

The concept of religion in early modern philosophy – three examples: Machiavelli, Cardano and Bruno

I.

Nicolas of Cusa and Marsilio Ficino: religion as part of philosophy

The perhaps most basic notion of religion in the 15th and 16th century is that religion is the natural effect and expression of a natural disposition of the human mind. We can find this idea of a natural foundation of religion even in thinkers which, like Ficino or Cusanus, belong to the Platonic tradition. And, surely, this concept of a *religio naturalis* will then have, accompanied by the sister-concepts of a natural theology and the idea of a common religion to all people (*communis omnium gentium religio*) an enormous impact on the discussions in the following centuries up to the present time. Before coming to my discussion of the situation in the 16th century I will give you a short survey of the most important positions in the humanist tradition. The first to start with is Nicholas of Cusa (1401-1464), the outstanding German philosopher of the period around 1440 and 1460 and perhaps the most speculative and intellectually gifted thinker of that whole century. He is well known because of his concept of the “*coincidentia oppositorum*”, because of a dynamic vision of the universe which is thought of as the self-unfolding of a primary cause that in every instance of his explicative movements is, so to say, reflected and thrown back into its principle and offspring, and, primarily, because of his dialectic conceptions and concepts of the divine being (the *nomina divina: non aliud, idem, possest*). It could be surprising to find in his writings such a naturalistic approach to what religion is, for example when he is saying: “every creature knows and, in an individualistic sufficient way, recognizes his omnipotent creator”¹. Here we find the very interesting difference between ‘knowing’ (*scire*) and ‘to recognize’ (*cognoscere*) with knowing at the first position: it is exactly this first position of a pre-reflexive and habitual knowing, that Cusanus and others took over from Hellenistic Greek and Latin thinking and its late antique reception. Religion is, in that perspective, an essential part of a pre-reflexive, instinctive process of self-preservation and self-perfection. As Cusa is putting it just in his early *De concordantia catholica*²: “*Omni autem generi animantium primum a natura tribuitur, ut tueatur se, corpus vitamque, declinet nocitura, acquiratque necessaria*” – nature communicated to every kind of living being in first instance that it should protect itself, its body and its life, and that it should avoid things harming to and acquire things necessary to its nature, so Cusa with words taken nearly directly from Cicero’s paraphrases of stoic thinking³. In this naturalistic perspective the human being is part of an overall structure and condition of living beings: and religion is the specific mode of mental attitude to the conditions of physical existence reflected in mental consciousness. Coming back to the difference of knowing and recognizing in our Cusanus-quotation, we should say that (i) knowing (*scire*) is the verbal indicator of that pre-reflexive and nearly, so to say, unconscious “having” or “possessing” of religion, and that (ii) to recognize (*cognoscere*) is the next-level activity, based on (i) the first one, of consciously unfolding the

¹ Cusanus, *De venatione sapientiae*, c. 19, n. 54,12-13; h XII, p. 51: „scit igitur omnis creatura et, quantum sufficit sibi, cognoscit conditorem suum omnipotentem“.

² Cusanus, *De concordantia catholica* III, prooemium, n. 268; h XIV, p. 313.

³ See for example Cicero, *De finibus* IV 7,16: „omnis natura vult esse conservatrix sui, ut et salva sit et in genere convertitur suo“; V 9,24: „omne animal se ipsum diligit ac, simul et ortum est, id agit, ut se conservet, quod hic si primus ad omnem vitam tuendam appetitus datur, se ut conservet atque ita sit affectum, ut optime secundum naturam affectum esse possit“.

implications of that first and 'natural' possession. This whole scenario is pretty parallel to the other, even more basic scenario, we can find in the stoic thinking partly adopted by the later Academy, that is to the concept and complex structure of self-preservation (conservation sui). So we have two levels, one basic level (i) on which the 'knowing of god' is as pre-reflective as the 'knowing of the importance of self-preservation', and we have a second level (ii) of conscious activity, for example of constituting ritual structures. The perspective Cusa is introducing here is a bottom-up perspective, a perspective based on Aristotle's difference between 'what is prior to us' (*próteron pros hêmas*) and 'what is prior to nature' (*próteron têi physei*): for us and for our natural development the natural level is the first one and it is legitimate to start with it, but it is not, as for the Stoics, a self-sufficient level. The closer one analyzes the positions of the Christian or Platonic thinkers, the more evident a totally non-naturalistic basic-structure will become evident, a top down position and a systematic construction that makes clear that what is ontologically and metaphysically first, is the self-communication of the godhead and the noetic apriory-relation of the human mind to the divine intellect – nonetheless, for my purpose here it is important to note, that such a kind of naturalistic background of the concept of religion is present in the 15th century and that it is present not only in the sober thinking of humanists like Coluccio Salutati, Leonardo Bruni or Lorenzo Valla and their ethical or political orientation, but also in the Platonist current. The second outstanding member of the Platonic movement of the 15th century I will shortly discuss here is Marsilio Ficino (1433-1499). Ficino, protégé of the Medici family, canon of Santa Maria de' Fiore in Florence, founding member of the so-called Platonic Academy, and, besides Angelo Poliziano, the most learned specialist of Greek language and Greek philosophy in that time period, holds a typical humanist position regarding religion, that is: he partakes in the topic of the "communis omnium gentium religio", the religion common to all people or populations. A notion based on the before discussed Stoic notion of natural religion: "a natural and common opinion about God is put into us"⁴, 'put into' in the sense of being something native and original, and this common religion is, in first instance, a kind of "natural instinct" (*instinctus naturalis*) that inhabits men or, more precisely, all rational beings as a precondition of all mental orientation⁵. It directs us, as we have had it also before in Cusa, like our hunger or thirst directs us to eat and to drink and to self-preservation. But religion is, in clear difference to natural processes like hunting, eating, procreating etc., an exclusive indication of human being and it directs the human mind – not the body – to the non-physical intelligible entities. Let us hear Ficino in his early *De christiana religione*, first chapter: "the human being as human being is religious" and "of all animals only we (sc. humans) cultivate and venerate God" and it is exactly that veneration of divine being that is "natural to us" like "to neigh for horses and to bark for dogs"⁶.

