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2004

Numa Pompilius and the Idea of Civil Religion in the West

Mark Silk

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Journal of the American Academy of Religion December 2004, Vol. 72, No. 4, pp. 863–896

doi:10.1093/jaarel/lfh082

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ever and in need of new attention. The study of civil religion has, however, long been bedeviled by the difficulty of deciding exactly what civil religion is (see Linder). Too often it has seemed like little more than a baggy metaphor into which can be tossed some or all of the religious, quasi-religious, and pseudoreligious concepts and activities that in one way or another appear important to the ideology or self-image of a given nation. The idea of civil religion can be clarified by looking at the centuries-long discussion out of which the actual term "civil religion" emerged. Prior to the French Revolution this discussion proceeded less in terms of abstract political theory than by way of specific historical examples. And none of the examples was more important than that of Numa Pompilius, the Sabine wise man who, according to tradition, succeeded Romulus as the king of Rome.

THE PARAGON

Writing in the middle of the second century B.C.E., the Greek historian Polybius attributed the "distinct superiority" of Roman society to religion: "For I believe that the very thing that among other peoples is an object of reproach, namely superstition, is what holds together the Roman state" (394).¹ By the middle of the following century Roman writers were giving much of the credit to Numa. In his *Republic* Cicero describes Numa's religious innovations as part of a broader project of fostering prosperity, justice, and community through markets, games, and festivals:

By these institutions he restored to humane and gentle behavior the minds of men who had become savage and inhuman through their love of war. So, after ruling for thirty-nine years in great peace and harmony . . . he died, having established two things that are most important for the long life of a commonwealth, religion and mildness of character. (1999: 41).²

Numa is likewise cast as Rome's enlightened religious founder in M. Terentius Varro's *Antiquitates divinae*, the great encyclopedia of Roman religion that appeared a few years after the *Republic*.³ Cicero and

¹ Thanks to theatrical religious display and the instilling of "invisible fears" in the masses, the Romans were, Polybius claimed, much more honest and law-abiding than the Greeks.

² According to the *Republic* Numa's religious innovations included the "greater auspices," the five priests from the aristocracy who had charge of rituals, the priestly organizations of the Flamines and the Salii, and the Vestal Virgins.

³ What we know of the *Antiquitates divinae* comes largely from Augustine's *City of God*. Varro's account of Numa appears in Book VII, chapter 34.

Varro, themselves close acquaintances, were among those Roman intellectuals who, in Arnaldo Momigliano's words, "began to think in earnest about religion" between the years 60 and 40 B.C.E. (59). For them Numa stood for the kind of faith-based political stability that was so conspicuously absent in their own time.

The earliest and most important biographical account we have of Numa occurs in Livy's history of Rome. Embarking on his life's work in the early years of the reign of Caesar Augustus, Livy made Numa out to be the antitype of Romulus—the peacemaker versus the warlord. After Romulus succeeded in violently carving out what was, in effect, a brigand state, Numa turned it into a decent community:

When he had thus obtained the kingship, he prepared to give the City, founded by force of arms, a new foundation in law, statutes, and observances. And perceiving that men could not grow used to these things in the midst of wars, since their natures grew wild and savage through warfare, he thought it needful that his warlike people should be softened by the disuse of arms, and built the temple of Janus at the bottom of the Argiletum, as an index of peace and war, that when open it might signify that the nation was in arms, when closed that all the peoples round about were pacified. Twice since Numa's reign has it been closed: once in the consulship of Titus Manlius, after the conclusion of the First Punic War; the second time, which the gods permitted our own generation to witness, was after the battle of Actium, when the emperor Caesar Augustus had brought about peace on land and sea. Numa closed the temple after first securing the good will of all the neighboring tribes by alliances and treaties. And fearing lest relief from anxiety on the score of foreign perils might lead men who had hitherto been held back by fear of their enemies and by military discipline into extravagance and idleness, he thought the very first thing to do, as being the most efficacious with a populace which was ignorant and, in those early days, uncivilized, was to imbue them with fear of Heaven. As he could not instill this into their hearts without inventing some marvelous story, he pretended to have nocturnal meetings with the goddess Egeria, and that hers was the advice which guided him in the establishment of rites most approved by the gods, and in the appointment of special priests for the service of each. (1919a: 67–69)

After detailing the various rites and offices so established, Livy concludes with a paean to the social consequences that flowed from Numa's religious regime:

The consideration and disposal of these matters diverted the thoughts of the whole people from violence and arms. Not only had they something

to occupy their minds, but their constant preoccupation with the gods, now that it seemed to them that concern for human affairs was felt by the heavenly powers, had so tinged the hearts of all with piety, that the nation was governed by its regard for promises and oaths, rather than by the dread of laws and penalties. And while Numa's subjects were spontaneously imitating the character of their king, as their unique exemplar, the neighbouring peoples also, who had hitherto considered that it was no city but a camp that had been set up in their midst, as a menace to the general peace, came to feel such reverence for them, that they thought it sacrilege to injure a nation so wholly bent upon the worship of the gods. (1919a: 73)⁴

In short, having made peace with the neighboring towns, Numa so put the fear of the gods into the Romans that they became not merely law-abiding citizens but a virtual sacred society.

The pious fraud involving Egeria is essential to understanding the extent of subsequent interest in Numa. Had the story simply told of a king who got his spiritual marching orders from a goddess, it would have been no more than an agreeable myth about the divine origins of religious observance. As it was, the deception invited reflection on religion as a human institution designed for social betterment. Not that Numa was, in this respect, unique. In his biography of Numa, written a century after Livy, Plutarch associates the king with other ancient lawgivers, or *nomothetes*, who feigned supernatural support for their legislation—Zaleucus, Minos, Zoroaster, and Lycurgus of Sparta (who is paired with Numa in one of the first sets of parallel lives). Although allowing for the possibility that Numa might really have been in contact with a divine personage, Plutarch insists that, nonetheless,

[T]here is no absurdity in the other account which is given of Lycurgus and Numa and their like, namely, that since they were managing headstrong and captious multitudes, and introducing great innovations in modes of government, they pretended to get a sanction from the god, which sanction was the salvation of the very ones against whom it was contrived. (321)

It is important to recognize that for Plutarch the pretense was completely justified and detracted from neither Numa's character nor his seriousness

⁴ It was widely believed that Numa owed his learning to Pythagoras—so widely that Cicero and Livy are both at considerable pains to point out that this was impossible, because Pythagoras took up residence in a different part of Italy, spoke a different language, and lived more than a century later. Nevertheless, Numa continued to be associated with Pythagoras, for example, by Ovid in the *Metamorphoses* and Augustine in the *City of God*.

about religion. Plutarch's Numa is a man who wants nothing more than to linger in sacred groves, perform holy rites, and contemplate the divine. The pious fraud is genuinely pious.

As Plutarch implies, ancient pagans differed on the extent to which religion à la Numa had anything to do with actual supernatural phenomena. Dionysius of Halicarnassus, writing at the end of the first century B.C.E., explains that he will describe one of Numa's religious establishments

[T]o the end that those who are unacquainted with the piety practiced by the Romans of those times may not be surprised to find that all their wars had the most successful outcome; for it will appear that the origins and motives of them all were most holy, and for this reason especially the gods were propitious to them in the dangers that attended them. (523)

For his part the fourth-century pagan historian Ammianus Marcellinus accepts that Numa was in communication with a tutelary spirit (169). On the other hand, Cicero in his *Laws* makes fun of people who believe that Numa actually spoke with Egeria (1999: 106). And in *The Nature of the Gods*, his mouthpiece, the academic philosopher Cotta, sarcastically differentiates what he really thinks about the gods from what he officially avows in his capacity as a Roman priest:

I take considerably to heart your authority Balbus, and the comments at the close of your discourse, in which you urged me to remember that I am not just Cotta, but also a priest. The point you were making, I imagine, was that I should defend the beliefs about the immortal gods which we have inherited from our ancestors, together with our sacrifices, ceremonies and religious observances. . . . I have come to the firm view that Romulus by his auspices, and Numa by establishing our ritual, laid the foundations of our Roman state. Certainly Rome could never have achieved such greatness without the utmost propitiation of the immortal gods. So much, Balbus, for the sentiments of Cotta the priest. (1997: 109)⁵

However skeptical they were in private, aristocrats like Cotta recognized an obligation to uphold traditional Roman religion as an essential buttress to the state. Cicero himself famously wrote a long dialogue against divination while serving as an augur. From the first century B.C.E. on, Rome's state religious practices were identified as *theologia*

⁵ Most but not all subsequent accounts omit Romulus's role as a religious founder.

civilis—civil theology. According to Varro the term was coined by Q. Mucius Scaevola, Cicero's teacher as well as pontifex maximus, in a tripartite formula that also included "mythic theology" (poetic and theatrical accounts of the gods) and "natural theology" (philosophical speculation) (Augustine 1963: 99–105). After the end of the Republic responsibility for civil theology fell to the emperor—after the model of Numa.

