

Maurizio Viroli (2012). *As If God Existed: Religion and Liberty in the History of Italy*, trans. Alberto Nones, Princeton, NJ & Oxford: Princeton University Press.

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Viroli's scholarly reputation has chiefly been built on studies in the history of political thought of Italy, focusing on the city republics of the Late Middle Ages and the Renaissance; works such as *From Politics to Reason of State* (2005) have become standard references in the secondary literature on civic republicanism. In parallel, Viroli has also tackled themes related to the modern history of Italy and the relevance of civic republicanism for contemporary political life, from *Republicanism* (2002) to his latest publications on intransigence. Collaborations with such esteemed intellectuals as Norberto Bobbio (*The Idea of the Republic* 2003), the presidency of the Italian Mazzini Society, advisory functions on the revival of popular patriotism to the former Head of State, Carlo Azeglio Ciampi, and vigorous polemics against Silvio Berlusconi's political system (*The Liberty of Servants* 2011) all belong to Viroli's public *engagement*. *As If God Existed* is situated at the confluence of these two aspects of its author's activity; its scope aims to encompass all of Viroli's intellectual influences, from the civic humanists of fifteenth-century Florence to the protagonists of the unification of Italy in the nineteenth century and the antifascist militants of the early twentieth century.

It is not coincidental that the terrain on which such a merging is to be effected is religious. Intimations as to this shift in Viroli's research priorities can already be found in *Machiavelli's God* (2010), in keeping with a general rekindling of interest in religious matters in Anglo-American political theory in the early twenty-first century, itself fuelled by the perceived reversal of the secularisation drive of modern society. It is in *As If God Existed*, however, that they are brought to full fruition.

The argument the book sets forth is quite straightforward: through the centuries, liberty has been defended by individuals of deep religiosity; when such convictions have been lacking in the body politic, liberty has been overthrown. Viroli illustrates this basic contention with a profusion of historical examples, mainly drawn from three key phases of modern Italian history: the Renaissance, the *Risorgimento* and the *Resistenza*. The focus of the analysis is explicitly on Italy, but certain chapters (such as Chap. 11, on post-Revolutionary France, or parts of Chap. 21, on Mann, Huizinga and Bergson) take a broader look at the European intellectual context. The religiosity that drives love of liberty is extremely

heterogeneous; orthodox and heterodox Catholics are grouped with Protestants of various denominations, practicing and non-practicing Jews, avowed heretics, timid deists, vague spiritualists and even frank unbelievers who nonetheless approach politics with a form of mind Viroli terms religious.

In the great variety of examples presented, spanning several centuries and many different political and cultural contexts, it is at times difficult to understand on what basis the coherence of the category 'religion' can be established. Rather than the explanation offered in the Preface (xviii-xix), which simply claims to be tracing a linguistic continuity present in the sources (a rather weak argument for a contextualist scholar), it would seem that the decisive factor is the enduring institutional presence of the Catholic Church in the political history of the peninsula. As the traditional established centre of moral authority, which furthermore never completely accepted the historicity of its message, the Church was a force that all the authors Viroli discusses had to reckon with; perhaps only as a reaction to the asserted universality of the Church's definition of religion can the political thinkers who aimed for a religion of liberty be understood to participate in a common endeavour. However, while the point is very well taken that the religiosity of the city republics of the late Middle Ages should not be measured (and condemned as irreligion or cant) against an ideal-type of Catholicism that often bears the anachronistic characteristics of Counter-Reformation centralization and dogmatism, the religious analogy becomes much less convincing in the post-Enlightenment *Risorgimento* and least of all for certain antifascist movements. Viroli's expository style, which privileges a wide range of sources and extensive quotations over conceptual and taxonomic development, does little to alleviate the difficulty.

Ultimately, *As If God Existed* is militant history, the recounting of the ideas of lovers of liberty and the fatherland by someone who fully shares their commitments and blames the present ills of the country on their eclipse. The religious dimension of this commitment resides in the fact that it produces an activist, anti-utilitarian mentality, fostering altruism and self-sacrifice, independently of the actual chances for success of the cause. Opinions may differ as to the normative appeal of this position, or the insightfulness of the political analysis, but it is in any case symptomatic of the current cultural climate that social behaviour other than pure utility maximisation appears for discussion under the rubric of religion.