⁴ Marsilio Ficino, *De christiana religione*, c. 1; Opera, fol. 2. See Vasoli 1988; Euler 1998; Leinkauf 2014, pp. 123-155.

⁵ See Palmieri, *Vita civile III*, n. 41-42; Palmieri 1982, p. 112: „Da questa (sc. legge naturale) procede la religione, le cerimonie et celebrità de' culti divini, le quali certo non sarebbero nel mondo da ogni nazione con tanta efficacia consacrate se e' non fusse insito naturalmente negli animi nostri una superna essentia in divina unione eternalmente perfecta“.

⁶ Marsilio Ficino, *De christiana religione*, c. 1; Opera, fol. 2: „homo in quantum homo religiosus“; religion is (i) indication of humanity, (ii) the erection of man in the heavens of God, (iii) divine veneration; *Theologia Platonica XIV*, c. 8; 2, p. 274: „soli nos animantium omnium colimus Deum, soli nos Deum affectu, gestibus, verbis, delubris, sacrificiis honoramus“; c. 9; p. 280: „cultusque divinus ita ferme hominibus (es) naturalis, sicut equis hinnitus canibusque latratus“. The direction to the intelligible realm is clearly shown *ib.* XII, c. 1; 2, p. 154: „Facile autem et naturali quodam instinctu ipsa formula (sc. in our mind), cum sit ideae radius, resilit in ideam, secumque attolit mentem cui est infusus hic radius qui, cum reducitur in ideam, refluat in eam sicut fontem, ceu radius repercussus in solem perque nodum huiusmodi unum aliquid ex mente et Deo conficitur“. Giovanni Pico della Mirandola, *Commento ai salmi*, ed. E. Garin, in: *La cultura filosofica del rinascimento italiano*, Firenze

Taking Cusa and Ficino as testimonies and taking the parallelism between 'neigh for horses' and 'veneration of God', phrases that in the logic of propositional definition take the systematic place of the "proprium" (kind, specific difference and the determination proper to the species), we could formulate the following modified definition of man: 'homo est animal rationale religionis capax'. If we take 'religionis capax' logically parallel as 'risibilitatis' capax, we can consequently say that having a religion or cultivating and venerating God is not only natural in the sense a phenomenon in the natural realm of being would be part of that being natural, but that it is, in a more deeper sense, an essential part or moment of a being x that belongs 'naturally' to the definition of x.

But the most important determination of religion is not its being an indication of rationality in the realm of living beings and its naturalistic fundament, but that religion is, if one takes a non-naturalistic point of view, nothing else, as we find it for example in cult and rites, then the outer surface of the inner mental processes and concepts. Or, more, that it is the sum up of all these inner mental processes, that part of philosophy what the Greeks called "epistrophê" or the Latinists "conversio" – that is: the intellectual activity of unifying and synthesizing the plurality of being and ideas and concepts etc. to an ever more intensive level of unity, lastly to the absolute unity which is God as the first principle of all being.

So to sum up our short discussion: what do we have essentially in that concept of the humanists in the 15th century? I think we have the following criteria:

(i) religion is an essential part of human being and as such a common property or, with Aristotle and the scholastic tradition, a "proprium" (ídion) of its definition

(ii) religion is, as such an essential part, a basic property like natural instincts and as such it is a necessary condition of self-preservation, that is: religion is a kind of nourishment of the soul and the mind – it is what Cusa calls a "cibum mentis"

(iii) religion has its basic form in the various expressions of cult and forms of adoration and veneration of God or a plurality of Gods

(iv) religion is a kind of cultural 'language' that is not only a sign and indication of rationality in general but primarily of the specific mentality of the community A that has developed such and such a religion x, and, in an analogous way, of the community B that has developed the religion y and so forth

(v) religion is primarily a mental status and it serves primarily to instigate men to transcend the realm of physical or corporeal being, that is nature in the common sense, to another purely mental and intelligible realm – as we can see it in the Platonic tradition: religion coincides with the realization of knowledge or wisdom, that is: with philosophy. Religion is "pia philosophia", philosophy is "docta religio", Plato's philosophy is the summit of religion if taken, as I tried to show, as a mental reversion to the first principle. For Ficino the exterior ceremonies are not true cult, but only indications or signs (inditia), the "true cult" is an internal act of thinking God, that is: to reflect and to philosophize⁷. So

2nda ed. 1979, p. 248: „Tum vero id maxime facit theologica scientia ad maiora nos provehens et non solum ad id cohortans, ut integram retineamus humanam dignitatem, ne vel ab homine degeneremus in brutum, sed ut sancta aemulatione divinarum mentium, quarum illa nobis naturam demonstrat, ex terrenis hominibus in caelestes homines regeneremur“.

⁷ Ficino, Commentaria in Paulum, c. 8; Opera, fol. 438: „verus Dei cultus est, Deum cogitare frequenter, propter seipsum ardentem amare. (...) exteriores caeremoniae non ipse cultus sunt, sed inditia cultus“.

for both, for Cusa as also for Ficino, the exterior forms of religion could be manifold and it is absolutely legitimate “to search and to investigate” the one God under many traces and forms – one of Cusa’s most famous works, the *De pace fidei*, has as its leading idea: one religion in a manifold of rites – *una religio in rituum varietate*. It is not the outer surface but the inner core that is important, it is not the multitude of forms that are all legitimate expressions of the one invisible and formless God that is important, but the first principle itself, the One or the transcendent God. Religion is only the way to God or the *modus procedendi*.