The rule of law began to be established in Rome, says Tacitus, because Numa constrained the people "with religion and divine law" (564).⁶ In going out of his way to mention Augustus's closing of the Temple of Janus after the battle of Actium in 31 B.C.E., Livy pointedly identified Rome's new ruler with its religious founder; and he was not alone in doing so. In 23 B.C.E. Cn. Calpurnius Piso, son of a former republican loyalist whom Augustus had persuaded to become consul, issued a series of coins that show Augustus on the obverse, Numa on reverse—thereby both recognizing Augustus's substantial efforts to restore Roman religious practices and linking a hoped-for Pax Augusta to the aboriginal Pax Numana (Galinsky: 34–35). Ovid's *Fasti*, written to celebrate "Caesar's altars and the days he added to the sacred roll" (3), may similarly be taken as a tribute to Augustus as *Numa Redivivus*; nor does it seem coincidental that the poet should have made Numa the framing character for most of the last book of the *Metamorphoses*, which ends in an acclamation of Augustus. Recently it has been argued, very plausibly in my view, that the southern panel relief at the west end of the Ara Pacis Augustae, the emblematic monument of Augustus's reign, depicts not (as generally thought) Aeneas after his arrival in Latium but Numa making peace with a neighboring king (Rehac).

Thus did Good King Numa become, in post-Republican Rome, the paragon of imperial piety. Both Hadrian and Marcus Aurelius cultivated an association with him (Zoepffel), as did Antoninus Pius, the pacific graybeard who in the mid-second century undertook his own renewal of religious practices—and issued coins linking his rule with Numa's (Weigel).⁷ Not long after Antoninus died, the court rhetorician Fronto wrote that he of all the emperors deserved to be equated with the ancient king (209). Two centuries later the historian Eutropius declared that Antoninus was to Numa as Trajan was to Romulus (105–106), whereas the biography of

⁶ *Annales* III.xxvi. Similarly, the collection of imperial biographies known as the *Historia Augusta* describes Numa as the ruler who, "by means of religious observances safeguarded a state which resounded with wars and was swollen with triumphs" (III, 419).

⁷ According to the *Historia Augusta*, Marcus Aurelius traced his descent from Numa (I: 135). For Hadrian's aspirations to be a second Numa, see Zoepffel.

Antoninus in the collection of imperial lives known as the *Historia Augusta* concludes, "Almost alone of all emperors he lived entirely unstained by the blood of either citizen or foe so far as was in his power, and he was justly compared to Numa, whose good fortune and piety and peacefulness and religious rites he ever maintained" (I: 131).

THE PAGAN

Under the circumstances it is to be expected that Christian intellectuals in the Latin West should have regarded Numa as personifying the pagan Rome they were trying to defeat. In the 190s Tertullian called him the man who "weighed the Romans down with the most burdensome superstitions" (114). One hundred years later Arnobius of Sicca described Rome as a place "in which, although there were people taken up with King Numa's arts and ancient superstitions, they did not defer abandoning the traditions of the fatherland and coalescing around the Christian truth" (57). A century further on, Paulinus of Nola sang that "all Rome has been offered up in the pious name of Christ, laughing at Numa's figments" (120). As far as the Christians were concerned the biography of Numa served as a demonstration of the falsity of Roman religion; and if the tale of Egeria was Exhibit A, Exhibit B was a curious story, told by Livy with considerable circumstantial detail, about the discovery of two stone caskets in 181 B.C.E., four hundred years after Numa's death.⁸ One of the caskets had supposedly held the king's remains, although nothing remained of them. The other contained two bundles of books—seven Latin "pontifical law" books and another seven Greek books relating to "a philosophical discipline that could have been contemporary." According to Livy the books were all ceremonially burned because the city praetor concluded that making them public would weaken religious observance (1919b: 89–93).⁹ Valerius Maximus, the second-century retailer of historical exempla, claims that the Latin books were preserved "with great diligence" but that the Greek ones were destroyed "because in some measure they were thought to lead to the dissolution of religion"

⁸ This episode has been much discussed by historians for the light it sheds on ancient Roman religion. It seems clear that the books in question were forgeries attributed to Numa by those with a particular religious agenda. For a review of the varied treatments of it by pagan and Christian authors in Antiquity, see Willi.

⁹ The earliest version of this story, quoted by Augustine from Varro, differs in significant respects from Livy's account. The discovery takes place when a farmer plowing turns up nothing more than a collection of Numa's books—in which were written the "reasons for his religious institutions." When leading senators read why these institutions had been established, the "pious conscript fathers" ordered the books burned (Augustine 1963: 495–499).

(24)—thereby making the issue Greek philosophical impiety. In Plutarch's conventional pagan Greek interpretation, all the books were burnt because it was felt to be wrong for esoteric religious lore to be made known to *hoi polloi* (379–383). But the fourth-century Christian apologist Lactantius contends that the books were destroyed because in them Numa, undeceived by his own deceptions, had undertaken to dissolve all the religious rites that he had established (88).¹⁰

Christian Romans were well aware of the importance that pagan Romans attached to Numa's religion. Prudentius puts the issue elegantly in the second of his two long poems against Symmachus, the erudite aristocrat who as prefect of Rome in 384 begged Valentinian II to restore the Senate's Altar of Victory.

But you say that the gods chose where the shrines
Would be forever used in crowded worship,
And for their part followed the winning banners
Of Aeneas' tribe out of unforced love of King Numa. (266)¹¹

Times, however, had changed—as Prudentius suggests in these lines from his graphic poem on the martyrdom of St. Romanus (spoken by the martyr's torturer, the pagan prefect Asclepiades):

Alas our forebears' sacred law and the state
Of ancient custom! Our age destroys the things
Pompilian kings devised for public safety.
What modern error has brought in these sophists
Who argue that the gods should not be worshipped? (385)¹²

After Rome was sacked by the Visigoths in 410, pagans charged that responsibility for the disaster lay with Theodosius I's prohibition of pagan worship a few years after the Altar of Victory controversy—and Augustine began writing the *City of God* to answer them. In Book Two Augustine airily denigrates Numa's legal institutions as well as his religious ones (1981:195–197), and in Book Three contends that it was not

¹⁰ He goes on to say that it was foolish for the Roman authorities to try to protect pagan piety by burning the books, while at the same time handing down the memory of why they had done so.

¹¹ Poetry that invokes Numa in terms similar to the words Prudentius puts in Symmachus's mouth can be found in the panegyric on the consulship of Stilicho that Claudian wrote in 399 or 400. According to that pagan (or at most nominally Christian) poet Rome was "strengthened by the sibyls' oracles, brought to life by Numa's holy rites" (Claudian: 54).

