Spinoza’s theory of religion : the importance of religion in Spinoza’s thought and its implications for state and society

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Foreword

This dissertation did not start out as an inquiry into Spinoza's views on religion. My initial research question in 2010 was: How to understand Spinoza's defense of the 'freedom to philosophize' or *libertas philosophandi* in the *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus* (TTP)? This question seemed topical, because of the ongoing debates in the Netherlands and the rest of the Western World about freedom of speech and its limits. Did Spinoza give a liberal defense of free speech, 189 years before the publication of John Stuart Mill's *On Liberty*? Could his arguments still be of value to us today? However, to be able to judge the validity of his arguments, one first has to understand them in their proper context. My research thus led me into hermeneutics, the art of interpreting texts, and in this case, the texts from the history of political philosophy.

I soon became convinced that I, in order to determine to what extent Spinoza's arguments for freedom of thought and expression are applicable in our day and age, first needed to understand their place within Spinoza's philosophical system as a whole. Now, Spinoza's argument in defense of 'the freedom to philosophize' is part of a 'theological-political treatise'. An interpretation of Spinoza's defense of the *libertas philosophandi* should show how this defense fits into the overarching theological-political argument of the book.

Scholars hold diametrically opposed views with regard to Spinoza's 'theological-politics'. Did Spinoza, in the words of Jonathan Israel, aspire to 'eradicate' all religious authority?[1] Or did he consider religion to be 'indispensable' to society, as Leo Strauss maintained?[2] Was Spinoza one of the first secularists as Rebecca Goldstein[3] and others have claimed? Or was he, as Henri Krop has argued, of the opinion that a public religion, upheld and to some extent enforced by the state, was necessary, an opinion that was in fact shared by all sides in the debates that were going on in the Dutch Republic of the 17th century?[4] The quest for an answer made me look beyond the TTP, to see how Spinoza had described religion in his other works.

I studied the *Ethics,* but also the *Treatise on the Emendation of the Intellect*, the *Short Treatise on God, Man, and his Well-Being, the Political Treatise* and the *Letters* in search of what my final question had become: how exactly did Spinoza view religion? Was he an atheist or had Novalis been right in calling him *ein Gott trunkener Mensch*?

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[1] Israel. (2010), p. viii.
[2] Strauss. (1952), p. 183.
[3] Goldstein. (2006), p. 11.
[4] Krop. (2012), 67-90.

How Spinoza understood, judged and thought about religion also affects the answers to the other two questions. If he was an atheist, advocating a 'Radical Enlightenment', it is likely that his overarching theological-political argument in the TTP would stand in the service of banishing religion from politics, or at least severely limiting its claims. But if he was an atheist who believed that religion was a necessary instrument to control the masses, it would make far more sense to understand his theological-political argument as a way to have a state religion. And if he was not an atheist, but embraced religion as necessary for all to lead a good life, he would probably agree with his contemporaries that religion and politics, Church and State, can and should not be separated.

Likewise, if he was disingenuous and misleading in stating that our highest good consists in the knowledge and love of God, but only did so out of fear of persecution or for strategic considerations, he could very well be read as an early proponent of what later became liberalism's defense of the right to free speech. But if he did not share the liberal assumption that the state ought to be neutral with regard to the question of the good life, because he seriously believed that the best life is one in which people come to know and love God, his defense of the *libertas philosophandi* probably has to be read in a different light.

Introduction

What role does religion play in Spinoza's texts and in the different interpretations of Spinoza's texts, and what are the consequences of Spinoza's views on religion for his ideas on the organization of state and society? This is the research question that I will attempt to answer in these pages.

In answering this question I have made extensive use of the work of many excellent scholars (I focused mostly on the English and Dutch secondary literature). Most important however for my research has been the Dutch dissertation of Paul Juffermans, unfortunately not well-known in the English literature on Spinoza.[1]

In his dissertation Juffermans used textual analysis in order to show that we can find in Spinoza's works 'three different perspectives on religion'. These three perspectives (or three different meanings) of religion[2] can be distinguished from each other by their Latin names:

1. *religio* is the philosophical religion that we find, most famously in the *Ethics*, leading to 'the intellectual love of God', a path that, according to Spinoza, is 'rarely discovered'.[3] This, according to Juffermans, is religion in its 'strictly philosophical meaning, which as such was common in scholastic discourse'. Scholastic discourse 'acknowledged *religio* as a basic moral virtue resulting from the knowledge of God'.[4]
2. *fides* is the Biblical faith, which 'requires not so much true as pious dogmas'.[5] Spinoza discusses the necessity of faith for 'the salvation of almost all men' in the *Theological-Political Treatise*.[6] This faith, according to Juffermans gives religion 'a purely practical meaning. In this sense of the word, religion simply denotes a course of action leaving aside any cognitive basis'.[7]
3. *superstitio* are the false beliefs that come forth out of 'fear' and 'the immoderate desire to uncertain things', that keep people ignorant and hateful.[8] Juffermans writes on this *religio vana*: 'it is a kind of illusionary religion, based on ignorance, idolatry and passions such as pride, hatred and jealousy which generate discord in society and in the state'.[9]

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[1] Juffermans (2003).
[2] Juffermans (2011), p. 302 distinguishes also a fourth, 'conventional meaning of religion, related to revealed, positive and historical religion, especially Judaism and Christianity'.
[3] See the final sentences of the *Ethics*. (EV-42s, p. 182)
[4] Ibid, p. 301
[5] See the fourteenth chapter (TTP XIV-8, p. 181).
[6] See the very end of the first 'theological part' of the *Treatise* (TTP XV-10, p. 194)
[7] Juffermans (2011), p. 302.
[8] See the very beginning of the TTP *Preface* 1-5, (p 3-5)
[9] Juffermans (2011), p. 302.

Different from Juffermans my intention is not so much to *analyze* the different perspectives/meanings of religion in Spinoza's texts. Rather, I try to *synthesize* the three different perspectives into an integrated philosophy. As this is my aim I will focus primarily on the internal logic of Spinoza's texts themselves. However, I will pay at the same time attention to the historical context, whenever I believe that this context is important for a better understanding of the text. Although I cannot compare myself to him, one could say that I share this approach, which focuses on the inner reasoning of a text, while not totally ignoring the historical context, with a great scholar such as Martial Gueroult.[10]

Gueroult also has made the valid point that any study in the history of philosophy leaves us with a philosophical problem: once we have come to study philosophy historically as a 'series of doctrines succeeding one another in time and swallowing up one another in the completed past' we do not study philosophy as it was meant to be, namely, as the expression of eternal and timeless truth.[11] This 'philosophical problem' also lies at the heart of the Strauss-Skinner debate on the study of the history of philosophy. Strauss embraced his specific version of 'reading between the lines'-textualism in order to fight historicism. Historicism or the idea that all thought is limited by its time makes, according to Strauss, political philosophy or the articulation of eternal problems 'impossible' from the outset.[12] Skinner, the founder of the Cambridge School, on the other hand, attacked the Straussian presupposition of 'perennial problems' or 'timeless questions' in the study of the history of philosophy. According to Skinner, we have to understand a thinker in the context of the political debates that were going on at that specific time.[13]

Stressing a dichotomy between what might be called, on the one hand, a historical approach towards the history of philosophy (Skinner) and, on the other hand, a philosophical approach to the history of philosophy (Strauss), however, can also be a little bit deceptive. For Strauss as well as Skinner aim at understanding the authors 'as they understood themselves'.[14] Both approaches also use the study of the history of political philosophy as a way 'to peek beyond the horizons of our present political thinking'.[15] I, for this reason, did not make an either-or choice between a textualist/philosophical or a contextual/historical approach. Although my overall inclination in this dissertation is textual and philosophical, I

[10] Gueroult (1968) and Gueroult (1974)
[11] Gueroult (1969), p. 564.
[12] Strauss (1953) p. 9- 34; Strauss (1959), p. 56-78; Zuckert (2013) , p. 25.
[13] Skinner (1969), p. 50; Skinner (1978), p. xi; Bevir (2013), p. 11.
[14] Ward (2009), p. 238.
[15] Ibid, p. 255.)

do not shy away from exploring the historical background as I think this is something that is absolutely necessary for not getting a text completely wrong. For example, I follow Skinner's contextual approach as I understand Spinoza's use of the word 'liberty' in a pre-liberal context. I believe that textual and contextual approaches both can be helpful in the attempt to understand the authorial intent, and in the search for ways of thinking that can be used to challenge and criticize our own most cherished convictions. I, for this reason, do not make such a rigid distinction between textual and contextual approaches. When an interpreter uses textual or contextual methods in order to understand the author in the way he understood himself, and in order to explore different views than the ones we have grown accustomed to, I have called this a (con)textual approach. [16]

To call this (con)textual approach a "methodology", however, would be an exaggeration. If someone were to ask what my methodology is, I would answer that I, to a large degree, agree with Ronald Beiner's plea for a 'textualist anti-methodology' for reading texts. We cannot assume, before a very careful reading of the text itself, that the author of a text is engaged in a dialogue with his contemporaries, as the contextual Cambridge School of Quentin Skinner holds. Of course, I do not deny that Spinoza in the *Theological-Political Treatise* is engaged in a dialogue with Dutch contemporaries, such as Voetius.[17] However, at the same time, he is reacting to the thoughts of people such as St Paul and Maimonides.[18] Although I am interested in the question how Spinoza's thought relates to that of the tradition and that of his contemporaries, I first of all want to understand the text and how the different parts of his philosophy relate to one another.