Humanist authors in general, not only Cusa and Ficino, took the criteria I mentioned also as an interpretation of what the Latin word ‘religio’ could mean. They learned from Cicero that *religio* could be a noun derived from several verbs, (i) from *religare*, that is ‘to bind back’, (ii) from *relegere*, that is ‘to read again’, or (iii) from *religere* or *recolligere*, that is ‘to recollect’ – in all these alternatives you have one thing in common and that is the reflexive or reflective modality of an action⁸. As Ficino puts it in his Commentary (Epitome) on Plato’s *Euthyphron* (Opera, fol. 1135), taking *religare*, *relegere* and *religio* together: “*nos ipsos relegendo religantes Deo, religiosi sumus*” – we are religious if we in the act of re-reading (sc. the holy scripture) are binding us back to God. The general concept of binding or reflecting back and its naturalistic interpretation leads however thinkers like Cusa or Ficino not yet to a theory that argues about religion in terms of political force and reality. That aspect of religion as a social and political phenomenon is, on the other hand, subject of many discussions by contemporaneous humanist authors. Religion is here nothing else than a certain force that is conceived as natural, unavoidable, mighty, and, most important, exposed to manipulative acts. This kind of discussing religion is preparing what we will find then in Machiavelli and other thinkers of the next century. We have here a synthesis of the concept of natural religion (with cult-structure) and the concept of religion as an anthropologically necessary act of rebinding the individuals to a divine principle.

II.

The political function of religion before Machiavelli: Palmieri, Landino

It was a fundamental insight for humanist renaissance thinkers, who like Salutati or Bruni, have often been active politicians in their home town, that religion has an important function in politics because of its stabilizing and grounding character. Stability, constancy and preservation of the *res publica*, the establishment of government and reign in a transcendent instance, the embodiment of rules and laws in a transcendent and universal constant. As Matteo Palmieri wrote in his quite influential *De vita civile*: there would be no general or universal justice, nor law, nor even religion, if “a higher essence would not be planted into our human minds” (*insito naturalmente negli animi nostri una superna essentia*) (*Vita civile* III, n. 41), that means: substantially it is religion that stands in the back of every operating city or state. Or, as Landino has it: “religion is laying the first fundamentals of this congregation”, that is: of this ‘*civitas*’ (*prima huic coetui [sc. civitatis] fundamenta iaciat religio, De nobilitate c. 2, n. 1*)⁹. For 15th century humanists this means that politics have to pay respect to

⁸ Cicero, *De natura deorum* II 28,72: „qui autem omnia quae ad cultum deorum pertinerent diligenter retractarent et tamquam relegerent [!], sunt dicti religiosi ex relegendo“.

⁹ Landino, *De nobilitate*, c. 2, n. 1; Landino 1949, pp. 17-18: „Verum quoniam non ex uno simplici genere civium, sed ex plurimis variisque eam civitatem constare oportet, cui bene beateque vivendum sit, prima huic coetui fundamenta iaciat religio. Cui qui praesunt eos vos, et quia sacri sunt et quia sacra ferunt, sacerdotes nominatis. Horum ego triplex esse officium reor: primum, ut omnibus flagitiis animos nostros purgandos curent. Alterum, ut summa doctrina summaque eloquentia nos ad verum Dei cultum, omni superstitione

religions and to religious behavior, that human laws have to take into account the principles of justice, equity and liberty laid down in and then expressed by the basic divine law, etc. But, on the other hand, politics could 'use', so to say, all these stabilizing qualities of religion to govern their state quietly. It was only a small step from this humanist position to the explicitly manipulative position of Machiavelli, who grew up in a Florence shocked by Savonarola and his movement and paralyzed by a new face or façade of religion showing an unknown power, out of political control.

III.

Niccolò Machiavelli: religion as instrument of politics

In Machiavelli's thinking we can observe a substantial break with nearly all philosophical and theological traditions, be it the metaphysics of Plato, Aristotle and their schools, be it the scholastic theology and ontology, be it the humanist vision of an ordered cosmos where man is the center and the teleological 'end' of all processes. Even his own categories or theories, as for example the theory of historical cycles or his specific concept of religion, are not metaphysically guaranteed, they are, instead, tools and means of a basically practical orientated thinking. Especially religion is, as Isaiah Berlin has it, "not much more than a socially indispensable instrument"¹⁰. Machiavelli takes from his humanist predecessors the insight in the prominent social role of religion, I remember on what I just said about the important factor stability, and he also shared the belief in the natural character of religion. But he consequently drew off the metaphysical or theological superstructure: there is no more any providential scenario, there is no more any transcendent instance to promise mankind a spiritual life as alternative to world-conditions, there is no more any trace of teleological laws and processes in nature that could work as trust inspiring, etc. Religion is in that context nothing else than a promoter of solidarity and cohesion in societies and, seen from the viewpoint of political power, a means to direct people and to keep people calm while the rulers are, for example, preparing war. Machiavelli's utterances in the famous chapter 12 of the first book of the *Discorsi* or in chapter eighteen of *Il principe* are plain: a republic will be ordered and good and therefore united only if the governors are able to maintain and to protect the ruling religion: "the leaders of a republic or of a state have to maintain the fundamentals of the religion of that republic or kingdom; and it will be easy, then, by doing this, to maintain also the republic religious and, consequently, good and united" – *bona e unita*¹¹. Machiavelli sees a direct reciprocity between a living religion and its specific cultic activity – *il culto divino* – and the working and functioning of a society. Like a kind of proverb or even a historical law he introduces something like this: 'where you can find religion, there you can presuppose to find the good or the wellbeing (*bene essere*), where you can find no religion you

amota, instituant. Tertium, ut ea vita iisque moribus sint, quibus veluti summum omnium virtutum exemplar nos ad recte vivendum et ad vere speculandum etiam cum taceant sua praesentia alliceant". A basic text for Landino is, as he himself is pointing out (p. 19), Marsilio Ficino's treatise *De religione christiana*.