¹² Similarly, in another poem Prudentius claims that as a result of the martyrdom of Lawrence, Romans abandoned the veneration of "Numa's sacrificial bowl" in favor of crowding into churches to sing the martyr's praises (314).

religion that brought peace to Rome in Numa's day but the fact that none of Rome's neighbors chose to attack (1981: 297). And in an extended commentary on the book-burning episode Augustine speculates that Numa used hydromancy to obtain secret demonic lore, writing it down to assist his memory but keeping it secret for fear of incurring the demons' wrath (1981: 499–505).

The attack on Numa is part of the *City of God's* massive critique of Rome's civil theology. Although easy to miss amidst the elaborate fun he makes of the minor functional deities of Roman life, the pagan rationales for this system of religious practice are clearly addressed by Augustine. In Book Three, chapter 4, he calls attention to Varro's argument that it is a good thing for cities when strong men believe themselves to be descended from the Gods, because that increases their ability to get things done: "We see thereby that where lies even about the Gods themselves have been thought to be beneficial to citizens, very many sacred and quasi-religious matters may have been fabricated" (1981: 278). Then, in Book Four, chapter 31, he quotes Varro as saying

[O]penly with respect to religious ceremonies that there are many truths which it is not useful for the general public to know, and, further, many falsehoods that it is expedient for the people to believe true, and that this is why the Greeks kept their initiation rites veiled in silence and enclosed within walls. *He puts forward the whole policy of the so-called wise ones, through whom cities and peoples were to be governed* [italics added]. (1963: 118)¹³

This complete subordination of civil theology to sociopolitical purposes was, for Augustine, the key to what was wrong with it: it had nothing whatever to do with life eternal.

But the issue that had motivated the *City of God* did not take long to evaporate. The paganism of the Roman elite guttered out in the fifth century and with it all insistence on the importance of preserving Rome's sacred past. Numa, the best that Roman paganism had to offer, was no longer a figure for Christians to conjure with. To be sure, medieval writers did not forget about him altogether. Armed with Lactantius, Augustine, the grammarian Donatus (who etymologizes on Numa's name), and standard summaries of Roman history (by Florus, Eutropius, and Jordanes), they now and again found occasion to drop his name. This, however, amounted to little more than antiquarianism. In Roman

¹³ Although this sentence is clear enough, it makes more sense if we read "through which" (*per quod*) in place of "through whom" (*per quos*)—as, for example, Montesquieu did (86).

antiquity pagans and Christians alike understood the figure of Numa to be central to the story of religion in their society. Through the early Middle Ages he was beside the point—a remote pagan figure of no apparent relevance to issues of Christian governance. Not until the middle of the twelfth century did anyone in the Latin West pick up the thread of the ancient discussion.

THE EXEMPLAR

In 1159 John of Salisbury, secretary to Archbishop Theobald of Canterbury, published the *Policraticus*, a guide to politics, government, and court life that he dedicated to his friend the royal chancellor, Thomas Becket. Book Five is a mirror for princes couched as a commentary on something called the *Institutio Traiani*, an otherwise unknown treatise on government that John claims was written by Plutarch to instruct the Emperor Trajan.¹⁴ By way of explicating what he says is the work's assertion that religion is the soul of the commonwealth, John points out that there is a difference between direct love of God and *cultus exterior*, external religious practices. Only through the medium of such *cultus* can God be diligently worshiped, because God has never been seen and is not easily knowable:

Wherefore we read that Numa Pompilius introduced among the Romans certain ceremonies and sacrifices, to the end that under the pretence of the immortal gods he might the more easily induce them to cultivate piety, religion, good faith, and the other things which he wished to make known to them.

After listing a number of these religious innovations John declares that all were designed

[T]o curb the barbarism of the people, restrain them from wrong-doing, and cause them to keep a holiday from arms, cultivate justice, and steadily train themselves in civil affection [*civilem affectum*] toward one another; and he did in fact so succeed in taming that fierce people, that the empire which they had seized, as it is said, by violence and wrong, they governed happily by the laws of justice and piety. (1963: 68–69; Latin: 1965: I: 285–286)¹⁵

¹⁴ Famous (in John's summary) for its detailed analogy between the body politic and the body human, the *Institutio* was either a Latin forgery or, more probably, a phantom conjured up by John himself (see Kerner).

¹⁵ John's account of Numa is based closely on Jordanes's history of Rome (11).

So far as I can tell John is the first Latin Christian author to single out Numa for praise, and it is easy enough to surmise what led him to do so.¹⁶ England had just come through the anarchy of King Stephen, and Becket, as the young Henry II's principal administrator, was struggling to restore domestic law and order. Though an early supporter of Henry's, John had himself been exiled from Theobald's service by the king in 1156–57, apparently for diplomatic missteps at the papal court. Relations between state and church were delicate at best. Why not use Numa, the exemplary Roman king, to call the English monarchy's attention to the social benefits religion could bring to the realm?

Conscious that some might nonetheless object to his use of this most pagan of models, John pretends to apologize—and analogizes Numa's religious project to Moses':

But why should I put forward the example of Numa when the fathers of our own faith likewise assert that the sacrifices and ceremonies of the old law were instituted lest the people, becoming captivated by the worship of demons, should unlearn the practice of the true religion, burning their sacrifices to demons after the manner of the gentiles, and not to God?" (1963: 69)

Cultus exterior, in other words, secures the moral integrity of the community at large. Although John does not mention Christianity in this context, there can be little doubt that he means for the analogy to extend that far. Later in the *Policraticus* he makes an argument for *civilitas*, civilized behavior, by citing the passage in Luke where Jesus advises those invited to weddings to take the lowest place at table ("because everyone that exalteth himself shall be humbled and he that humbleth himself shall be exalted" [xiv.9–11]). John explains: "Although this may seem to be an edict of religion rather than of *civilitas*, I do not separate the form of religion [*formam religionis*] from *civilitas*, since there is nothing more civilized than to insist upon the cultivation of virtue" (1965: II: 280). *Civilitas* is, for John, as much a function of the Christian form of religion as it is of any other. As he puts it in a letter he wrote for Theobald to send to Henry II in 1160:

¹⁶ Jordanes, a sixth-century Christian Goth, offers nothing in the way of a negative assessment in reprising the story of Numa, the religious founder of Rome. His practice is to omit editorial evaluation positive or negative (O'Donnell: 225), whereas John introduces Numa in order to exemplify princely reverence. In this regard it is significant that the last passage quoted above—emphasizing the societal benefits of Numa's religious policy—is John's own.

By [God's] grace we have found such peaceful unity [*concordiae unitatem*] among your subjects, that it is established by the surest and most manifest signs that their faith is securely founded on the rock of the Church. (1955: 216)

It is not surprising that John, a man of affairs immersed in classical letters, should have recovered pagan antiquity's appreciation of the social utility of religion. More remarkable, and of greater significance in the history of western thought, is his theologically deft rationalization of this anti-Augustinian perspective. After noting the communal benefits of the Mosaic Law he asserts that although every faithful creature is capable of interior worship, *cultus exterior* is necessary because it is the only way to approach God corporeally—and God desires to be honored corporeally “so that the tardiness of infidelity or negligence has no excuse” (1965: I: 289). *Cultus exterior* thus serves as a remedy for human weakness, its religious benefits (combating infidelity and negligence) comparable to its secular ones (civilized behavior, embrace of justice, and civic affection).

In the early Middle Ages spiritual commitment was conceived in terms of behavior and doctrine rather than as the expression of an inner self; indeed, the very word “religion” came to mean life under a monastic rule. But during what Giles Constable has called the “reformation of the twelfth century,” those in search of God began to distinguish their interior spiritual lives from corporate religious practices and ceremonial. As Constable puts it, “For many of the new monks prayer and spiritual devotions were a matter of direct communication of the inner self with God rather than of participation in community worship and psalmody, which for them came from the lips rather than the heart” (272). That interior spirituality outranks external practice has ever since been a central conviction of western Christianity—indeed, of western religion. No one has been a bolder exponent of this view than Spinoza, who held that religious ceremonial (*externum cultum*) had nothing whatever to do with blessedness and that real religion consisted only of individuals worshipping privately according to their lights (98–99, 292–293). As a good churchman—he would end his days as Bishop of Chartres—John cannot be accused of wishing to disengage inner devotion from external forms of worship. But the new idea that religion at its most profound stood apart from *cultus exterior* enabled him to cast the latter in human terms and thereby to make a case for the social benefits of religion in general. For him it is religion *sub specie cultus exterioris* that functions as the soul of the commonwealth. By embedding his tribute to Numa in a discussion of interior and external worship John did not so much rehabilitate Roman

civil theology as discover space within western Christianity for what we have come to call civil religion.