It is for this reason that I can agree with Beiner that my "anti-methodology" 'consists in reading a primary text very slowly and very carefully, paying special attention to puzzles or oddities in the text, and then casting about mentally for solutions, or possible solutions to these problems' [19] I recognize my own way of working in this description: I have read Spinoza, and as I read him, I encountered difficulties, certain seemingly inconsistencies that I have tried to overcome. My procedure has been "anti-methodological", because I do not assume that there is one specific procedure that can always help me to solve the problems. If a contextual reading helps to overcome certain difficulties, I will gratefully use it. But if the

[16] In chapter 1 I will distinguish this (con)textualist approach from both the teleological as well as Straussian approach.
[17] James (2012), p. 4-14; Krop (2012), p. 70-71.
[18] See for an overview of Spinoza's indebtedness to classical authors: Wolfson (1965); Klever (2005);
[19] Beiner (2013), p. 34

text becomes understandable if one places it in a wider historical tradition, I have also not hesitated to do so.

Although I think that I, in writing this work, did not really make use of one specific "method", I did stick to certain commonsensical, hermeneutical rules of thumb: 1) an interpretation that is confirmed by the literal texts of the philosopher is better than a view which is not confirmed by the literal text; 2) an interpretation that is not denied by literal statements of that philosopher is better than one in which this interpretation is refuted by literal statements of that philosopher; 3) an interpretation that clarifies the arguments of a philosopher is better than one in which they remain obscure.[20] 4) an interpretation in which the arguments of a philosopher are made to fit into a consistent worldview are better than an interpretation in which the philosopher is held to contradict himself.[21]

It is especially this fourth hermeneutical rule that has been the most challenging. In order to comprehend Spinoza's thought as a coherent whole we first need to understand how Spinoza's views on religion (the three perspectives) can go together with his views on philosophy. This relationship between philosophy and theology is the subject matter of part I of this dissertation, consisting out of five chapters, the content of which will be outlined below.

The second part of this dissertation, consisting out of two chapters, researches how Spinoza's views on religion can go together with his views on the society and the state. This is why the second part focuses on the relation between religion and politics.

The third part of the dissertation, consisting out of three chapters, is about the relation between the political and the philosophical, that is, it asks the question how exactly should we understand Spinoza's political philosophy? This question is discussed in the light of what has come up in the previous two parts that have dealt with Spinoza's views on religion and its consequences for state and society.

Building on Juffermans' works I research in these three parts the following ten questions (that all have to do with the research question, as stated above):

1. Can the three perspectives (or meanings) of religion that Juffermans has distinguished explain some of the differences in the secondary literature with regard to how Spinoza viewed religion? This is the central question of chapter 1.

[20] If the literal text also allows for such a clear explanation. Of course, it would be wrong to come up with a very clear explanation which is nevertheless not supported by the literal text.

[21] Again, this only is the case under the condition that such an interpretation is supported by the actual text.

2. Did Spinoza intend his philosophical religion, which comes most clearly to the fore in the *Ethics*, to be a kind of atheism? Or is it more accurate to state that Spinoza – if we try to understand him as he understood himself – seriously believed that he found an intellectual path to salvation? This is the leading question in chapter 2.
3. If Spinoza considered his philosophical religion to be the true religion, how did he think of the Bible? Was he first and foremost a staunch critic of the Bible? Or did he emphasize what is 'true and divine' in Scripture? This is the central question of chapter 3.
4. How do Spinoza's views with regard to the philosophical religion and the biblical faith relate to the tradition? Was he the last of the medievals in believing in the possibility of a philosophical religion? Or was he the first of the moderns in making clear that the prophets were not philosophers, but simple (and often also ignorant) men? This question is researched in chapter 4.
5. How can the three different perspectives or meanings of religion coexist in Spinoza's philosophy? Can they coexist? Or are they mutually exclusive? Was Spinoza honest about his religiosity? Or did he try to cover up his atheism with pious language? This is the topic of chapter five.
6. What are the political consequences of the three meanings of religion? What role – if any - does the state have in Spinoza's political thought in furthering Biblical faith, in protecting the philosophical religion, and in fighting superstitious beliefs? This is what is at stake in chapter six.
7. Can Spinoza's theological-political writings historically be best understood as the birth of secularism and its plea for the separation of church and state? Or is his teaching one that can be better understood in terms of a 'civil religion' and a 'state-church'? This is the question in chapter 7.
8. Does Spinoza stress the need of people to be liberated from religion in order that they can decide for themselves what they want to believe (negative liberty)? Or does Spinoza emphasize the idea that religious beliefs can make people more free (positive liberty)? This question is first introduced in chapter eight.
9. How does Spinoza describe "freedom" in the *Ethics* and in his two political treatises? Is freedom used in the way which Isaiah Berlin called "negative liberty"? Or did he use it to denote a kind of "positive liberty"? This is the subject matter of chapter nine.

10. What did Spinoza mean with the "freedom to philosophize"? Is this kind of freedom to be understood as the modern freedom of speech or expression? Or is it to be understood in a different way? This is the topic of this book's final chapter ten.

Part I. The Relation Between Philosophy and Theology

A Brief Introduction to Part I

'Philosophy' and 'Science' were not separate disciplines in Spinoza's time. Physics, for example, was known as 'natural philosophy'. Philosophers such as Descartes and Spinoza were actively studying, as well as trying to contribute to, the new philosophy (or the modern science) that was under development in their time. As a lens grinder, Spinoza had to be intimately familiar with the laws of optics. But he also had a keen interest in chemistry, as is shown by the correspondence between him and Robert Boyle about the interpretation of chemical experiments. Their exchange was mediated by Henry Oldenburg, who became secretary of the Royal Society in London in 1662.[1]

Philosophy was not only connected to science, but also to theology[2], literally meaning, 'knowledge of God'. Medieval philosophy endeavored to understand more about natural things by studying 'the Book of Scripture', and to arrive at a better understanding of God by studying 'the Book of Nature'. The entire universe was, after all, thought to have been created by God. It was therefore believed that the study of God's creation would supply us with important information about God's motives, God's will, and God's plan.[3]

This synthesis of philosophy and theology was still very much alive in Spinoza's seventeenth century. But the discovery of the *nova philosophia* of Copernicus and Galileo, Bacon and Descartes, also raised questions with regard to the relation between philosophy and theology. The new science no longer understood the universe *teleologically*, as tending towards a certain goal, but rather *mechanically*. This changed the relation between the philosophical and the theological. If the universe could be successfully described as mere matter in motion, obeying necessary laws of cause and effect, in which every single thing moves, because of the way it has been determined to do so by another moving object, which was forced to move in this particular way by yet another moving object, and this all the way down to the beginning of time, the study of Nature would no longer tell us anything about God's motives, God's will, and God's plan—aside from the basic position that God was the first cause.

This provides the background against which Spinoza gave the philosophical-theological relation a central place in his works. Fifteen of the twenty chapters of the *Theological-Political*

[1] Letter 6, p. 768-776 and letter 13, p. 792-796.
[2] Aristotle writes about three fields of theoretical philosophy: mathematics, physics and theology. *Metaphysics* VI 1026a18-21. The scholastics, who followed Aristotle in this regard, did not separate philosophy from theology.. Descartes and his followers broke with this tradition. They were in favor of a 'separation between philosophy and theology' See 3.4.2. Also important for understanding Spinoza's take on the relation between philosophy and theology is the distinction between 'natural theology' and 'revealed theology'. See for this distinction 4.3.2.
[3] Grazia (1980), p. 319-329.

Treatise are dedicated, so Spinoza writes, to the separation of philosophy from theology.[4] In all his other works Spinoza is doing the very opposite. In demonstrating, by means of reason alone, that everything is in God, and that without God nothing can be nor be perceived, he is not separating, but connecting philosophy to theology—theology in its literal sense as 'knowledge of God'.[5] This raised the question: how do philosophy and theology relate to each other in Spinoza's texts?

[4] 'Hitherto our concern has been to separate philosophy from theology and to establish the freedom to philosophize which this separation allows to everyone.' (TTP XVI-1, p. 195)

[5] The connection between philosophy and 'theology' (knowledge of God) is treated in the first five chapters which make up the first part of this dissertation. This part describes Spinoza's philosophical religion, Spinoza's views on the Bible and revealed faith, and how Spinoza's endorsement of a philosophical religion as well as of a revealed Biblical faith can be understood as making up Spinoza's comprehensive theory of religion.

1. Three Perspectives on Religion

In this chapter I present three perspectives on religion. Accordingly, I demonstrate how these three perspectives play a role in Spinoza's primary works, and how integrating the three into a coherent, Spinozist theory of religion (including its political consequences) is the primary aim of this book. Thirdly, I discuss how these three perspectives have also dominated the perception of Spinoza in the secondary literature. They explain the teleological approach, the Straussian approach, and the methodology that I have called the (con)textualist approach. Each of these three approaches considers one of the three perspectives on religion to be decisive for Spinoza's philosophy of religion.