¹⁰ Berlin 1972, S. 161. See also Granada 1998. Granada 1998, p. 345 proposes three different topics as an orientation for discussing Machiavelli's concept of religion: „(i) la religión como un componente de todo Estado; (ii) la religión cristiana en su utilidad o eficacia para la salud del Estado; (iii) la Iglesia cristiana como poder temporal o Estado, es decir, el llamado ‚principado eclesiástico“.

¹¹ Machiavelli, *Discorsi I*, c. 12, n. 1; *Opere a cura di Corrado Vivanti*, Torino 1997, Vol. I, p. 232: „Debbono adunque i principi d'una republica o d'uno regno, i fondamenti della religione che loro tengono, mantenergli; e fatto questo, sarà loro facil cosa mantenere la loro republica religiosa e, per conseguente, buona e unita". In chapter 10 Machiavelli shows a deep conscience of the meaning and the importance of the „capi e ordinatori delle religioni“ in the history of mankind, *ib.*, p. 225.

should, consequently, presuppose to find nothing then the bad'¹². Such laws or principles play a basic role in Machiavelli's thinking. One can see that he took them over from traditional discourses or that he deduces or extracts them out of his reading of the ancient historiographers or philosophers. Machiavelli could see confirmed such principles by analyzing the status quo of the Catholic Church, especially of the "Chiesa Romana", and by being forced to diagnose the absence of or the total decline of any substantial living religion and cult. One of the most important reasons for that decline and weakness is the historical fact that the Roman Church was politically ruled by too many and too different rulers – è stato sotto più principi e signori – and, so to say, negatively coined by disunion¹³. It never gets a position with enough political power and it never was weak enough not to be part of the big political game. The immanent character of religion, that is, the fact that religion is not a result of a direct divine institution has been held in the same time period also by thinkers like Pomponazzi: for Pomponazzi as also for Machiavelli religion is a phenomenon in the ontological and cosmological realm 'sub luna', a realm totally subjected to generation and corruption and to the government of the stars¹⁴.

What we have to say therefore, is, that for Machiavelli religion is part of the game of political power and of the ups and downs of being in historical processes. Religion is equal to other, non-religious factors, and it is put on the level of immanence – it is, as in the Roman tradition, as in Cicero or Varro, a "civil religion"¹⁵. Its effects are measured not by immanent criteria of religion or theology, but by the criteria of social and political life. So, as in the late hegemonic Roman empire the liberal or, better, indifferent position of the state conceded the coexistence of a big number of quite different religions – Isis-cult, Mithras-adoration, Hebraic tradition etc. – also for Machiavelli, even if he would insist more in the dominance of one leading religion in a state, the most important point is that the 'inner side' of religion, the factual belief and the inner legitimation of that very belief, are totally unimportant. Reading his texts, you do never get information about Machiavelli's own religious belief, even if we would, correctly as I think, suppose that Machiavelli is not an atheist, his theory in itself is purely atheistic. It is the sheer 'outer' part and face of a religion that has to function and to work, independently of any question of "truth". It is social effectiveness that counts: the constancy of the ritual procedures, the stability of hierarchies, the working of the binding forces coming from inside etc. We can see here the following: evidently Machiavelli is, together with his contemporary Erasmus and the Lutheran protestant movement, one of the authors who prepared the road for the modern division between state and church, between rationality and belief, between inner conviction and outer laws. And we can see, and now in direct opposition to the protestants, that Machiavelli has to cope with that withdrawal of political power on the purely territory of state interests: for his calculus politicus he has to presuppose the functioning of religious structures without being able to legitimate any political activity on the proper ground of religion. So, what rests on the end of the day, is to install a kind of bridge which allows the transportation of political basic interests – for example to maintain religious rites – into the realm of religion or, even, theology. And this possible political

¹² Machiavelli, Discorsi I, c. 12, n. 2; Opere a cura di Corrado Vivanti, Torino 1997, Vol. I, p. 233: „perché, così come dove è religione si presuppone, ogni bene, così, dove quella manca, si presuppone il contrario“.

¹³ Machiavelli, Discorsi I, c. 12, n. 2; Opere a cura di Corrado Vivanti, Torino 1997, Vol. I, p. 234: „non essendo adunque stata la Chiesa potente da potere occupare la Italia, né avendo permesso che un altro la occupi, è stata cagione che la non è potuta venire sotto uno capo, ma è stata sotto più principi e signori, da' quali è nata tanta disunione e tanta debolezza che la si è condotta a essere stata preda, non solamente de' barbari potenti, ma di qualunque l'assalta“.

¹⁴ See Parel 1992, chapter 3.