An echo of John's discussion can be found in the thirteenth century, in Albert the Great's commentary on the *De anima* of Aristotle. In Book One, chapter 3, Aristotle had criticized Pythagorean mythology for suggesting that any soul can be clothed in any body. Using some of the same words that John used to describe Numa, Albert writes that it was because Pythagoras wanted "to make citizens cultivate piety and justice" that he "made up the story that the souls of bad citizens would depart from one body into another of a worse condition, i.e. that the soul of a man would migrate into the body of a lion or an ass" (V, 160). The passage in the *Policraticus* may have come to mind because of a traditional association between Numa and Pythagoras (see footnote 4), but Albert got the idea that a Numa-like Pythagoras devised metempsychosis as an instrument of social control from the Arabic philosopher Averroes, who in his Great Commentary on the *De anima* asserts that the Greek philosopher had posited the idea "in order to correct citizens' souls" (1953: 74). Averroes set out his views on the social utility of religion at greater length in his commentary on Aristotle's *Metaphysics*, building on Aristotle's remark in Book Twelve that much of religion was invented to persuade the multitude and for legal and other useful ends (1962: 341K and 334B). Albert, drawing on Averroes in an extended discussion of the issue in his own commentary on the *Metaphysics*, writes that *civilitas* (the *Policraticus* again?) does not require that people have a pure understanding of truth but rather that they "cultivate piety and serve justice and uphold the state." As a result, "legislators seek not the principles of truth but hand down precepts of piety, and things that more easily by hope of rewards and fear of punishments promote the governing and maintenance of the state. And therefore many gods, cults, and religions have been made" (Albert: VI: 129).

This elaborated Aristotelian perspective on pagan religion became standard scholastic teaching.¹⁷ As Aquinas (borrowing from Averroes) puts it in *Summa Theologiae* 1–2 q. 99 a. 3:

[D]ivine law is principally instituted to command people with respect to God, human law principally to command people with respect to each other. And therefore human laws have not been concerned to institute anything regarding divine worship unless it is for the common good of people; and because of this as well they made up much concerning

¹⁷ For a brief but excellent overview of scholastic thought on this matter, see the discussion by Alan Gewirth in Marsilius of Padua (1951: I: 83–84).

things divine, as seemed expedient to them for forming peoples' mores; just as is apparent in gentile religion. (644)

Yet although Thomas, like Albert, was prepared to grant that pagan religion was designed with worthy social ends in view, neither would go so far as to say, or imply, that true religion could be seen in comparable terms.¹⁸ That step was taken in the 1320s by the radical anti-papal theorist Marsilius of Padua. In Discourse I of his *Defensor Pacis* Marsilius contends that most religions claim that God will punish evildoers and reward those who do good in the next world. But besides that proposition, which, he says, cannot be proved, ancient philosophers noted another, "quasi-necessary" reason for instituting religion: "to ensure the goodness of human acts both individual and civil, on which depend almost completely the quiet or tranquility of communities" (1932: I: 26). That Marsilius considered the latter to apply to Christianity becomes clear in Discourse Two, where he offers separate accounts of thisworldly and otherworldly uses of the "evangelical law" (1932: II: 232–233).

Scholastic acknowledgement of the civic utility of religion, grudging though it usually was, created the intellectual basis for a general revaluation of pagan Rome's religious founder—and in fact in the first half of the fourteenth century two notable literary texts helped reestablish Good King Numa as an exemplary figure in western thought. The first was the immensely popular *Ovide Moralisé*, an anonymous allegorized version of Ovid's *Metamorphoses* written around 1320. In it, the Numa whose story frames most of the last book of the *Metamorphoses* is successively identified as St. Clement (who followed St. Peter as pope), "the order and the dignity of bishop" (instituted by the apostles to govern the Church), St. Paul (who founded the Church among the gentiles), and such other sainted popes of the early church as Anastasius, Silvester, and Boniface (250–251, 254–255, 346). All of the above "kept the state of Holy Church in peace by their wisdom, and had written down the laws and canons by which the faith was then maintained" (346). After the early papal saints, however, the Church began to suffer greatly from the persecution of "the false emperors who held secular power and worshiped idols" (346). Wittingly or not, the poet replaced the patristic understanding of

¹⁸ In *Summa Theologiae* 2–2 q. 94 a.3 Thomas differentiates between exterior and interior religion but explicitly rejects the idea of engaging in idolatrous rites while keeping the faith "interiorly" (589). He likewise, in 2–2 q. 101, discusses Scaevola's tripartite theology and conceives of piety in terms of a *cultus* of family and fatherland (634–639). Although he does not identify filiopiety or patriotic cult as contemporary manifestations of civil theology, there does seem to be some relationship between this discussion and the contemporary sacralization of the secular state as a *corpus mysticum* (Kantorowicz).

persecution in Numa's name with the idea that it was thanks to the wise governance of a series of saintly "Numas" that the early Church had avoided persecution.

Then, in the early 1340s, Petrarch composed a glowing portrait of Numa for the first installment of his *De viris illustribus*, a collection of biographical sketches of great Roman leaders. As a close reader of the *Policraticus*—passages from its account of the *Institutio Traiani* turn up several times in his works—Petrarch would have been familiar with John's tribute to Numa; but it was directly from Livy that he acquired his vision of ancient king. (So beguiled was he that, he tells us, he paid a personal visit to the cave on the shore of Lake Nemi in the Alban hills southeast of Rome where Numa was supposed to have gone to meditate.) The *De viris illustribus* presents Numa as a wise and devoted king who piously deployed religious fictions for the sake of peace abroad and a decent, law-abiding society at home. In line with Livy, Petrarch emphasizes the contrast with Romulus: Numa was a man "very learned in human and divine law, hugely devoted to peace, abstinent from war, dedicated to holy things" who differed from his predecessor "in his talents and in the tenor of his entire life." The Egeria deception was no more than a successful means of keeping the "simple and credulous plebs" from dissoluteness through "fear of the gods and the restraints of religion." The result was that Numa ruled for many years "in utmost peace with all neighbors, having pacified with love and reverence those who had hated them" (Petrarca: 1964: 15–16).

The *De viris illustribus* literally served to place the image of Numa before Renaissance eyes. A few years before Petrarch died, his patron Francesco il Vecchio da Carrara commissioned a grand series of frescos for his palace in Padua, displaying *De viris illustribus*'s entire series of exemplary Romans (Mommsen). In the fifteenth century Italian nobles acquired a taste for such "famous men" frescos; the most elaborate, the Monte Giordano cycle executed by Masolino in 1431–32 for the Roman palace of Cardinal Giordano Orsini, showed Numa flanked by the Erythraean Sibyl and the prophet Isaiah (Simpson; Mode).¹⁹ With the help of such imagery Numa became the prime exemplar of the ancient pagan lawgiver. For example, in the preface to his translation of Aristotle's works on animals, dedicated to Pope Sixtus IV in 1476, Theodore of Gaza praises the popes for following the example of Numa the peacemaker rather than Lycurgus, whose laws, he says, were designed to spur the Spartans to bellicosity (Aristotle: n.p.). In Bartolomé de Las Casas's

¹⁹ I am grateful to Kristin Triff for calling my attention to this tradition.