1.1. Three Perspectives on Religion in History

In debates about religion between theists and atheists one should distinguish between two questions:

1) Does religion give us a truthful account of reality? In other words: is religion 'true'?[1]
2) Does religion help us to lead a good life? In other words: is religion 'good'?[2]

Logically, these two questions would lead to four possible answers, in which religion is either: 1) true and good, 2) untrue and good, 3) true and bad, and 4) untrue and bad.[3] However, almost no one defends the third position – that God exists, but that his existence should in fact be considered as something detrimental to humanity – and we can therefore safely ignore it. [4] That leaves us with the following three main positions:

1. Religion is 'true and good'. Religion provides us with valuable knowledge about the world we are living in, and it helps us to lead a good life. The people who adhere to this position will consider it completely rational to believe in God and in revelation. Some of them might be of the opinion

[1] The debate can be then be out questions such as: Is there a God; an eternal soul; an afterlife; angels; demons; a hell? Is what the Bible writes in any way confirmed by historical and scientific research? Were the Jews slaves in Egypt? Did Jesus and Mohammed really exist?
[2] The debate will then be about questions such as: Are wars and terrorism a consequence of religious convictions? Are people by religion more inspired to do moral things or more inspired to do immoral things?
[3] I am not claiming that this rather crude and simplifying way of distinguishing the different positions one can hold with regard to religion, should reduce the rich variety of approaches to religion to only these four. I realize that this is not an extensive list. One should not confuse a way to order the world with the way the world itself is. I would call this ordering of the different positions one can have with regard to religion (in Spinoza's terms) an *ens rationis* or even an *ens imagiationis*, that is, an instrument that reason uses to think about things.
[4] Some have suggested Satanism as an example of the position that religion is both true and bad. If Satanism can be classified in this way, I cannot judge.

that *only religion* leads to truth; whereas philosophy or science lead away or lead nowhere.[5] But many within the religious tradition have judged otherwise. They have believed that there need not be any contradiction between religion and the Bible, on one side, and philosophy or science, on the other. For, as was maintained, God is reasonable, and he has created a universe ruled by laws that we can come to understand by reason. Humans possess the faculty of reason, since they have been created in the image of God. Many philosophers and enlightened religious leaders from Christianity, Islam, and Judaism used to agree with each other that there is no real difference between philosophy and religion, because 'the truth does not contradict the truth'.[6]

2. Religion is 'untrue and good'. Religion does not give us important information about the world we are living in. It is based on an illusion. But religion is still very useful in helping us to lead a good life. That religion is untrue must be kept a secret, though, because it is good.[7] It is foolish to think that religion is about the question whether God exists or does not exist.[8] Religion might even have an evolutionary function in instilling in humans certain values that help them to survive.[9] The religious morality might even remain present in the background of all those who openly profess that they don't believe in God.[10] In the longer run, atheism might then still

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[5] Tertullian (1966), p. 5: 'What indeed has Athens to do with Jerusalem? What concord is there between the Academy and the Church? What between heretics and Christians? Our instruction comes from the porch of Solomon who himself taught that the Lord should be sought in simplicity of heart. Away with all attempts to produce a mottled Christianity of Stoic, Platonic and dialectic composition!'

[6] Averroes (2001), p. 8-9: 'Since this law [*shari'a*] is true and calls to the reflection leading to cognition of the truth, we, the Muslim community, know firmly that demonstrative investigations cannot lead to something differing in the Law. For the truth cannot contradict the truth; rather it agrees with it and bears witness to it.' See for a Jewish example: Maimonides (1963) Part 2. Chapter 2, p. 253: 'My intention in this Treatise (…) is only to elucidate the difficult points of the [Jewish] Law and to make manifest the real [that is, philosophical] realities of its hidden meanings, which the multitude cannot be made to understand because of these matters being too high for it.' See for a Roman Catholic example: Aquinas (1920) Book 1, Chapter 7, title: 'The truth of reason is not contrary to the truth of Christian Faith.' See for a Protestant example: Craig (2000), p. 153: 'I have found that the more I reflect philosophically on the attributes of God the more overwhelmed I become at his greatness and the more excited I become about Bible doctrine. Whereas easy appeals to mystery prematurely shut off reflection about God, rigorous and earnest effort to understand him is richly rewarded with deeper appreciation of who he is, more confidence in his reality and care, and a more intelligent and profound worship of his person.'

[7] Machiavelli. (2016), Book 1, Chapter 12: 'The Princes of a Republic or a Kingdom ought therefore to maintain their Republic's religions, and in consequence well and united. And therefore they ought in all things which arise to foster it (even if they should judge them false) to favor and encourage it: and the more prudent they are, and the more they understand natural things, so much more ought they to do this.'

[8] Botton (2012), p. 1: 'The most boring and unproductive question one can ask of any religion is whether or not it is *true* – in terms of being handed down from heaven to the sound of trumpets and supernaturally governed by prophets and celestial beings.'

[9] Darwin (1871), p. 166: 'There can be no doubt that a tribe including many members who, from possessing in a high degree the spirit of patriotism, fidelity, obedience, courage, and sympathy, were always ready to give aid to each other and to sacrifice themselves for the common good, would be victorious over most other tribes; and this would be natural selection.'

[10] Nietzsche (2001), Book III. Aphorism 125, p. 120: "I come too early', he [the madman] then said; 'my time is not yet. This tremendous event [the death of God] is still on its way, wandering; it has not yet reached the ears of men. Lightning and thunder need time; the light of the stars needs time; deeds need time, even after they are done, in order to be seen and heard. This deed [the murdering of God] is still more remote to them than the remotest stars - and yet they have done it themselves!"

become a real problem, for: 'if God does not exist, everything is permitted'.[11] This perspective on religion probably was on Voltaire's mind when he famously wrote : '*Si Dieu n'existait pas, il faudrait l'inventer*'.[12]

3. Religion is 'untrue and bad'. Religion consists of a set of dangerous illusions, because it not only makes people ignorant, but it also makes them so in a most violent and almost incurable way.[13] To behave as Machiavelli and Voltaire wanted us to do, and to remain silent about the lies that religion spreads, would be damningly immoral.[14] Instead, therefore, one has to voice – to the extent that this is possible – contempt for what believers consider holy, and help to free people from religion.[15]

I realize that subdividing all the views on religion into these three is problematic, because it does violence to the variety and richness of the many different positions that are being held in the many different debates on religion. Spinoza would say that classifications such as the three perspectives on religion never give an adequate description of reality. I think, however, that making abstractions or simplifications can be excused from a Spinozistic point of view as being both inevitable as well as useful. They are inevitable because we understand reality by making these kind of abstractions or simplifications all the time. Almost all words we use, such as for example the word 'dog', is an abstraction and simplification of the many different things that we heap together in this category. (E II p40 s1, p. 267). Is it for this reason bad to use words such as 'dog'? No, we only have to realize that the goal of such classifications is not to directly describe reality, but to provide us with an instrument that helps us to get a grip on the complexities of reality. The three perspectives on religion are theoretical constructs that can help us to classify and organize the material. Or, to use Spinoza's *parlance*, the three perspectives should be considered *beings of reason*, not *beings of reality*. (CM 1-1, p. 178).

One could use the three perspectives on religion for example, if one would want to write a history of the age-old debate on religion, researching and evaluating the different arguments that

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[11] Dostoevski (1976), p. 558 : "'But what will become of men then ?" I [Mitya] asked him [Rakitin], "without God and immortal life?" All things are lawful then, they can do what they like?" Didn't you know?" he said laughing, "a clever man can do what he likes", he said.'"

[12] Voltaire (1785), p. 250.

[13]Boulanger (1819), Chapter X: '(…)Let it not be said, that it is through a shameful abuse of this religion, that these horrors have happened. A spirit of persecution and intolerance is the spirit of a religion ordained by a God, jealous of his power, a God who has formally commanded the commission of murder; a God, who, in the excess of his anger, has not spared even his own Son!'

[14] Harris S (2005), p.48: 'It is imperative that we begin speaking plainly about the absurdity of most of our religious beliefs.'

[15] Hitchens (2007), p. 56: 'Violent, irrational, intolerant, allied to racism and tribalism and bigotry, invested in ignorance and hostile to free inquiry, contemptuous of women and coercive toward children: organized religion ought to have a great deal on its conscience.'

have been brought forward, for and against each of these three perspectives. This would provide one with an interesting, life-long pursuit.[16] However, this is not what I want to do, at least not here.

1.2. Three Perspectives on Religion in Spinoza's Philosophy

The discovery that one can find three perspectives on religion in Spinoza's thought is not my own. It is evident in the dissertation of the Dutch Spinoza scholar Paul Juffermans. There Jufferman engages in a careful reading and analysis of Spinoza's texts.[17]

Superstitio

'For when they are afraid, anything they see that reminds them of some good or bad thing in the past seems to communicate a happy or unhappy outcome, and so they call it a good or bad omen, even though they have been disappointed a hundred times in the past'. (TTP, Preface-2, p. 2).

The first perspective that Juffermans uncovers is the view that religion is both 'untrue and bad'. Spinoza refers to the kind of religion that appears from this perspective as 'superstition' [*superstitio*], a phenomenon which he considers to be a real threat to freedom, peace, and happiness. But Spinoza's writings are never confined to be mere criticism: 'I have taken great care not to deride, bewail or execrate human actions, but to understand them'. (TP I-4, p. 681). Understanding for Spinoza means to explain something from its causes; Spinoza demonstrates, therefore, how superstition is caused, and what the effects of superstition are on the individual as well as on society at large. Juffermans pays particular attention to Spinoza's analysis of superstition as it figures in the Appendix of the first part of the *Ethics* and in the Preface of the TTP.[18]

Religio

'The sum of the divine law therefore and its highest precept is to love God as the highest good (…) For the idea of God requires that God should be our highest good; i.e., that the knowledge and the love of God is the ultimate end to which all our actions are directed' (TTP IV-5, p. 60).