¹⁵ Granada 1998, S. 346; compare Augustinus, De civitate Dei VI 5 on Varro's concept of „civilis religio“.

input is, so to say, absolutely independent from all piety towards authority and prescription – the only important thing for Machiavelli and his ‘principe’ is the preservation of political freedom, and that means freedom from arbitrary despotic rule or from tyranny. Religion has to work in a genuine political context and it has to tolerate absolute centralized power and to accept that there is not any legitimation for ‘own rights’ of religious subjects. As indifferent as Machiavelli’s thought is regarding the variety and difference of historical phenomena, history is a redundant, iterative cyclic process where everywhere all men are more or less equal, as indifferent is his viewpoint on the inner needs of religions, of piety, of revelation, of authority, of the sequence of time etc. or regarding real progress. But what Machiavelli really wants to instigate and to realize with his theories, is basically not a religious community – even if religion is a necessary tool or means to establish and maintain a community – but a kind of restored type of antique morality, of the “*exempla virtutis*” he is referring to so often in his *Discorsi* or in *Il Principe*. What we have here is the cohabitation of two different types of morality, and, in the back, of two different types of religion: the liberal Roman understanding of religio and the accompanying concepts of virtues on the one hand, and the Christian understanding of religion, which gives no room for an independent concept of morality¹⁶. The ‘weak’ Christian virtues like charity, mercy, sacrifice, love of God, forgiveness for the enemies etc. cannot, in Machiavelli’s view, stand their ground in real and hard inner-worldly conflicts. This is quite different with the virtues of the ancient heroes: courage, vigor, fortitude, order, discipline, happiness, justice etc. are, and here Machiavelli is relying on his preferred authors like Livy and Plutarch, the adequate powers to construct a stable human community, type of the Roman Empire. Christian faith, so his short cut conclusion, makes men weak or feeble, roman or stoic morality makes them strong or, at least, stronger. Christian beliefs are not bad, Christian virtues are not bad, but they are politically non-effective. What he would have demanded, is, in contrast to Luther, a Christianity that did not put the blessings of a pure conscience and faith in heaven above earthly success. And what he did presuppose, is, that in religion a natural need of human beings, a need for and a desire of the good and not the bad is articulating its power¹⁷. There is a kind of natural instinctive morality working in mankind – and religion is one of the modalities, and in fact an important one, where that morality finds its expression. But all that is operating in a radical non-political realm, but in a social realm. Therefore religion is strong in terms of social stability, and weak in terms of politics. But politics is strong where it is able to ‘use’ religion for its purposes. But a religion to use must be a religion different from the otherworldly orientated religion of the “Christians”.

IV. Cardano: religion and the individual

If we are reading the huge work of Cardano, who lived between 1501 and 1576 in an Italy devastated by war and epidemic diseases, in an “age of anxiety”, to use a phrase coined by Eric Dodds regarding his analyses of late antique psychological status quo, we are meeting an highly complex individuality that, in difference to Machiavelli’s, expressed its talents in many fields like metaphysics, natural science, technique and medicine. In his famous work *De subtilitate* we can read sentences we will never find in any text of Machiavelli, for example: “you are in such a way present, that you are

¹⁶ I follow here the suggestions given by Berlin 1972, pp. 168 ff.

¹⁷ Machiavelli, *Discorsi* I, c. 10, n. 6; *Opere* a cura di Corrado Vivanti, Torino 1997, Vol. I, p. 228: „E senza dubbio se e’ sarà nato d’uomo, si sbigottirà da ogni imitazione de’ tempi cattivi ed accenderassi d’uno immenso desiderio di seguire i buoni“.

nowhere, you are so immense, that nothing exists outside of you (...). You who exist in no place, but exist before all place alone in yourself: not great or large, but immense. You established all the lives even before place and time in themselves"¹⁸. Cardano's hymn on the absolute transcendent god is nothing 'external' or set up like a camouflage, but it expresses in a quite traditional vocabulary of speculative Neo-Platonic theology his deepest convictions. With Cardano we are entering a totally different world-view: what is common with Machiavelli is a certain pessimistic grounding, but even this is different in so far as for Machiavelli skepticism regards not the capacity of men to reach a substantial relation to their very principle or metaphysical fundament, but the capacity to survive sub conditionibus terrestris. Cardano's whole view on the *conditio humana* is pessimistic and a priori standing under a kind of dualist tension between universal divine precepts (*praecepta, leges*) and individual experience and factual situations: (i) man should recognize god and the divine and he is unable to realize it, because god is bigger than any cognition or than cognition itself – *maior ipsa cogitatione*; (ii) man should recognize the natural and the essence of things and he is unable to realize it, because he is restricted to the outer surface of the thing's being and cannot reach the 'inner core' of things¹⁹; (iii) man should recognize the good and act morally and he is, except few exceptions, unable to realize it, because his life stands under the heading of a 'deceptive nature', full of fallacy (*natura fallax*); (iv) man should do right to the intentions of the others, just to get on a level of commutative laws and rights, and man is unable to realize it, because he cannot advance to the inner realm and the convictions of the other's self²⁰; (v) man should mediate and connect the mortal to the immortal and divine and he is unable to realize it, because he is in the same moment when he connects dividing that very being that he is trying to connect²¹. This pessimist stance is significant for Cardano's intellectual position: the nature of men is, post lapsum, necessarily orientated to the bad and the malicious. The only legitimation for that is the general – theological – idea that men's being bad gives god the occasion to correct, using punishment and reward, the course of the world²². What in genera counts is the following: "*vita enim nostra nil aliud quam militia est*"²³ – an expression you surely could find in Machiavelli, Juan Luis Vives, Luther or Erasmus as well, but with a quite different reason.

Seeing and facing this specific pessimistic and in the same moment religious position of Cardano, that is quite different to what we find (expressed) in Machiavelli's writings, we nonetheless have to realize that what he thinks about religion and its political function is instead very similar to Machiavelli. We can find the same 'substantial equidistance'²⁴ or indifference in confrontation with

¹⁸ Cardano, *Hymnus*, in: *Opera omnia*, Lugduni 1663 (ND ed. August Buck, Stuttgart-Bad Cannstatt 1966), Vol. I, pp. 697-698; see also *De subtilitate XXI: De deo et universo*; ebd., Vol. III, pp. 663 ff. For the following see Leinkauf 2007. For Cardano and religion compare also Zanier 1975; Di Rienzo 1994.