Apologética historia, which was written to demonstrate that the Indian societies of the New World were as rational and sophisticated as the pre-Christian civilizations of the Old, Numa serves as the template for Pachacuti, the Inca leader responsible for reconstituting ancient Andean religion. Just as Numa had pretended to derive his authority from Egeria, so Pachacuti called himself Indichuri, "Son of the Sun," in order to claim that "whatever he did and ordained was done, ordained, and commanded by the Sun," that is, by divine authority (Las Casas: 217–218). Although Pachacuti lacked the true faith, like Numa he was, writes Las Casas, "a singular example worthy of imitation" by Catholic rulers on how to conduct themselves religiously (580).

But no Renaissance writer made more of Numa than Machiavelli, who in his *Discourses on Livy* adopts Polybius's view that religion was the key to Rome's greatness.²⁰

As he found a very ferocious people and wished to reduce it to civil obedience with the arts of peace, he turned to religion as a thing altogether necessary if he wished to maintain a civilization [*una civiltà*]; and he constituted it so that for many centuries there was never so much fear of God as in that republic, which made easier whatever enterprise the Senate or the great men of Rome might plan to make. . . . 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. So if one had to dispute over which prince Rome was more obligated to, Romulus or Numa, I believe rather that Numa would obtain the first rank; for where there is religion, arms can easily be introduced, and where there are arms and not religion, the latter can be introduced only with difficulty. . . . Everything considered, thus, I conclude that the religion introduced by Numa was among the first causes of the happiness of that city. For it caused good orders; good orders make good fortune; and from good fortune arose the happy successes of enterprises. As the observance of the divine cult is the cause of the greatness of republics, so disdain for it is the cause of their ruin. (1996: 34–35)

Such an encomium would have come as no surprise to anyone in Florence. In February 1513, the year Machiavelli began the *Discourses*, Lorenzo the Magnificent's grandson Lorenzo marked his family's return to power in the city by commissioning a series of Carnival floats symbolizing good government (Puttfarken: 131). These "triumphs," as they were called, began with an ox-drawn car bearing scythe-wielding Saturn, the mythological ruler over the original golden age, and Janus holding

²⁰ For Machiavelli's use of Polybius in the *Discourses*, see Mansfield: 35–40.

the keys to the temple of peace. Then came Numa with his books of religion, priestly trappings, and implements for sacrifice. According to Vasari's biography of the artist Pontorno, who was hired to paint the floats,

Six priests accompanied [Numa's] car on handsome mules, their heads covered with cloth hoods embroidered with gold and silver ivy leaves, worked with mastery. They wore ancient sacerdotal vestments, with rich gold borders and fringes, some carrying a censer and some a gold vase or something similar. Their footmen were like Levites, whose torches resembled ancient candelabra. (Vasari: 238)

Additional floats featured the Roman consul Titus Manlius Torquatus, Julius Caesar, Augustus Caesar, and the Emperor Trajan, and the procession culminated in a triumph showing the birth of a new golden age presided over by Lorenzo's uncle Giovanni de' Medici, the newly elevated Pope Leo X.

Dismissed from his job as Florentine secretary, imprisoned and tortured, and then released as part of a general amnesty proclaimed by Leo X, Machiavelli was desperate to get into the Medicis' good graces. *The Prince*, which he dedicated to the young Lorenzo, concludes by calling upon this "glorious family . . . favored by God and by the Church" to unite Italy (1965: 93). But in the *Discourses* Machiavelli abandons such millenarian flattery. The point of Roman religion was that it enabled the rulers of the state to achieve their ends—as when the Roman plebs honored an oath made under duress rather than continue to agitate for a law limiting the power of the consuls over them (1996: 39). This was scarcely a new insight on Machiavelli's part. A century and half earlier, in an assessment of the episode of Numa's excavated library, Petrarch had written

I do not know whether he [Numa] truly believed the books to be contrary to religion (the pretended reason), or whether (a view to which I myself am more inclined) the Roman praetor with the consent of the senate really ordered the books burnt as a pretext . . . lest a people freed from fear throw off the yoke of the nobility. (1975: 524)

But Machiavelli went further, comparing Roman religion favorably to Christianity itself.

Book III of the *Discourses* begins with the assertion that republics, religions, and monarchies that wish to last need to reform themselves periodically by returning to their origins. Thus, says Machiavelli, Christianity

[W]ould be altogether eliminated if it had not been drawn back toward its beginning by Saint Francis and Saint Dominic. For with poverty and with the example of the life of Christ they brought back into the minds of men what had already been eliminated there. Their new orders were so powerful that they are the cause that the dishonesty of the prelates and of the heads of the religion do[es] not ruin it. Living still in poverty and having so much credit with peoples in confessions and sermons, they [the Franciscans and Dominicans] give them [the people] to understand that it is evil to say evil of evil, and that it is good to live under obedience to them [church leaders] and, if they [church leaders] make an error, to leave them for God to punish. So they [church leaders] do the worst they can because they do not fear the punishment that they do not see and do not believe. This renewal, therefore, has maintained and maintains this religion. (1996: 211–212)²¹

In short, the holiness of the mendicants so revived Christian piety that ordinary people, as humble Christians, did not revolt against the church's corrupt leadership and destroy the Christian religion. Just as the Roman elite controlled the plebs through the strength of the religion established by Numa, so the princes of the church were able to control their flocks through the (renewed) strength of the religion established by Jesus.

The problem, for Machiavelli, was that although the religion of Numa had served to undergird the Roman state, Christianity undermined the Italian one. Institutionally, the Catholic Church as a temporal power kept Italy from becoming united (1996: 38–39). Ideologically, Christianity “placed the highest good in humility, abjectness, and contempt of things human,” rather than (as ancient Roman religion had done) in the doing of great deeds. Where paganism “beatified” only those who were full of worldly glory, “our religion” tends to glorify the humble and the contemplative. Somewhat plaintively, Machiavelli puts it down to cowardice that people interpret Christianity “according to idleness and not according to virtue,” even though it “permits us the exaltation and defense of the fatherland” (1996: 131–132).²² But the burden of his argument is that “our religion” is fundamentally flawed as a civic institution. States need religion to prosper, yet the more effectively Christianity

²¹ In their translation of the *Discourses* Mansfield and Tarcov footnote the above passage with a reference to Dante's discussion of the corruption of the Franciscans and Dominicans in the *Paradiso*; however, the referents that I have added in brackets should make it clear that that is not what Machiavelli is talking about. It is precisely because the followers of Francis and Dominic are holy men truly preaching the gospel that the corrupt and faithless hierarchy is able to hold on to power.

²² Marcia Colish notes that in the *Florentine Histories* Machiavelli supplies examples of leaders who used Christianity effectively (606–607).

perpetuates itself by preaching its core value—Christ’s humility—the less capable it is of empowering them to carry out great enterprises.

If not Christianity, then what? In *Utopia* (1516), a work exactly contemporaneous with the *Discourses*, Thomas More imagined a society that tolerated all religious views so long as people believed that there was a God who would punish vice and reward virtue in the next world. Anyone who did not was excluded from citizenship, “since he would openly despise all the laws and customs of society, if not prevented by fear” (98). This religious regime combined the scholastic recognition of the social utility of belief in posthumous reward and punishment with a late medieval willingness to see religious tradition as differing more in externals than in essentials.²³ In practice Utopian religion featured a popularly elected priesthood in charge of education and morals as well as prescribed religious rites. The result was a highly ethical social order free from sectarian conflict and church–state tension. The man responsible was Utopus, a founder–legislator on the ancient Greco-Roman model who did not, apparently, need to fake divine authority in order to gain public acceptance of his reforms.²⁴ In the real world of post-Reformation Europe, however, a well-regulated society seemed to require more substantial metaphysical authorization.