The second perspective on religion which Juffermans analyzes is one in which Spinoza's philosophy comes to light as an independent 'ethical-religious path to salvation'.[19] This perspective corresponds to what I have above named the view that religion is both true and

[16] See Beiner (2010), Fraenkel. 2012, and Weed & Van Heyking (eds. 2010).
[17] Juffermans (2003)
[18] Juffermans (2003), p. 67-158.
[19] Juffermans (2003), p. 17.

good. True religion proves to be equivalent to philosophy, an 'ethical' way of life that can bring man to eternal happiness.[20] Juffermans interrogates this second perspective by means of an analysis of the concept of 'religion' (*religio*) in Spinoza, as it figures in the fourth part of the *Ethics* and in the fourth chapter of the *Theological-Political Treatise*.[21]

Fides

'[F]aith requires not so much true as pious dogmas, that is, such tenets as move the mind to obedience, even though many of them may not have a shadow of truth in them. What matters is that the person who embraces them does not realize that they are false (…)' (TTP XIV-8, p. 181).

The third and final perspective that Juffermans describes, as being a part of Spinoza's complex philosophy of religion, is Spinoza's rendering of the Biblically revealed religions of Judaism and Christianity, as this comes to the fore in the *Theological-Political Treatise*.[22]

However, Juffermans' description of this third perspective is problematic, because in it he doesn't distinguish between *a theory of religion* and *a historical description of religion*. Spinoza's theory of religion is meant to be a universal and non-temporal tool which can be used to evaluate historical religions in all times and places. The historical manifestations of religion, on the other hand, vary from time to time and from place to place. Now, I would take Spinoza's description of faith to be part of Spinoza's theory of religion, even if he did arrive at it by researching a historical document, namely the Bible. The most important thing Spinoza gets from the Bible is a universal or catholic faith, that is, a theoretical construct that can be applied in all ages. [23] This theory of the universal faith supplies us with a normative ideal which we can use to evaluate the historically existing religions of Judaism and Christianity.[24]

Spinoza in the *Treatise* writes about this third perspective which I want to call 'faith' *(fides)*: 'men may have totally wrong ideas about God's nature without doing any wrong' (TTP XIII-8., p. 176), and also that '[t]his definition [of faith] does not expressly require dogmas that are true but such as necessary for inculcating obedience, i.e. those that confirm the mind in love towards our neighbor (…)' (TTP XIV-8, p. 181).

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[20] Spinoza's philosophical religion is the main subject of chapters 3 and 4.
[21] Juffermans (2003), Chapter 6, p. 159- 274.
[22] Juffermans (2003), Chapter 7, p. 283-327
[23] This passage will probably raise eyebrows. Some readers will object that the idea of a theoretical construct that transcends time sounds like an oxymoron. However, if one would consider the figures 1, 2, 3 etcetera to be theoretical constructs, one can easily see that they can be used in all times and places and in thise sense can be called theoretical constructs that transcend time.
[24] Juffermans also seems to have arrived at the same conclusion, because he later distinguishes *four* different meanings of *religio:* 1) 'a strictly philosophical meaning'; 2) 'a purely practical meaning'; 3) 'religion as superstition or *religio vana/falsa*'; 4) a conventional meaning of religion, related to the revealed, positive and historical religion, especially Judaism and Christianity'. Juffermans (2011), p. 301-302 .

Juffermans is of the opinion that Spinoza, in his research of the historical religions of Judaism and Christianity, has transcended the dichotomy between 'untrue and true religion, superstition and philosophical religion'.[25] I understand why Juffermans would hesitate or even deny that one can reasonably call Spinoza's depiction of universal faith 'untrue and good'. For, Spinoza describes this kind of religion as an 'adaptation' of the truth to the minds of common people. Revealed religion or faith can, in this way, be understood as being 'true' and 'untrue' at the same time. From a purely philosophical (or scientific) point of view it is untrue, but from a didactical, moral, and political point of view it is true. Meaning: it helps people to lead meaningful lives.[26]

Bringing the Three Perspectives Together

Since Juffermans already discussed the three perspectives on religion in Spinoza at length it would be useless to repeat his work. [27] Instead, I seek to present a coherent Spinozistic theory of religion. Juffermans' ground-breaking study has provided us with a very precise analysis of the three perspectives in selected parts of Spinoza's works. But what is still missing is a presentation of Spinoza's comprehensive theory of religion in which these three perspectives are integrated into a unified whole. The questions are: Did Spinoza succeed in overcoming the opposition between the three? And, if so, how?[28]

In what follows I will argue that Spinoza remained faithful to the classical position, which stated that religion was both true and good, because religion is first and foremost understood as 'philosophical'.[29] I will try to explain how this philosophical religion, which is 'true and good', can be reconciled with Spinoza's endorsement of faith [*fides*] (which arguably can be called 'untrue and good'), and with Spinoza's critique of superstition [*superstitio*] (which can be called 'untrue and bad'). After I have done so, I will try to demonstrate in the second and third parts how this theory of religion is connected to Spinoza's political philosophy. My aim in all this is to present Spinoza's entire philosophy as a coherent whole, centering around his theory of religion.

I realize that this presentation of Spinoza's philosophy, as centering around the subject of 'religion', will not be applauded by everyone. In order to understand not only Spinoza's theory of religion but also the opposition to such a theory, I will now treat relevant debates in the

[25] Juffermans (2003), p. 18.
[26] This will be further explained in 4.3 and in 5.3..
[27] For a very brief summary of Juffermans' views on Spinoza's religion in English, see: Juffermans (2011).
[28] This will be analyzed in chapter 5.
[29] Fraenkel (2012), Chapter 4, p. 213-282. Spinoza, however, does not completely fit into this tradition as he refuses to make religion into the handmaid of theology. Fraenkel takes this to be a sign that Spinoza's philosophy is inconsistent. See 4.3.

secondary literature. These debates reveal themselves to be intrinsically connected to the three perspectives on religion.

1.3. Three Perspectives on Religion in the Secondary Literature

One could subdivide the existing secondary literature on the topic of Spinoza's views on religion in the same three positions. Again, I realize that I generalize and simplify as I am making such a subdivision. Not all studies on Spinoza's religion can be made to fit the scheme without doing great injustice to the nuances and subtleties in them. Still, I think such a subdivision can help us to get more clarity on the opposition as well as support anyone would encounter who would try to sketch Spinoza's comprehensive theory of religion.

The first position that can be identified in the secondary literature is that Spinoza was an atheist and an Enlightenment thinker, fighting for freedom against the ecclesiastical classes. This teleological approach, in which Spinoza is understood as one of the founders of Modernity, is grounded in the presupposition that Spinoza considered religion to be 'untrue and bad'. Jonathan Israel, for example, tries to understand the meaning of Spinoza's texts by means of the influence he has had on later thinkers in the eighteenth and nineteenth century. In this sense he understands Spinoza's as someone whose thought made possible the modern, secular society in which we have come to live. Steven Nadler is another example of someone who understands Spinoza as one of the first truly 'modern' thinkers. I will treat this teleological position in 1.3.1[30]

The second position is that Spinoza shared the 'attitude of an earlier type of writers' who thought that 'the gulf separating "the wise" from "the vulgar" was a basic fact of human nature which could not be influenced by any progress of popular education: Philosophy, or science, was essentially a privilege of "the few"'.[31] I explain this 'Straussian' approach - in which Spinoza's attitude towards religion is considered to be that religion is 'untrue and good' - in 1.3.2.

In 1.3.3. I treat the scholars who fall into something that I have named the (con)textualist approach.[32] According to the scholars who defend this third position – people such as Herman

[30] James (2012) p. 3: 'Others have read his [Spinoza's] work teleologically, interpreting him as an early advocate of contemporary values such as free speech and democracy.' In the accompanying note James writes: 'The most celebrated current exponent of this approach is Jonathan Israel.'

[31] Leo Strauss (1952), p. 34.

[32] I call it the (con)textualist approach, realizing that the approach of people such as De Dijn is more 'textualist', while the work of other such as James is clearly 'contextualist'. Yet, I have grouped these scholars together as these textual and contextual approaches share two concerns: 1. to understand Spinoza as he understood himself, being very alert to the risk of projecting our own ideas onto Spinoza; and 2. to study the history of political philosophy in an attempt to find ideas that challenge our own, most cherished convictions. Since we have come to live in a 'secular age', it is a challenge to our most cherished beliefs to consider that a great philosopher such as Spinoza might have thought that religion was in fact extremely important for each individual as well as for the peace and freedom in the state.

de Dijn, Susan James, Angela Roothaan, Wiep van Bunge, and Graeme Hunter – Spinoza was, just as almost all people in his time, a deeply religious man, considering religion to be 'true and good'.