¹⁹ Cardano, *De subtilitate*, c. 20; *Opera omnia*, Lugduni 1663 (ND ed. August Buck, Stuttgart-Bad Cannstatt 1966), Vol. III, p. 662 B: „mens nostra medullam rerum non attingens, quaedam solum externae inclyti huius divini opificii contemplatur, & admiratur“.

²⁰ Cardano, *De proxeneta seu de prudentia civili*, c. 41-42; *Opera omnia*, Lugduni 1663 (ND ed. August Buck, Stuttgart-Bad Cannstatt 1966), Vol. I, pp. 394 f; see Alfonso Ingegno, *Saggio sulla filosofia di Cardano*, Firenze 1980, pp. 348 ff.

²¹ Cardano, *De subtilitate*, c. 11; *Opera omnia*, Lugduni 1663 (ND ed. August Buck, Stuttgart-Bad Cannstatt 1966), Vol. III, pp. 550 B-551 B.

²² Cardano, *De arcanis aeternitatis*, c. 21; *Opera omnia*, Lugduni 1663 (ND ed. August Buck, Stuttgart-Bad Cannstatt 1966), Vol. X.

²³ Cardano, *De utilitate I*, c. 4; *Opera omnia*, Lugduni 1663 (ND ed. August Buck, Stuttgart-Bad Cannstatt 1966), Vol. II, p. 39.

²⁴ See Zanier, *Cardano e la critica delle religioni*, in: *Giornale critico della filosofia italiana* 54 (1975), pp. 89-98, S. 90-91, Anm. 1

the dominant religions – Jewish, Islamic, Christian – and we can find, more important, the same instrumental position of religion in the social framework and in politics. Cardano sees religions not as independent expressions of a way of life based on a fundamental act of revelation, but he sees them as historical phenomena, important in an anthropological sense. In this sense religion is (i) a natural and fundamental aspect of all human being, religion is (ii) a stabilizing factor in sociality and religion is (iii) an instrument of political power²⁵ – all that we had just in Machiavelli. But, while Machiavelli's orientation is basically not one to the so-called religions of revelation, but to the civil religion of the Romans (we heard the reason: the political weakness and feebleness of Christian virtues), Cardano's position is, that one has to follow the Christian religion: "this is the only true philosophy, our – sc. Christian – religion. (...) In that case we cannot rest (or: be content and calm with) on natural reasons: it is necessary instead that we should follow the authority of the Holy Scripture"²⁶. This is an explicit repudiation of the basic level of religion, the natural religion as we found it in humanist thought or in Machiavelli; the insistence on Christian faith is, as for example in Cusa, Ficino, Giovanni Pico and others, not only based on explicit theological and metaphysical reflections²⁷, but it is a direct sign of the existential instability of individual being and the need for a personal God and his care for the world. But, the difference again to people like Cusa or Ficino, is the prominent stoic coining of Cardano's philosophy: he develops a position that is close to the position of the stoic "sapiens", the individual that on pure natural and rational grounds is able to face the contingency of the world. And, even more different to Cusa-Ficino, but quite comparable to Bruno's heroic individual, he combines this ideal of an anti-tridentine wise man, a 'homo perfectus', with the connecting function of the Christian figure of the "verbum incarnatum". All the energy of mental forces seems concentrated in such individuals that are fighting against the de-stabilizing forces of war, counter-reformation, epidemics and existential contingency²⁸.

IV. Giordano Bruno: religion as instrument of politics (ii)

The last author to discuss here shortly is Giordano Bruno, born 1521 at the small city of Nola and burned at stake in Rome in the year 1600 at the very end of that century marked by so many tensions, wars and disasters²⁹. For Bruno, hardest critique of the traditional concept of religion, promoted by the masters and doctors of theology, be this catholic or be it protestant theology, religion is, as for Machiavelli before him, something that is primarily addressed to the simple uncultivated masses, the "universo volgo", just to give them a general orientation in their stupid

²⁵ Cardano, Cardano, *De proxeneta seu de prudentia civili*, c. 40; *Opera omnia*, Lugduni 1663 (ND ed. August Buck, Stuttgart-Bad Cannstatt 1966), Vol. I, pp. 368 A-388 A: religion is a constituent part of all „socialitas“; *De sapientia III*, in: *Opera omnia*, Lugduni 1663 (ND ed. August Buck, Stuttgart-Bad Cannstatt 1966), Vol. II, pp. 550 A ff.

²⁶ Cardano, *De proxeneta seu de prudentia civili*, c. 40; *Opera omnia*, Lugduni 1663 (ND ed. August Buck, Stuttgart-Bad Cannstatt 1966), Vol. I, p. 387 B: „haec enim sola vera philosophia est, religio nostra. (...) Nec rationi naturali hac in parte est acquiescendum: sed opus est tut sequamur auctoritatem sacrae paginae“.

²⁷ In works like: *De uno*, *De natura*, *De arcanis aeternitatis*, *De fato* and *De subtilitate*.

²⁸ So, for example, is the lost *De fato* part of his fight against contingency, the result is made explicit in *De arcanis aeternitatis*, c. 21, in: *Opera omnia*, Lugduni 1663 (ND ed. August Buck, Stuttgart-Bad Cannstatt 1966), Vol. X, p. 42: „rursus quae futura sunt necessaria sunt, ut in libro *De fato* demonstratum est: ubi ergo necessitas haec nisi in causarum ordine? Ordo vero ubi nisi in Deo“. The prize to pay for freedom becomes an illusion on the part of man, a necessary illusion, which is documented by the weakness of our intellectual power.