THE ERASTIAN

In the early seventeenth century the idiosyncratic Thomist Tommaso Campanella held that religion, true or false, was of critical importance in the governance of a state and that no ruler could hold power unless he was authorized, or believed to be authorized, by God (Headley: 187). More orthodox Catholic thinkers of the same era likewise acknowledged that religion was essential to a well-functioning state; what worried them was that the wrong conclusions were being drawn. Fear of punishment in the next world was “so necessary in republics,” wrote the Spanish diplomat Diego Saavedra Fajardo in his *Politico-Christian Prince* (1643), “that many impious people see religion as a political invention” (30). Saavedra vigorously attacked the use of religious fictions to deceive the populace into good behavior, asserting that a state cannot be firmly established on

²³ In the middle of the fifteenth century Nicholas of Cusa famously wrote that “all diversity” of religious traditions (including that of ancient Rome) was “located more in rites than in the cultivation [*cultura*] of the one God, whom everyone in every culture has from the beginning presupposed and worshiped” (62).

²⁴ More gives a date for Utopus’s founding of Utopia (344 B.C.E.) that pays tribute to King Agis IV of Sparta, who was put to death for advocating egalitarian reforms (More: 47, n 18).

such trickery. He and other anti-Machiavellians were principally concerned to demonstrate that Christianity was in fact a fighting creed capable of sustaining a strong state—indeed, that no religion could serve the state better (Bireley: 61–63, 143–146, 209–211, 230–231). To show religion on the march they happily pointed to Counter-Reformation heroes like Charles V and Philip IV.

Machiavelli's Renaissance concerns survived better among English writers who, in the troubled mid-seventeenth century, tended to appreciate any and all efforts to put society on a stable footing. In a 1641 pamphlet, Milton wrote that the "guidance of a civill state to worldly happinesse" was so difficult that "all the ancient lawgivers were either truly inspir'd as Moses, or were such men as with authority anough [*sic*] might give it out to be so, as Minos, Lycurgus, Numa, because they wisely forethought that men would never quietly submit to such a discipline as had not more of Gods hand in it than mans" (186). Hobbes, who took the same view, went further than any thinker since pagan antiquity in enlisting religious practices in the service of the state. In the *De cive* (1642) he claims that citizens ought to perform acts of idolatry if a non-Christian commonwealth commands it (1998: 184–185) and in both the *De cive* and *Leviathan* (1651) asserts that prostration, genuflection, or any other bodily expression of respect for a secular ruler is permissible as "civil worship" (*cultus civilis*), provided that the ruler is not confused with God (1996: 447–449; 1839: 350).²⁵

The only dissenter from the consensus on religion's importance to the state was the liberal Calvinist Pierre Bayle, who scandalized one and all by arguing that atheists make just as good citizens as believers (I: 301–350; II: 5–47).²⁶ For their part the Machiavellians took the Erastian position

²⁵ In *Leviathan* Hobbes claims that "all formed religion is founded at first, upon the faith which a multitude hath in some one person, whom they believe not only to be a wise man, and to labour to procure their happiness, but also to be a holy man, to whom God himselfe vouchsafeth to declare his will supernaturally." From Abraham, Moses, and Jesus, to Numa, Muhammad, and Pachacuti, they aimed to "make those men that relyed on them, the more apt to Obedience, Lawes, peace, Charity, and civill Society." He goes on to say that the "gentile" founders have "in all places taken care; First, to imprint in their minds a beliefe, that those precepts which they gave concerning Religion, might not be thought to proceed from their own device, but from the dictates of some God, or other Spirit; or else that they themselves were of a higher nature than mere mortalls, that their Lawes might the more easily be received: So *Numa Pompilius* pretended to receive the Ceremonies he instituted amongst the Romans, from the Nymph *Egeria*: and the first king and founder of Peru, pretended himselfe and his wife to be children of the Sunne: and *Mahomet*, to set up his new Religion, pretended to have conferences with the Holy Ghost, in forme of a Dove" (1996: 79–83).

²⁶ Bayle became a favorite whipping boy for many writers, most famously Montesquieu in Book 24 of the *Spirit of the Laws*.

that religion was too important to be left to the clergy and thus should be placed under state control. At the end of the seventeenth century an English pamphleteer named Walter Moyle celebrated Numa as an Erastian *avant le mot*: His “great genius” lay in placing the “government of religion . . . in the hands of the state”—because “[p]ersecutions are generally made to gratify the pride, the ambition, or the interests of the clergy; which a state, that has the command of the national conscience, will never indulge at the expense of the public good” (210, 214).²⁷ Half a century later the notorious freethinker Lord Bolingbroke mischievously suggested that Constantine was following the example of Numa (who contributed more to the “prosperity and grandeur” of Rome than Romulus and “all the warrior kings who succeeded him”) when he seized upon the vibrant new religion of Christianity to pacify and civilize his fractious empire (497). Constantine’s mistake, said Bolingbroke, was to permit Christianity to retain its independent clergy, thereby creating a rival power, and ultimately leading to the spiritual and temporal “tyranny” of the papacy (510).²⁸ No one, however, identified Rome with Erastianism more elegantly than Montesquieu. In an address on Roman religion presented to the Bordeaux Academy in 1716, the twenty-seven-year-old *philosophe* declared that it was because “the genius of the Republic” was their only divinity that the Romans so readily assimilated the gods of the people they conquered. Calling Numa “the wisest prince of whom profane history has ever spoken,” he pronounced: “I find this difference between the Roman lawgivers and those of other peoples, namely that the former made religion for the state; the latter, the state for religion” (82, 90–92).

The most prominent critic of the Enlightenment Machiavellians was the English divine William Warburton, who set out to prove in his *The Alliance between Church and State* (1736) “that the Christian, of all religious societies, is best fitted to assist the civil magistrate” (169). In the *Social Contract* (1762) Jean-Jacques Rousseau, the greatest Machiavellian of them all, used Warburton as a foil in developing his approach to religion and the state. Noting that all ancient lawgivers had to “resort to the intervention of heaven,” Rousseau declares that one should not therefore conclude “with Warburton that among us politics and religion have a common object, but rather that at the origin of nations the one serves as the instrument of the other” (1997b: 71–72).²⁹ What kind of

²⁷ For an extended discussion of Moyle’s treatment of Numa, see Champion: 186–195.

²⁸ This argument spins out of a Protestant polemical tradition tracing Roman Catholic practices to ancient Rome in general and Numa in particular (Robbins: 155, n 1).

²⁹ In a revised edition of the *Alliance* published in 1766 Warburton took great exception to this characterization of his view; religion and the state have separate ends, he claimed, even as they collaborate.

religion could serve as the instrument of the modern state? That is the final problem the *Social Contract* attempts to solve.³⁰ The historical facts, Rousseau claims, are more than sufficient to refute Bayle, on the one hand, and Warburton, on the other: Of all the "Christian Authors" only Hobbes "clearly saw the evil and the remedy, who dared to propose reuniting the two heads of the eagle, and to return everything to political unity" (1997b: 146). It was very likely the Hobbesian idea of "civil worship" that led Rousseau to call his proposed solution "civil religion." But what he had in mind was far more consequential than ceremonial signs of respect showed to a secular ruler.

Rousseau begins by using the now centuries-old distinction between interior and exterior worship to define a "religion of man" and a "religion of the citizen"; neither, he argues, is adequate to the job at hand. The former, which entails "the purely interior worship of God," is primitive Christianity: "the pure and simple religion of the Gospel." Its usefulness to the state is nil because it is a "wholly spiritual religion" whose "Fatherland is not of this world." Pushing Machiavelli's point to the extreme he calls a "Christian Republic" a contradiction in terms (1997b: 142–151).³¹ By contrast the "religion of the citizen" combines "divine worship and love of the laws, and in making the fatherland the object of the Citizens' worship it teaches them that to serve the State is to serve its tutelary God." But such religion entails false belief and empty ceremonial and runs the risk of making people bloodthirsty and intolerant. Even if it were desirable, exclusive national religions are no longer possible in this day and age.³² What is needed is "a purely civil profession of faith the articles of which it is up to the Sovereign to fix, not precisely as dogmas of

³⁰ Six years earlier Rousseau had written a letter to Voltaire urging him to compose "a moral code, or a kind of civil profession of faith, containing, positively, the social maxims everyone would be bound to acknowledge, and, negatively, the fanatical maxims one would be bound to reject, not as impious, but as seditious." It would, he wrote, "be the most useful book ever composed, it seems to me, and perhaps the only one needful to men" (1997a: 245).