'Untrue and bad': Spinoza as an Enlightenment Thinker

The teleological approach emphasizes Spinoza's critique of supernaturalism and theism, and his attack on what is considered to be the foundations of revealed and organized religion. In this sense the perspective of superstition – in which religion is understood negatively as something 'untrue and bad' – is taken as the crucial perspective for understanding Spinoza's position with regard to religion. Spinoza's view of theistic religion is that it is simply and totally untrue, as Jonathan Israel explains: '(…) my own considered view is that it is extremely difficult, after analysing Spinoza's texts with the utmost care, to agree with those who still today find traces of theism in Spinoza. (…) God for Spinoza is always and consistently just 'the fixed and immutable order of Nature', something self-creating and evolutionary which never departs from the laws of nature as ascertained by empirical science. 'God's being', held Spinoza, 'coincides with the power by which he exists and "creates" whatever can be conceived'. Hence, in his thought, something clearly evident as early as his Cogitata metaphysica (1663), there is, as likewise in Bayle later, absolutely no sense in which God can be said to be a benevolent (or malevolent) rather than a purely neutral force, the totality of all that is'. [33] Not only is theistic religion 'untrue' it is also 'bad' in the sense that the 'Radical Enlightenment' the political movement which was, according to Israel, begun by Spinoza and his circle strove: 'to curtail the authority of miracles, prophecies, and scriptures together with ecclesiastical authority'.[34]

Israel's Spinoza-interpretations can be called 'teleological', because in it Spinoza is portrayed as someone who has been of great importance in making modernity possible. As already can be glimpsed from looking at some book titles, Israel is certainly not the only one to view Spinoza in this way.[35] Spinoza, approached teleologically, is considered to be one of these remarkable persons in history who was, as the expression goes, 'ahead of his time'. Spinoza stood out, he was so different that he knew that he couldn't be honest about what he truly believed. Israel writes that Spinoza didn't express himself openly, because he was 'perfectly aware of the radical implications of his ideas and the violent reaction they were likely to provoke. Since his philosophy stood in total contradiction to the tenets of Judaism and all forms of Christianity, as

[33] Israel (2006), p. 45
[34] Ibid, p. 52
[35] Goldstein.(2006), Nadler (2011), Feuer (1966)

well as Cartesianism and the mainstream of the western philosophical tradition since the end of antiquity, it was obvious that his philosophy could only be propagated clandestinely'.[36]

What does Israel mean when he states that Spinoza could only express himself "clandestinely"? It means that we can and should not take Spinoza too seriously when he uses language that seems to be religious. According to Israel, we can, for instance, best understand Spinoza's emphasis on the importance of Christ as a teacher and example of the whole human race if we consider Spinoza's 'deeply felt need to form a tactical and strategic alliance with those fringe Christians, especially Collegiants, and Socinians, willing to assist him in promoting the sort of campaign that could eventually help to strengthen toleration and individual liberty, reform society and politics, and institute true 'freedom to philosophize'.[37]

Spinoza in other words could not be completely open and honest in everything he wrote, because he had a political agenda that included the radical transformation of society. Spinoza, Israel writes, wanted 'to paraphrase Marx, not just to meditate, but to change the world, a goal in which he eventually – and in the most extraordinary manner – succeeded'.[38] According to Israel, Spinoza not only consciously planned modernity, understood as the 'intellectual rebellion against revealed religion', but he also decided on what the best tactic would be to arrive at this goal. Understanding Spinoza in this way implies that one needs to interpret many of the positive statements Spinoza made about things that are of importance to Christian believers as mere strategic maneuvers. For instance, Spinoza's expressed admiration for Christ, his judgment that the Bible is not only useful but even necessary for the salvation of mankind, his statement that people necessarily need to believe the seven dogmas of the universal faith. These all are, in Israel's, eyes nothing more than tactical steps to arrive at the completely secular society in which every individual can 'inwardly reject, outwardly argue against, and ultimately help to overthrow, all prevailing structures of theological and ecclesiastical tradition, hierarchy and authority'.[39]

Spinoza's 'radical enlightenment' is the attempt to get rid of the ecclesiastical tradition. Spinoza would have found inspiration for this radical enlightenment – the idea that popular education will free the common people from prejudice, superstition and tyranny – in Spinoza's 'atheistic schoolmaster' and Latin teacher, Franciscus van den Enden,[40] especially in his *Vrye Politijke Stellingen* (VPS, 1665). This book begins by stating the importance of the education of the

[36] Israel (2001), p. 162-163.
[37] Israel (2007), p. xx.
[38] Israel (2001), p. 174.
[39] Israel. (1999), p. 18.
[40] Israel (2001), p. 185.

people. Van den Enden later specifies that this education needs to take place on the basis of reason alone; teachers need to prove their teachings by means of a sound argumentation. Israel understands Spinoza's thought as 'a more measured and cautious' expression of what is basically the same radical philosophy that Van den Enden taught, a philosophy that strives 'to enlighten the common people, instilling the lessons of philosophy by novel, carefully devised methods of popular education'.[41] Israel sees only a difference in strategy between Van den Enden's utopian idealism in which he envisions a completely free and egalitarian society on the one hand, and Spinoza's political realism on the other hand. From Israel's point of view, both Dutchmen are part of the same radical philosophy which aims at 'the elimination of (…) ecclesiastical authority (…) and divine commandments'. [42]

Steven Nadler[43], another productive Spinoza scholar, states that Spinoza is an atheist. 'To be sure', Nadler writes: 'Spinoza is at times capable of language that seems deeply religious. In the *Ethics*, he says that "we feel and know by experience that we are eternal", and that virtue and perfection are accompanied by a "love of God (*amor Dei*)". But such phrases are not to be given their traditional religious meaning. Spinoza's naturalist and rationalist project demands that we provide these notions with a proper intellectualist interpretation. Thus, the love of God is simply an awareness of the ultimate natural cause of the joy that accompanies the improvement in one's condition that the highest knowledge brings; to love God is nothing but to understand nature. And the eternity in which one participates is represented solely by the knowledge of eternal truths that makes up a part of the rational person's mind'.[44]

In other words, Spinoza uses religious language, while he actually wanted to get rid of religion altogether. Why then use religious language? In Nadler's interpretation this is partly explained as a rhetorical strategy Spinoza needed to employ.[45] In the TTP, Spinoza 'does not always mean exactly what he says or says everything that he thinks', because he doesn't want to alienate these groups whose support he needs for his radical plans to change society into a secular and democratic one in which freedom and toleration are the leading principles. Just as Israel, Nadler wants to see Spinoza as someone who was far ahead of his time.[46]

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[41] Israel (2001), p. 185.
[42] Israel (2004), p. 15.
[43] Nadler is critical of Wim Klever's idea that Van den Enden is to be understood as 'the masterbrain behind Spinoza', but the differences between the two are not spelled out, whereas the similarities are clearly stated. Nadler (1999), p. 107.
[44] Nadler (2007).
[45] Nadler (2011), p. 172.
[46] For a criticism of this view: Melamed (2013a).

'Untrue and good': Spinoza as a Maimonidean[47]

The second group of scholars also believe that Spinoza was an atheist. But in their reading of Spinoza he was not as modern as the scholars of the first group think. For, he didn't believe in what Alexis de Tocqueville called the most important characteristic of modernity, 'the love for equality'.[48] According to the scholars who endorse this position, Spinoza remained deeply indebted to the elitist Maimonidean-Farabic tradition in which the core political teaching is that there will always be a gap between 'the philosophers' on the one hand and 'the common people' or 'the vulgar' on the other hand. It is because of this opposition between the philosophers and the common people that these medieval philosophers – Spinoza included - made use of a 'forgotten kind of writing'. The idea of an 'art of writing', in which it is possible to convey traditional views to pacify the vulgar, both for political and strategic reasons, while nevertheless indicating the truth to a small group of philosophers, has found its most influential and powerful expression in the works of Leo Strauss (1899-1973).

Strauss wrote his first book on Spinoza's critique of religion; in this book he argued that, underlying Spinoza's biblical criticism, was a religious criticism, and that this religious criticism had an Epicurean, that is, atheist motive in freeing people from the fear of God.[49] People in the nineteenth and twentieth century who, like Novalis, had argued that Spinoza was a 'God-intoxicated man' were only able to do this, because they, according to Strauss had forgotten what revelation really entails.[50] In this first book Strauss has yet to develop his theory about a forgotten kind of writing. Here he still seems to think that Spinoza was best understood as a modern man, because he links Spinoza to the 'Radical Enlightenment' (*radikale Aufklärung*), which wants to preclude the very possibility of revelation.[51]

Even in his first book, Strauss tries to make Spinoza fit into his more general scheme in which there is a fundamental dilemma standing at the heart of Western civilization: the choice between Jerusalem and Athens, or between revealed religion and philosophy. Strauss makes clear in *Natural Right and History* (written twenty-two years after he had published his first book on

[47] Strauss considered Spinoza to be a Maimonidean in the specific sense that he made use of deliberate contradictions in order to mislead the masses. Wolfson also thinks that Maimonides, together with Descartes and Aristotle, have had 'a dominant influence on the philosophic training of Spinoza'. Wolfson (1965), p. 9. However, unlike Strauss, Wolfson doesn't see Maimonides as a philosopher who, influenced by Farabi, uses the art of writing to instill secret messages to the philosophical few. In this section I will describe the Straussian interpretation of Spinoza, belonging to a tradition of authors such as Maimonides who wrote 'between the lines', not the idea that Maimonides influenced Spinoza in other ways, as, for example, Wolfson has argued.
[48] De Tocqueville (2000), p. 479.
[49] Strauss (1965), p. 38.
[50] Batnitzky (2016)
[51] Strauss (1965), p. 35.