²⁹ For Bruno and religion or politics see Papi (1968) 2006, ch.7, pp. 265-322; Granada 1998, pp. 352-358; Granada 2001; Ordine 2003, pp. 93-124.

lives³⁰. It works as a means or instrument to introduce to the masses an ordered conduct of life – for example by phrasing their life through precise ritual procedures – and to procure them with a social progress and a stable political existence. The Holy Scripture, “i divini libri”, are only implanted strategically by the political cast of priests to mediate practical behavior and knowledge to the uncultivated: “nelli divini libri in servizio del nostro intelletto non si trattano le dimostrazioni e speculazioni circa le cose naturali, come se fusse filosofia: ma in grazia de la nostra mente et affetto, per le leggi si ordina la prattica circa le azzioni morali”, as he wrote in *Cena de le ceneri*, ‘in the divine books that are at the service for our intellect, there are no demonstrations or speculations about natural things, as if that would be philosophy: but for the sake of our mind and affects, in that books the practical conduct is organized by laws (leges) regarding moral actions’ – Bruno sees that goal of religious instruction basically in what he calls “bontà dei costumi” (good behaviour) or, more important (and close to the Humanists and Machiavelli) in the preservation and conservation of peace and the growing of the state: “mantenimento di pace et aumento di repubbliche”³¹. This is realized through the fact that religion is more a “rule” (law, lex, nomos) than the voice of the truth³². Even if, per impossibile, one would take a divine revelation for real or for reality, the task and intention of that revelation would be that the text established by God’s self-revelation, for example the bible or the Koran, would be a moral work to educate the masses³³. The wise man is totally out of discourse here, he is not the addressee and he is his own source of laws for moral practice. In general for Bruno the wise men or the philosophers “do the proper and convenient without any law”³⁴. It are only the wise men and the philosophers who are able to have insight in truth and in the essence of being, for example the real structure of the universe or the movement of the sun around earth – in this perspective the Copernican universe is only for the few, the Ptolemaic version for the mass (*Cena de le ceneri*, dialogo 1; *De l’infinito*, dialogo 1 finis). In the quite elitist social universe of Bruno where only the wise men “are really men” (quei che sono veramente uomini)³⁵ religion seems a kind of fake, produced to restrict the life of the masses to pure social and political functioning – the bible is no holy text, the bible is no revelation of a transcendent instance of power and love, the rites are sheer, but subtle, patterns of active organization of the lower levels of non-rational, quasi instinctive living. If we would imagine a kind of amplitude or life-curve we would be here on the lowest level of estimation and dignity of religion in the humanist tradition. The low estimation of the theological core of any religion has a correspondence in the very high estimation of philosophy and, especially, of the liberty and freedom connected essentially with rational thinking. Nonetheless, religion is

³⁰ Bruno, *Cena de le ceneri*, dialogo 4; *Dialoghi italiani*, a cura di Giovanni Gentile, Firenze 1985, Vol. 1, pp. 120-142, p. 121: „Pazzo sarebbe l’istorico, che, trattando la sua materia, volesse ordinar vocaboli stimati novi e riformar i vecchi, e far di modo che il lettore sii più trattenuto a osservarlo e interpretarlo come gramatico, che intenderlo come istorico. Tanto più uno, che vuol dare a l’universo volgo la legge e forma di vivere, usasse termini che le capisse lui solo (...)”. Beside ‘universo volgo’ we can find ‘generale e moltitudine’.

³¹ Bruno, *Cena de le ceneri*, dialogo 4; *Dialoghi italiani*, a cura di Giovanni Gentile, Firenze 1985, Vol. 1, p.

³² Bruno, *Spaccio de la bestia trionfante*, dialogo 1; *Dialoghi italiani*, a cura di Giovanni Gentile, Firenze 1958, Vol. 2, pp. 621 f, p. 622: “perché non è vera, né buona legge quell’ache non ha per madre la Sofia, e per padre l’intelletto razionale”; for religion and law dialogo 2, pp. 655-677. Granada 1998, pp. 355-357, 360 f.

³³ So Papi (1968) 2006, p. 265.

³⁴ Bruno, *Cena de le ceneri*, dialogo 4; *Dialoghi italiani*, a cura di Giovanni Gentile, Firenze 1985, Vol. 1, p. 121: „li quali (sc. quei che sono veramente uomini) senza legge fanno quel che conviene”.

³⁵ Bruno, *Cena de le ceneri*, dialogo 4; *Dialoghi italiani*, a cura di Giovanni Gentile, Firenze 1985, Vol. 1, p. 121 (see last note). For the manifest Averroist background see Granada 2001, S. 204; see also Averroes, *In libros Physicorum Aristotelis commentaria*, Prooemium; *Opera omnia*, Venetiis 1574, Vol. IV, p. 1, col. H-I: „manifestum est quod praedicatio nominis hominis perfecti a scientia speculativa, et non perfecti, sive non habentis aptitudinem quae perfici possit est aequivoca: sicut nomen hominis, quod praedicatur de homine vivo, et de homine mortuo; sive praedicatio hominis de rationali, et lapideo”.

necessary as an instrument of politics and as a means of life-conduct. Here, in that last point, we have, as you can easily see, an overlapping of insights between the Roman Latin traditions, the early humanists, Machiavelli, Cardano and Bruno. But, in a significant difference to this tradition, he introduces a new and different source of that specific theory of politics and religion: the Arabic tradition with thinkers like Al-Gazali (1058-1111) and Averroes (Ibn Rushd 1126-1198) and, not to forget, the Aristotelian theories that had survived in that thinking. So the impact of Machiavelli is always, in Bruno, tempered by the political teaching of Aristotle – in Machiavelli for example, we have no elitist perspective, in Aristotle we have, or: in Machiavelli there is no prerogative of philosophy or the inner coincidence of theory and happiness, in Aristotle it is the cornerstone. Bruno pretends not without arrogance that his own philosophy would not only tell us the truth (*verità*) about religion, but that it would give more genuine favor to religion than any other form of philosophy³⁶. And, quite evidently, this ‘favor’ sounds at first glance very Machiavellian³⁷, but it is substantially routed in the Arabic tradition mentioned before.