³¹ In the "Profession of Faith of the Savoyard Vicar" in Book 4 of *Emile* (published the same year as the *Social Contract*), the humble priest expresses an Enlightenment version of the "religion of man": "Let us not confuse the ceremony of religion with religion itself. The worship God asks for is that of the heart. And that worship, when it is sincere, is always uniform. One must be possessed of a mad vanity indeed to imagine that God takes so great an interest in the form of the priest's costume, in the order of the words he pronounces, in the gestures he makes at the altar, and in all his genuflections. Ah, my friend, remain upright! You will always be near enough to the earth. God wants to be revered in spirit and in truth. This is the duty of all religions, all countries, all men. As to the external worship, if it must be uniform for the sake of good order, that is purely a question of public policy; no revelation is needed for that" (1979: 296).

³² Rousseau dismisses a "bizarre" third sort of religion—the double-headed hybrid of church and state such as prevails among the "Lamas," the Japanese, and the Roman Catholics. Dividing peoples' allegiance between two systems of authority, this form of religion, he says, is not even worthy of discussion, for "everything which destroys social unity is worthless" (1997b: 146–147).

Religion but as sentiments of sociability, without which it is impossible to be either a good Citizen or a loyal subject" (1997b: 150). Positively, these include "the existence of the powerful, intelligent, beneficent, prescient, and provident Divinity, the life to come, the happiness of the just, the punishment of the wicked, the sanctity of the social Contract and the Laws." The sole negative prescription is tolerance of others—or at least tolerance of those who themselves profess tolerance and whose dogmas contain nothing contrary to the duties of a citizen. These "dogmas of the civil religion" closely parallel the religious groundrules set out in More's *Utopia*, and Rousseau offers them as the best the modern world can manage by way of a religion of the citizen. Their purpose is to promote a peaceful society of God-fearing citizens who will not fight among themselves over matters of faith, or aggressively attack their neighbors. Yet, because it is explicitly universal, "civil religion" is not equipped to create strong national identity or purpose. And it was this goal of Machiavelli's that preoccupied Rousseau when he returned to the issue of religion and the state a decade later in his *Considerations on the Government of Poland*.

He wrote the posthumously published *Considerations* in response to a request for advice from the Confederates of Bar, a faction of the Polish elite that was agitating for political reform and greater independence from Russia. It begins with a lament on the decline of civilization and a claim that in establishing religious ceremonies, games, spectacles, and plays, all ancient legislators had been guided by the same spirit that had moved Numa.

Those who have seen Numa as nothing but someone who instituted religious rites and ceremonies have badly misjudged this great man. Numa was the true founder of Rome. If all Romulus had done was to assemble some brigands whom a reversal could scatter, his imperfect work could not have withstood the test of time. It was Numa who made it solid and lasting by united these brigands into an indissoluble body, by transforming them into Citizens, not so much by means of laws, for which in their rustic poverty they had as yet little need, as by means of mild institutions which attached them one to another and all of them to their soil so that they eventually sanctified their city with these apparently frivolous and superstitious rites, the force and effects of which so few people appreciate. (Rousseau: 1997b: 181)

Those apparently frivolous and superstitious rites—Roman religion—had supplied the essential sinews of the Roman state. Parenthetically calling the reader's attention to the end of the *Social Contract* (for its account of the religion of the citizen), Rousseau describes ancient religious ceremonies as "by their very nature always exclusive and national." By contrast, he says, if people assemble for religion today, "it is in Temples for a cult which is in

no way national, which in no way reminds them of the fatherland, and has been turned almost into ridicule" (1997b: 182). But the *Considerations* has nothing to propose regarding the role of actual Polish religion—Roman Catholicism—in the Polish state. What Rousseau stresses, as strongly as possible, is the need to maintain and enhance the distinctiveness of Polish national identity.³³ Flattering those who had solicited his help, he writes:

You must seize the occasion of the latest event to raise their souls to the level of the souls of the ancients. Certain it is that the Confederation of Bar saved the dying fatherland. You must engrave this great epoch in sacred characters in every Polish heart. I should wish to see a monument erected to its memory, and the names of all the Confederates inscribed on it . . . I should wish to have a regular solemn occasion to celebrate it every ten years . . . to have the worthy Citizens who had the honor of suffering for the fatherland in the enemy's chains be eulogized with dignity . . . even to have their families granted some honorific privilege which would forever recall this fair memory to the eyes of the public. (1997b: 184–185)

In effect, the *Considerations* replaces the *Social Contract*'s generic civil religious sentiments with a more specific "religion of the Polish citizen"—one that Rousseau clearly intended to weld Poles into the kind of "indissoluble body" that Numa had made of the Romans. The nationalist religious ideology he forswore in the *Social Contract* is now front and center.

THE GHOST

Rousseau never tried to reconcile his two species of civil religion. But the idea that religion à la Numa could at once pacify and galvanize a populace was not impossible to entertain in the eighteenth century. Three years before Rousseau composed the *Considerations* the English playwright Oliver Goldsmith wrote that under Numa "the people became more submissive and social; but what gave them still greater force, if considered in the light of conquerors, was the spirit of religion which he implanted among them. This continued to operate through a long succession of ages of ages; for what could resist the greatest valour when impelled by the most profound superstition?" (21).

³³ "The virtue of Citizens, their patriotic zeal, the distinctive form which its national institutions may give their soul, this is the only rampart that will stand ever ready to defend it, and which no army could subdue by force. If you see to it that a Pole can never become a Russian, I assure you that Russia will never subjugate Poland" (1997b: 183).

In the midst of the French Revolution, Francois Lanthenas, a leading Girondin, did his best to sell his fellow citizens on a civil religion that would combine the universal morality of the *Social Contract* with the patriotic purposes of the *Considerations*.³⁴ His plan, which he repeatedly sought to have adopted by the National Convention (and published under the title *Religion civile* in successive editions), was to establish a government ministry with one thousand agents responsible for mounting public lectures and “fraternal gatherings” around the country to promote a Declaration of the Duties of Man and Citizen. This Declaration, which Lanthenas intended for any and all republics, comprised several dozen high-minded precepts that would “lead insensibly to this particular unity, to this similarity of mores, on which J. J. Rousseau has so strongly insisted, in occupying himself with the condition of the Polish nation” (Lanthenas: 51). Friend and translator of Tom Paine, Lanthenas was a creature of the high Enlightenment who departed from his mentor Rousseau in allowing “nothing spiritual” into his civil religion. “I have had recourse,” he wrote, “to no revelation.” Recognizing that ancient legislators had needed superstition to get the job done he expressed confidence that “pure and universal morality” derived from “the contemplation and study of nature, from feeling and reason” would “form very well this cement, this common bond, which is still lacking in republics” (Lanthenas: 42–43). In place of Rousseau’s dogmas of divine providence and justice the Declaration stated that citizens of a republic would require no more than the satisfaction of behaving well and the distress of behaving badly to stay on the straight and narrow (Lanthenas: 77–78, 103–104).

This rejection of supernaturalism is one reason that Lanthenas might have had to make only the briefest mention of Numa (29–30), but it is not the only one. A king in a line of kings that was overthrown to make way for a republic, he was hardly the sort of figure to appeal to those who had just cast off the shackles of monarchy in order to establish a republic of their own.³⁵ Moreover, even moderately well-read Parisians had reason to associate his name with the *ancien régime*. Three years before the

³⁴ Higonnet: 117, 207 describes Lanthenas’s difficult place in the larger world of Jacobinism.