Spinoza), that in his opinion all the attempts made in the middle ages to reconcile Jerusalem and Athens have not been able to resolve the tension: 'In every attempt at harmonization, in every synthesis however impressive, one of the two opposed elements is sacrificed, more or less subtly but in any event surely, to the other: philosophy which means to be the queen, must be maid the handmaid of revelation or vice versa.[52]

Strauss's 'orthodox atheism' or the certainty that a true reconciliation between religion and philosophy is impossible, also comes to the fore in his most (in)famous piece of writing on Spinoza: 'How to Study Spinoza's *Theologico-Political Treatise*', published in his book *Persecution and the Art of Writing*.[53] In this book Strauss maintains that classical writers such as Maimonides, Halevi, and Spinoza all had to be extremely careful to conceal the truth of the absolute incompatibility between reason and faith, knowingly making use of the noble lie that philosophy and religion could go hand-in-hand. They needed a strategic devise that would enable them to hide the truth about the incompatibility of philosophy and religion from the majority of mankind, while still indicating the truth about it to the elite of philosophically-talented people. They found this devise in a certain art of writing, which enabled them to convey two distinct messages: one exoteric teaching, meant for the masses, and another esoteric message, meant only for the philosophical few.

This hypothesis of ancient and early modern philosophers making use of 'the art of writing', made it possible for Strauss to read Spinoza's *Treatise* in such a way that its hidden message was the reverse of what Spinoza openly states. Thus, when Spinoza writes that philosophy and theology do not conflict with each other, Strauss believes this to be merely his exoteric teaching. His esoteric teaching is that 'philosophy and theology (…) actually contradict each other'.[54]

Strauss makes clear that there are two main reasons why philosophers in the past engaged in 'the art of writing', using 'noble lies'. Firstly it was to shield themselves against persecution. They wrote 'between the lines' in order to protect philosophy from society. The second reason why they hid their true intentions was to keep the theological-political myths on which society is based intact. In engaging in the art of writing, they tried to protect society from philosophy. Because philosophy puts all in doubt, and because society is based on certain irrational beliefs about 'us'

[52] Strauss (1953), p. 74-75.
[53] Hannah Arendt has remarked to Karl Jaspers that she thought Strauss to be 'a convinced orthodox atheist'. What Arendt makes clear with this expression is that for Strauss – as for many people who are radical in their atheism - there is no middle ground: either you are with the religiously orthodox or you are with the atheists. Arendt (1992), p. 244.
[54] See TTP Preface-11, p. 10 and 15-8, p. 193, and Strauss (1952), p. 170.

being a special kind of people with a 'holy' set of laws, philosophy is always a danger to society.[55] The old philosophers understood this danger, and Spinoza – in this particular sense, according to the mature Strauss – belonged to these 'old philosophers':

'Spinoza was very bold in so far as he went to the extreme to which he could go as a man who was convinced that religion, i.e., positive religion, is indispensable to society, and who took his social duties seriously. He was cautious in so far as he did not state the whole truth clearly and unequivocally but kept his utterances, to the best of his knowledge, within the limits of what he considered the legitimate claims of society. He speaks then in all his writings, and especially in the *Treatise*, "*ad captum vulgi*".[56]

As is clear from this citation, Strauss did *not* consider the TTP to be Spinoza's exoteric work, meant for the vulgar masses, and the *Ethics* to be Spinoza's esoteric work in which he openly communicated his true teaching to the few philosophers. For, Strauss writes here that Spinoza adapted the truth 'in all his writings' to the opinions of the vulgar. Spinoza's esoteric teaching, according to Strauss, is completely at odds not only with Christian metaphysics, but also with Christian morality. Spinoza only adheres to Christian ethical teachings such as that the wise man should return hatred with love, and that the philosopher will love his neighbor by means of justice and charity, in order to mislead the common people. In truth, the philosophical ethics is the very opposite of the traditional religious morality. Philosophical ethics is purely selfish; whereas religious morality is about caring for the other.

The philosopher is selfish in that he most of all enjoys his own understanding of eternal truths.[57] He is most committed to his own search for wisdom, and he doesn't care about the things about which his fellow citizens become upset or aroused.[58] He wants to spend as little time as possible in the company of the vulgar. The only reason why he cares for them – and therefore turns to politics – is that the multitude are a possible danger to his own existence. It is important that the multitude believe things that keep them from destroying the peace and quiet that are necessary for the best kind of life, the philosophical life.[59] Spinoza then didn't care about the things modern people care about. He didn't really care about human rights, freedom of speech, or democracy.[60] He only cared about these things as means to defend and protect his own philosophical lifestyle.

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[55] Strauss (1959), p. 221-222.
[56] Strauss. (1952), p. 183.
[57] Strauss (1953), p. 143.
[58] Strauss (1953), p. 145.
[59] Strauss (1953), p. 152-153.
[60] Strauss (1965), p. 19.

We have to be very clear what exactly are the esoteric or the exoteric teachings that Strauss detects in Spinoza's writings. Spinoza's esoteric teaching is not, as many of Strauss's opponents as well as many of Strauss's followers seem to believe, that Spinoza secretly conveyed the message that revealed religion or biblical faith is untrue, yet very useful for the majority of men to believe in. That is clearly and openly stated by Spinoza and thus not esoteric. And the exoteric teaching is not that the common people should stick to a form of traditional faith. This is something that Spinoza, according to Strauss, truly believed. Therefore, it is not exoteric. The truly exoteric teaching of Spinoza is that philosophy leads to the same moral truths as theology. To put it in the words of the subtitle of the TTP, Spinoza exoterically taught that philosophy is no threat to piety. This is Spinoza's 'political philosophy'.

Political philosophy in Strauss's view is not a discipline in which people philosophize about politics, but it is the strategical and political defense of the philosophical life.[61] Philosophers needed to defend their way of life against the masses who have always been hostile towards philosophy. The way they did it was by making philosophy seem a very pious and patriotic pursuit. This is then also what Strauss called the 'theological-political problem'. Societies demand of all of their citizens – this including philosophers – commitment to the religious and political beliefs that are not only typical for that particular society, but also define it. Philosophers have to hide the truth about their way of life, because the philosophical life always and by definition transcends the specific theological-political hang-ups of any given society.

These complexities in Strauss's position have, however, not played an important role in the influence that Strauss's reading of Spinoza has had on other scholars. Most importantly, in the debates between the writers who more or less follow Strauss and the ones who vigorously oppose this reading, is the idea of Strauss that Spinoza was an elitist. For scholars such as Yimiyahu Yovel[62], Steven B. Smith[63], Paul Bagley[64] and others, it is evident that we find in

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[61] Strauss (1959), p. 93

[62] Yovel, according to himself, is a 'Straussian' in textual hermeneutics without necessarily adhering to the rest of his philosophy. He criticizes Strauss, interestingly enough, for not doing 'full justice to the religious intent and substrate behind Spinoza's endeavor.' However, Yovel thinks himself that Spinoza 'believed he held the key to true salvation which only a select group might attain, and which challenged that of the established tradition. (…) Spinoza rejected all historical religions and cults as superstitions. Salvation lies neither in Christ nor in the law of Moses, but in the laws of reason leading to the third kind of knowledge.' Yovel (1989), p. 151- 153

[63] Smith tries to distance himself from both Strauss and Yovel: Strauss underestimates the political character of Spinoza's work as the *Treatise* is not only meant to liberate philosophy; Yovel overestimates the importance of the Marrano experience for the practice of esotericism as this was a common practice, also among non-Marrano's. Smith (1997), p. 19, 20. Still, the huge influence of Strauss's views on Smith's work is undeniable: Smith follows Strauss in writing about the 'theological-political problem' (chapter 1), in believing that Spinoza made use of a special kind of writing (chapter 2), in focusing on Spinoza critique on Scripture and religion in general (chapters 3 and 4), in making Spinoza one of the founding fathers of liberalism (chapters 4, 5 and 6) and in problematizing Spinoza's implicit advise to the Jews to simply go for assimilation (chapter 8).

Spinoza the idea of an insurmountable gap between the many ignorant people who are the victims of imagination, passions, and superstitious beliefs on the one hand and the very few who are capable of leading a life of reason, freed from imagination and the passions, on the other hand. This elitist reading is something that scholars such as Jonathan Israel and Steven Nadler will fight against, because it stands in the way of their image of Spinoza as one of the great heroes of Radical Enlightenment. Steven Nadler, for instance writes: 'Despite the difficulties of the book [i.e., the *Ethics*], Spinoza clearly believed that anyone – and we are all endowed with the same cognitive faculties – with sufficient self-mastery and intellectual attentiveness can perceive the truth to the highest degree. This is probably the reason why he seems from the start to have wanted to make sure that a Dutch translation of the *Ethics* was available, so that 'the truth' would be accessible for many. For it is our natural eudaimonia, our happiness or well-being, that is at stake, and for Spinoza this consists in the knowledge embodied in the propositions in the *Ethics*'.[65]

'True and good': (Con)Textual Approach

The (con)textual approach objects to the idea that we should read Spinoza between the lines as someone who states things he himself doesn't believe to be true. It objects to this procedure on textual as well as contextual grounds. The contextual interpreter can point to the fact that Spinoza lived in an age in which modern atheism simply didn't exist. The textual scholar can argue that Strauss himself has stated that the art of reading between the lines in order to search for an author's esoteric teachings is 'strictly prohibited in all cases where it would be less exact than not doing so (…)'.[66] In other words, if it is possible to arrive at a reading of Spinoza's philosophy that makes him intelligible without seeking refuge in the idea of a hidden, secret teaching, we should apply Ockham's razor and prefer that interpretation which does not make use of an additional hypothesis

Rejecting the idea that Spinoza is concealing his atheism (con)textual scholars do not consider Spinoza to have been a modern man, planning the Radical Enlightenment, and they also don't understand him as an elitist thinker who was spreading noble lies in a Farabic-Maimonidean tradition. Nor, for that matter, do they think of him as someone pursuing a Marrano strategy of

[64] Bagley does not distance himself from Strauss. He writes: 'Because of the perpetual differences between the philosophical minority and the nonphilosophical majority, it is believed [by the writers who endorse esoteric communication out of social responsibility, a group to which Bagley thinks that Spinoza belongs] that no progress in popular education or in cultural orientation can bridge the gulf between "the few" and "the many".' Bagley (1999), p. 266. Bagley has also defended Strauss against the damning critique of Errol Harris. See: Bagley (1996), p. 387-415.
[65] Nadler (1999), p. 226, 27.
[66] Strauss (1952), p. 30.

outwardly conforming to the dominant ideology, while inwardly rejecting it.[67] Rather, they argue that, if we study the historical context, we understand Spinoza as a thinker who lived at a time in which modern atheism, secularism and liberalism simply did not exist, and if we only look at the texts that he produced throughout his life, it is evident that his work is all about the importance of religion, even though he did not turn a blind eye to the problems that also come with religion. Both the historical context as well as the text themselves make clear that Spinoza was – just as his contemporaries – convinced that finding the true religion was the most important thing one can do in life.