There are clear traces of Bruno’s elitist conception of how intellectual talent is distributed in societies and how the intellectuals have to distinguish themselves from the uneducated and unintelligent masses – with calculated operations like, for example, religious rites – in the Arabic tradition, especially in Averroes³⁸. Averroes makes a clear distinction between texts that are presenting the truth, the “*profunditates*” (deepness) of the divine, and texts that are only directing the practice of life, that is, he distinguishes between speculative or theoretical and practical importance. The intelligence of the people is not fit to speculate the deepness of divine truth or of any speculative truth in general: “*non pervenit intelligentia vulgi ad tales profunditates*”³⁹. This is exactly what we can read in Bruno’s *Cena de le ceneri*: only the philosophers have the privilege to contemplate the truth, the wisdom of philosophy even tells us the truth, as Bruno pretends, about religion as the ‘nutrition’ of the lower and uneducated masses. The difference between Averroes and Bruno lies in the fact that Bruno does not accept an independent status of an own religious truth. There is only one truth, and that is rational. Religion is pure imagination and, at best, an allegory or a symbolic framing of philosophical, that is rational truth. For Averroes on the other hand, there exists a ‘divine’ reality and the self-unfolding of the divine logos is also present in religious holy texts. Bruno’s reception of Averroes’s thinking, or better: of what he holds for such a thinking, is based primarily on the common conviction of both in other perspective so different thinkers, that religion has a peace keeping power. The “*pax religiosa*”, based on moral and educational grounds, is the most important of all the criteria *pro religione*. But what Bruno experienced in his own lifetime, the splitting of the religions, the reformation and counterreformation, showed him, as he reflects so precisely in his

³⁶ Bruno, *Cena de le ceneri*, dialogo 4; *Dialoghi italiani*, a cura di Giovanni Gentile, Firenze 1985, Vol. 1, p. 126: „che questa filosofia (sc. la filosofia Nolana) non solo contiene la verità, ma ancora favorisce la religione più che qualsivoglia altra sorte di filosofia“.

³⁷ Granada 1998, p. 352 f insists on the presence of Machiavelli in Bruno’s thinking, even if he is never mentioned in the whole corpus brunianum.

³⁸ The most important texts are Averroes’s *Destructio destructionum philosophiae Algazelis*; his Commentary on Aristotle’s *Physics*, especially the Proemium, ; Papi (1968) 2006, pp. 266-276; Granada, Bruno has non direct knowledge of the most developed argumentation that Averroes is presenting in his *Traité decisif*, see Gauthier 1947. Here Averroes establishes a strict parallel between ‘logical’ levels, levels of education and levels of knowledge: (i) demonstrative syllogisms = science, truth = philosophy, (ii) dialectical syllogisms = opinion, probable = theology, (iii) heuristic syllogisms = In this system religion has no position to hold any truth, all truth is pure rationality; the most important religious ‘truths’ are pure fictions and imaginations of phantasy; see Gauthier 1947, pp. 34 f.

³⁹ Averroes, *Destructio destructionum Algazelis* in the Latin version of *Calo Calonymos*, ed. By B. H. Zedler, Wisconsin 1961, p. 291-292.

Spaccio della bestia trionfante, the weakness of religion in so far as it becomes an instrument of political thinking. As we just know: this kind of instrumental treatment of religion is, of course, not in itself part of the religion. It is exterior to it and its protagonists are the priests and the theologians. So the protestant theologians are those who destroyed the *pax religiosa* in 16th century life and provoked a catastrophic and disastrous splitting even in the realm of protestant orders themselves: “never has appeared all over the world and since so many years so much disorder and dissonance as we have between them (the protestants); it’s therefore that we will find in ten thousands of similar pedants not one who has not his own catechism ready, if not yet published, to be published and each of those catechisms is not approving any other constitution then his very own constitution, and in all the others there is nothing what he cannot criticize, blame and reprove” (Spaccio, dialogo269 f). Bruno’s theory of religion as educational practice is originally more influenced by Averroes than by Machiavelli, his critiques regarding the uncontrolled power of princes is at least partly also a critique of Machiavelli’s supplying the princes with nearly uncontrolled power, his consciousness that religion is, ad minimum, an original part of “the *prisca sapientia*”-tradition is also more fitting to the thinking the Arabic philosopher than to that of the Florentine politician. We should also, to have the full picture, not forget, that Bruno’s anti-tyrannical position in combination with his voting for moderate monarchist solutions in politics is close to the group of intellectuals around Henri III of Valois and to the preference, maintained by that group, for the catholic religion as the most fitting religion to the political reality they strove for⁴⁰.

The very low estimation, in Bruno, of religion regarding its substantial or essential content – that is its radical immanent character – stands in a direct relation and proportionality to the absolute high competence of religion regarding its stabilizing and peace-keeping role in human life. When, as we saw, in the thinking of Cusa or Ficino religion was at once a natural property of men and a metaphysical reality having substantial influence on his being, in the thinkers of the 16th century religion becomes – prominently under the influence of reformation and counter-reformation – a more complex meaning that embraces the natural and the supernatural realm. Both basic options, to see religion as the expression of an inner belief that is actively gained by the spiritual or mental substance of the individual or as the expression of an inner nature which is unfolding itself naturally and even unconsciously are still present also in the later discussions up to present time.

⁴⁰ See Yates 1947.

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