³⁵ In this regard it is worth taking note of a chapter on Numa that was added to the anonymous late-seventeenth-century *Traité des Trois Imposteurs* in an edition published at The Hague in 1719. Filling out that notorious treatise’s attack on the revealed religions of Moses, Jesus, and Muhammad as buttresses to tyranny, the new chapter portrayed Numa as a crafty ruler who played on the credulity of his subjects in order to establish an absolute monarchy (Israel: 700–701). In the original version of the treatise the author invokes Numa by denouncing “those great philosophers” who seek to bind simple people to their religion with “the communication of Pompilian dreams” and tales of “sleeping with the Nymph Egeria” (*De tribus impostoribus*, 9). In his *Philosophical Dictionary* Voltaire discusses Numa under the topic “Charlatan” (22–23).

storming of the Bastille a well-known litterateur named Jean-Pierre Claris de Florian published a popular romance entitled *Numa Pompilius, seconde Roi de Rome*, in which Numa appears as the very model of an enlightened monarch.³⁶ (Lest anyone miss the point, in his dedicatory poem to Marie Antoinette, Florian announced that readers of this tale of Numa, Egeria, and the Romans “will believe that I am writing the history of you, of Louis, and of the French” (I: n.p.).³⁷ For their part the Jacobins preferred their ancient heroes to be republican stalwarts like Brutus and Cato or, among lawgivers, Solon of Athens, who was not a king, and Lycurgus of Sparta, a king of sorts but one with royal peers, a propensity to abdicate, and credit for creating the most egalitarian society in the ancient world (Parker: 142–143, 146–170). Numa was a role model no longer for republicans but for the likes of the anti-Enlightenment polemicist Joseph de Maistre, who invoked him in the mid-1790s as evidence of the “indispensable alliance between politics and religion” (81).³⁸ It is no accident that the eponymous hero of Alphonse Daudet’s satirical novel *Numa Roumestan* (1881) is a Provençal politician who rises to power as a leader of the monarchist right.³⁹

Republicans did feel that something like a religion was needed to sanctify national purpose and bind the citizenry together. If Lanthenas’s

³⁶ The plot goes like this: Before becoming the king of Rome, Numa saves Zoroaster and his beautiful daughter Anais from bandits, but Zoroaster would not let Numa marry her because they belong to different religions. (Numa’s association with Zoroaster derives from Plutarch, who put the two of them on his list of ancient legislators.) A distraught Numa allows himself to be made king, relying for instructions on Egeria, who appears to him veiled. Ultimately, it is revealed that this Egeria is really Anais, acting as a conduit for her father’s wisdom. Significantly, Numa has to be weaned away from an excessive concern with religion. “A religious king is good,” “Egeria” tells him, “but a superstitious one is not” (Florian: II, 155). She urges him to dress up like a worker and mingle with his people. He establishes temples to Concord and Justice, an altar to Benevolence. In the end he and Anais are wed, but she remains in the sacred grove, lest the Romans hold against Numa his marriage to a sun-worshipping devotee of one God. Commuting to work every day he rules wisely, making no one unhappy because of “oppression” or “mauvais lois” (Florian: II, 190). Shortly after Numa’s publication, Florian, who grew up in Voltaire’s household, was elected to the Académie Française.

³⁷ Louis was not the only European monarch of the later eighteenth century to be flattered by a comparison with Numa. The following testimonial to King George III comes from a “Dialogue on Peace” recited at the commencement of the College of Pennsylvania to celebrate the Peace of Paris in 1763 and excerpted in the May 26 issue of Benjamin Franklin’s *Pennsylvania Gazette*: “HAIL! Happy Britain, in a Sovereign blest,/Who deems in Kings a virtuous Name the best;/Guardian of Right and sacred Liberty,/Romeglorious [sic] NUMA shall be seen in Thee.” In 1768 a University of Moscow professor named Mikhail Kheraskov published a novel entitled *Numa: Flourishing Rome*, which concludes by identifying both Peter the Great and Catherine the Great as latter-day Numas (177–180). (I want to thank Samuel Kassow for reading the novel for me.)

³⁸ According to Maistre, “Numa gave to Roman political life that religious character that was the sap, the soul, the life of the Republic, and that perished with it” (79).

³⁹ “Roumestan,” of course, means “Land of the Romans.” In the novel Daudet portrays his native Provence as being culturally more Roman than French.

fellow Jacobins declined to adopt his civil religious program, they promoted a seemingly endless series of festivals celebrating everything from the Divine Being to the Revolution itself. Although such exercises were short lived, and have generally been dismissed by historians as representing a stillborn pseudoreligion, they can be considered to have achieved their purpose. As Mona Ozouf, the most recent historian of these festivals, puts it,

The transfer of sacrality onto political and social values was now accomplished, thus defining a new legitimacy and a hitherto inviolate patrimony, in which the cult of mankind and the religion of the social bond, the bounty of industry, and the future of the France would coexist. How can it be said that the Revolutionary festival failed in that? It was exactly what it wanted to be: the beginning of a new era. (282)

Nor was France alone. In the new era all nation states would set about erecting cults to celebrate, as Montesquieu would have said, the divinity of their own genius. These consisted of the flags and anthems, shrines and monuments, and legends and ideals that we continue to take for granted as attributes of a normal country.

Bringing the history of the idea of civil religion down to the present is a task for another day—and one that will have little to do with Numa. Attributing complex human institutions to the creative talents of a mythic legislator was losing intellectual respectability in the eighteenth century; in the nineteenth, social thought would proceed on other terms. But in his day Numa did much to shape western thinking about the function of religion in the life of a nation. Absent the accounts of his reign by Livy and Plutarch it is hard to imagine Rome serving as a model religious polity. Scaevola's "civil theology" would otherwise have added up to little more than an opaque assemblage of mysterious priesthoods and peculiar ceremonies gleaned from pagan poets and Christian apologists. By connecting Greek notions of the social utility of religion to the manifest success of the world's great power, the story of Numa made Rome's old-time religion meaningful. If Christian intellectuals were repelled by its manifest pragmatism, its sanctioning of religious falsehood, not even Augustine could permanently efface its promise of social harmony and vitality. In due course European thinkers rehabilitated Numa for their own evolving purposes, embracing the idea that religion could ameliorate society regardless of whether it was true and without the tension between church and state endemic to so much of the history of the West.

There were, to be sure, alternative visions. The Roman Catholic habit of seeing nations in service to the higher ends of the church was long

lived and powerful. Protestant state churches tended to find more inspiration in ancient Israel than in Rome. Indeed, the line of thought that we have been following was often a minority report, critical of the intellectual status quo as well as the ecclesiastical powers-that-be. Yet it set the terms of the debate, pushing even the staunchest anti-Machiavellians to adopt a civil religious perspective. Arising from a clear and distinct tradition of reflection on the role of religion in a nation's life, the idea of civil religion was an exercise in solving the church-state problem by submerging it into a single national undertaking.

What is the proper place of the divine, of God or Providence, in a nation's creed? Does religion create a good society, a powerful one, both, or neither? The questions are ancient ones and persist to the present day. Robert Bellah, whose 1967 essay, "Civil Religion in America," reanimated scholarly interest in the subject, dismissed the French revolutionaries' anti-Christian civil religion and celebrated America's godly one, while at the same time suggesting that in a new age of "genuine trans-national sovereignty" the latter should "simply become one part of a new civil religion of the world" (40). Despite such efforts to valorize and even ennoble it, the idea of civil religion remains somewhat disreputable—which might be its saving grace. Even in moments of full-throated patriotism westerners have been reluctant to claim that public liturgies were spiritually sufficient and that a nation-building religious agenda was enough.

For in nurturing the hope that revealed religion was unnecessary to make the nation holy, the idea of civil religion was not so much an expression of irreligion as the product of a new conception of religion. The privileging of interior over exterior worship—which made it possible for John of Salisbury to appreciate the virtues of Roman civil theology and Rousseau to reject Christianity as a political ideology—remains, in the West, a virtual article of faith. Its role in enabling a separate civil religious function to be imagined is as important as it has been unremarked.

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