Using textual analysis Herman de Dijn comes to the conclusion that Spinoza developed in his TTP a theory of religion which is more complete than the one in the *Ethic*s. Not only does Spinoza in the TTP spend time to explain what superstition is, he also discusses a form of pious faith: 'He wants to show that freedom of thought is perfectly reconcilable with piety and peace. This presupposes that this also works the other way around, that there is a kind of religion or piety, which is compatible with freedom and peace. In connection to this kind of religion, he often uses the word *animus*, or mindset (or heart), the origin of certain attitudes that characterize piety. These are what one could call 'habits of the heart', such as integrity, trust, simplicity, etcetera, that are connected to a kind of childlike "obedience", which should not be confused with slavish fear and ambition that belong to superstition. There is in other words something that keeps middle ground between superstitious religion, which is the product of illusion and passions, and the philosophical religion, which is the product of the intellect and the active emotions'.[68]

It is especially this third possibility which is being described in the first fifteen chapters of the TTP that many have thought to be so unlikely that they believe Spinoza is speaking with a forked tongue: 'But why wouldn't there be non-rational forms of life, such as Biblical piety, which can at least be found in certain religious groups where, as Spinoza seems to believe, individuals can come close in enjoying the same peace of mind that the rational person has?'[69]

The TTP, according to De Dijn, shows us that the imagination is not something that we need to be freed from by means of 'radical enlightenment', it is also not a tool used to keep the masses in check. Rather it is to be considered a positive force, guiding the politician who knows from

[67] This thesis that Spinoza's 'art of writing' comes forth out of the Marrano tradition, is found in Yovel (1989).
[68] De Dijn (2009), p. 118.
[69] De Dijn (2009), p. 118.

experience what to do or say and in what way to do or say it in order to help people to lead a more reasonable life, in which they are less the victim of the passions.[70]

Susan James's book on the *Treatise* is a great example of how the contextual approach can be used to understand Spinoza. She describes the TTP as a reaction to debates that were going on at that particular time. In doing so she also takes issue with the interpretation that 'Spinoza is implicitly rejecting religion […] It also contrasts with Strauss's claim that the tenets of faith are fictions designed to pacify the common people'.[71] James shares my objective in wanting to present the *Treatise* as a unity, dismissing the claims of the Straussians that there are contradictions to be found in the *Treatise*.[72]

In Angela Roothaan's dissertation on Spinoza's *Theological-Political Treatise*[73], she understands the relation between the *Ethics* and the TTP by means of the Kantian distinction between theoretical philosophy and practical philosophy. The *Ethics* should, according to this interpretation, be seen as Spinoza's theoretical philosophy, the TTP as his practical philosophy. Spinoza's universal faith is pious because of its practical results. This practical knowledge in a way transcends – just as it does in Kant - the theoretical knowledge. This is how Roothaan reads Spinoza's expression 'to transcend the limits of the intellect'. Roothaan writes that the TTP has been read too often as an enlightenment-treatise.[74] She does not agree with the teleological approach, since she understands Spinoza to be a child of his time, and therefore a religious man.[75] Roothaan understands Spinoza not as a secularist, but as someone for whom the theological and the political are intrinsically linked. She thinks, for example that the state in Spinoza's thought also has a theological function, because the goal of the state is to create the conditions that make it possible for the community to reach salvation. This includes the freedom to philosophize, tolerance being one of the virtues needed for true piety.[76]

The historian and Spinoza-scholar, Wiep van Bunge, has criticized the teleological approach. Jonathan Israel's 'emphasis on the theological uproar provoked by Spinozism easily disguises both the deeply religious inspiration of his Dutch admirers as well as Spinoza's positive assessment of religion as such. As far as Spinoza's own evaluation of religion is concerned, it should first be established that from the outset he seems to have been most concerned first and

[70] de Dijn (2009), p. 121.
[71] James (2012), p. 213, note 72.
[72] James has a contextualist approach as she presents Spinoza's TTP as a reaction to a discussion going on in Spinoza's time. Although I do find the context important, my emphasis is on finding the purely philosophical arguments in Spinoza's *Treatise*, arguments that, in principle, would be capable of transcending space and time.
[73] Roothaan (1996).
[74] Roothaan (1996), p. 53
[75] Roothaan (1996), p. 36
[76] Roothaan (1996), p. 166.

foremost with the question how to obtain *salvation*'.[77] Even though Spinoza's treatment of religion in the *Ethics*, Van Bunge admits, to some extent, needs to be 'secularized' (or, rather 'naturalized') one, also in the *Ethics* cannot deny that the book ends in overtly religious tones.[78]

To this same conclusion that Spinoza is serious about religion comes Charlie Huenemann.[79] Huenemann's central thesis is that Spinoza did not intend to replace or reject, but to *correct* the religious tradition. 'Indeed, he believed the God he was describing was the very same God as seen by the ancient prophets, although their understanding was not as clear as the one now available to us'. [80]

Huenemann ends his book by contrasting 'our own Nietzschean naturalism' in which all values disappear with 'Spinoza's divine naturalism' which preserves the very reason why we do philosophy in the first place, and that is the experience of making the intellectual connection to infinite and eternal reality.

The third position in which Spinoza is understood as someone who thought that religion is true and good has been defended by many excellent scholars. Still, the idea of Spinoza as an atheist or even a 'radical atheist' has become quite dominant outside the scholarly community. In the introduction to his book *Radical Protestantism in Spinoza's Thought*, Graeme Hunter has described the reactions he got when he told people that he was writing a book on this matter: 'You know that you are battling a commonplace when the reactions to your project are less expressions of interest than of incredulity or dismay. Such has been my frequent experience, when explaining what I have been writing over the last couple of years. From acknowledged experts to those possessing only the most superficial acquaintance with Spinoza, a daunting number of those to whom I have communicated the idea of this study seemed to know in their hearts that Spinoza was opposed to every form of Christianity and what I propose could not possibly be true'.[81]

[77] Van Bunge (2012), p. 199.
[78] Ibid.
[79] Huenemann (2014).
[80] Huenemann (2014), p. 10.
[81] Hunter (2005), p. 4.

2. Spinoza's Philosophical Religion in the *Ethics* and Other Works

Did Spinoza truly think of his philosophy as a religion? Or is the pious language he used a smokescreen to hide the fact that his teachings in fact are the opposite of what religious people believe? In order to answer these questions this chapter looks at Spinoza's philosophical system. Is this the system of an atheist or of a religious man?

The first section discusses the difficulty of defining concepts such as 'atheism', 'God', and 'religion'.

The second section sketches the dominant theme in all of Spinoza's writings: the search for salvation by means of knowledge of God.

The third section highlights some of the positions in the long debate on Spinoza's perceived atheism.

The fourth section describes Spinoza's metaphysics. Can Spinoza be called a philosophical naturalist? After studying Spinoza's reaction to Oldenburg's suggestion that he, according to some, appeared to be an atheist because of his equation of God with Nature, the chapter turns to Spinoza's definition of God in the *Ethics*.

The fifth section tries to come to a deeper understanding of Spinoza's main theme. It does so by researching the path to salvation by means of the different kinds of knowledge, outlined in Spinoza's *Ethics*. Spinoza's notion of 'salvation' and his distinction between 'three kinds of knowledge' are analyzed. Spinoza's ultimate kind of knowledge seems to be a kind of mysticism in which we, by means of an inner transformation, caused by knowledge, come to experience God and his infinite power in every little thing that exists.

The sixth and final section analyzes Spinoza's own defense against the charge of atheism in his reaction to the critique of Van Velthuysen.

2.1. Defining Atheism, God, and Religion

Was Spinoza an atheist? Spinoza claimed again and again that he was *not*. However, his conception of God, in which God is *not* understood as a person, a king, a judge or a law-giver, but is said to be in some way equivalent to Nature, is, according to some, already enough to call him an atheist. Jonathan Israel, for example, writes: 'Admittedly, Spinoza indignantly rejects the designation 'atheist' but this is because he was not an 'atheist' under the terms of his own (and other Early Enlightenment materialists') redefining of the term 'atheism' to mean refusal to acknowledge the natural order and the obligations of the rational man. In terms of what was normally meant by 'atheism' during the Enlightenment, namely denial of all supernatural agency

in the cosmos, including rejection of a providential God who created and guides the cosmos, and watches over the actions of men, Spinoza unquestionably was an 'atheist".[1]

In this citation Israel makes an important distinction between, on the one hand, the way in which Spinoza understood 'atheism' himself, and, on the other hand, the way in which atheism was understood by others. What I am most interested in is how Spinoza understood 'atheism' himself[2], and why this particular definition of ' atheism' might have lead him to the conclusion that he himself was not an atheist. I find this most important, because my aim in this dissertation is to understand Spinoza in the way in which he understood himself. Apparently Spinoza (but also others, such as his close friend, Jarig Jelles) strongly believed that Spinoza's philosophical convictions did not surmount to mere atheism. What I like to understand are the reasons why he made such a claim. Was this mere strategy to avoid persecution by the religious authorities or did he seriously believe he himself was not an atheist?

What Israel implies in the cited passage is that people in the seventeenth century considered theism and atheism different *ways of thinking about the world*. But did Spinoza and his contemporaries really discuss theism and atheism in such theoretical terms? The following citation from Verbeek suggests otherwise: 'In the 17th century an atheist is someone who denies, not necessarily, the existence, but in any case the will of God – if the atheist denies God's existence at all it is in order to be able to deny God's will and do as he pleases'.[3]

Atheism in the seventeenth century, according to Verbeek, is not so much about one's worldview, but is defined as a kind of immorality, the idea that one may do as one pleases. John Locke, for example, argued against tolerating atheists on the basis that they lacked morality: an atheist cannot be trusted to keep his oaths.[4] Spinoza also seems to have a very practical definition of atheism as he most strongly reacts against the suggestion that atheism is unrelated to the way in which people live.[5]

However, someone such as Israel might object, why should we follow Spinoza's take on theism and atheism? Shouldn't we apply a commonsensical approach and study words in the way they are used in 'ordinary language'? And if we do so, wouldn't we then see that Spinoza's conception of God and religion are completely at odds with the way we (or the people in the

[1] Israel (2006), p. 45, 46

[2] I do not agree that he himself defied atheism in the way Israel describes it as 'denying the refusal to acknowledge the natural order and the obligations of the rational man'. Spinoza, rather defines atheism as the idea that God should not be acknowledged and loved as the highest good, leading people to love money, sex and fame. See section 2.6 of this chapter. I also do not agree that Spinoza should be called a 'materialist' and an 'empiricist' as Israel does. See section 2.3.5 of this chapter.

[3] Verbeek (2003), p. 4

[4] Locke (2010), p. 37. See also David (2003).

[5] See 2.6.

seventeenth century) would normally understand someone who uses these words? What is neglected in such an approach is the extent to which ideas about who or what is to be considered 'pious' and 'theist' and who or what is to be considered 'a heretic' and an 'atheist' is part of an ongoing power struggle, and therefore subjected to change: 'In the second half of the seventeenth century the term 'atheism' had a very vague meaning denoting all kinds of deviate behavior. Some of its many equivalents were superstition, idolatry, irreligion, libertinage, deism, Machiavellianism, indifferentism, neutralism, Socinianism and heterodoxy in general'.[6]

In other words, when one analyzes ordinary language one finds the dominant orthodox beliefs to be called 'theist' and the heterodox beliefs to be called 'atheist'. What is considered 'orthodox' changes from time to time and place to place. But even if this were not the case, and an orthodoxy would be installed that would dominate the religion forever, repressing all heterodox opinions, would it then be justified for a scientist to call anyone who is religious in a non-orthodox way an atheist? Wouldn't this scientist interfere in a theological-political struggle between believers, taking the side of one party against the other?

This is why the question whether someone is an atheist or not is not merely a scientific or philosophical question, but is also to be considered *a theological-political question*. Spinoza addresses this question in his *Theological-Political Treatise*. His main argument is there that the Bible allows for different opinions about God. Spinoza's opponents, people such as Voetius, judged otherwise. This only shows that the theological-political debate on who is to be considered an atheist allows for a wide variety of opinions.[7] What I am interested in is the reconstruction of Spinoza's explicit and implicit arguments as to why he is not an atheist.

Can We Demarcate Theism From 'Pseudo-Theism'?

Atheism literally means non-theism. If theism is believing in the existence of God (or gods), then atheism would be the belief that there is no God (or no gods). If such a definition is used, Spinoza is not an atheist, because for him God exists by necessity. (E-Ip11, p. 222)

But is atheism really incompatible with believing in the existence of God? According to today's most famous atheist, Richard Dawkins, this is not the case. 'Much unfortunate confusion', he writes, 'is caused by the failure to distinguish what can be called Einsteinian

[6] Krop (2011), p. 165.
[7] Fukuoka (2018), p. 93.

religion from supernatural religion'.[8] This 'Einsteinian religion' is believing in the existence of Spinoza's God.[9]

A frequently discussed problem in the philosophy of science is the so-called 'demarcation problem': what is the criterion that we can use in order to adequately distinguish between science and pseudo-science? A comparable problem exists in the philosophy of religion: what criterion can help us to demarcate between theists and 'pseudo-theists'? The criterion that Dawkins put forward is the belief in the existence of a *personal* God. If someone believes in a personal God, this person is a theist. If someone believes that such a personal God does *not* exist, that person is an atheist.[10]

But using this criterion would mean that some people who are generally and almost universally held to be theists would need to be considered to really be atheists. Maimonides, for example, the greatest philosopher in the tradition of Judaism, rejected the idea of a personal God.[11] In Maimonides' negative theology God is unique in every respect. Therefore, he cannot be adequately understood as belonging to a class of things that have personhood. Would this mean that, according to Dawkins, also Maimonides is an atheist?[12] Additionally, one might ask: if someone who believes in God, but not in a personal God, is to be considered an atheist, how do we refer to someone who rejects the idea of God in its entirety? There may be very devout people for whom worship and religion are an important part of life who do not accept the idea of a personal God. Yet would we call such people atheists?

As an atheist is defined as someone who denies the existence of God, the discussion quickly progresses to the question: *Quid sit Deus?* According to some there is 'an official concept of God'[13] of which the atheist says: 'this God does not exist'. This 'official God' is said to comprise of the following characteristics: 1) unity, God is one; 2) self-existent, God is a *causa sui*; 3) eternal;

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[8] Dawkins (2006), p. 13

[9] On April 24 of the year 1929 Einstein received a cablegram from Rabbi Herbert Goldstein of the Institutional Synagogue, New York. The rabbi asked him: 'Do you believe in God? Stop. Answer paid 50 words.' Einstein replied: 'I believe in Spinoza's God who reveals himself in the orderly harmony of what exists, not in a God who concerns himself with fates and actions of human beings.' Schilpp (1970), p. 60. For Dawkins this reply does not make Einstein a theist. Einstein, according to Dawkins, is 'a religious atheist', because he did not believe in a personal God.

[10] Besides theism and atheism there is also deism, pantheism and panentheism. Deism is the idea of God as the great watchmaker. God created everything and made the laws of nature, but after he did that, stopped interfering, letting nature function on its own. Pantheism is the idea that God is to be found in everything in nature. There is something divine in every cloud, tree, and ant. Panentheism is the notion that everything is contained in God. Now, Spinoza is not a deist, because he doesn't believe in God as a creator, nor does he believe that God does not play an active role anymore in making everything function. Spinoza can also not be called a pantheist, because he doesn't think that trees or other natural phenomena are in some sense holy or worth our veneration. Panentheism comes closest to his position as everything, according to Spinoza, is *in* God.

[11] Kessler (2007), p. 42-44

[12] Strauss seems to imply that in fact he was. See: Goldman (2010).

[13] The term comes from feminist theologian Rosemary Radford Ruether and is taken over by Cliteur (2010), p. 177.

God stands outside time; 4) creator, everything is created and governed by God; 5) transcendent, God is distinct from his creation; 6) omnipotent. God has absolute power; 7) omniscient, He knows everything; 8) personal, God is a person; 9) perfectly good, God is perfect in every respect; 10) holy, God is worth our veneration; 11) interventionist, God intervenes in history; 12) judge, God rewards the righteous and punishes the wicked.[14]

But how many of these beliefs does someone have to share in order to be called a theist? If someone would not believe in all 12, but would believe in most of them, would this make him an atheist? And how exactly are we to interpret terms such as 'omnipotence' and 'omniscience'? Is there only one valid interpretation of these terms? Or can several different interpretations be allowed?[15]

That these questions matter, becomes clear if we look at the case of Spinoza, who would agree that God has these characteristics, but who would reinterpret them in a way which is not orthodox.[16] This shows, that if one would accept the idea of an 'official concept of God', one would still be left with all kinds of problems once one tries to apply it in order to demarcate theism from atheism.

But is there really an 'official concept of God'? Doesn't the history and anthropology of religion reveal a continuous struggle within different religious traditions about the nature and concept of God, where formal concepts are continually challenged?

Maybe it is this problem of 'the official concept of God' that has made Dawkins add that an atheist – at least in the modern period - not only denies the existence of a personal God, but also embraces 'philosophical naturalism': 'An atheist in this sense of philosophical naturalist is somebody who believes there is nothing beyond the natural, physical world, no supernatural

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[14] Cliteur (2010), p. 179-180.

[15] According to Spinoza there is no such a thing as 'official model of God'. Everyone may adapt the idea of God to his own understanding and interpret it in such a way that it makes it easier for him to obey God's divine law. (TTP XIV-11, p. 183)

[16] Of the 12 mentioned characteristics Spinoza can be said to explicitly embrace criterion 1, 2 and 3. See for example the Appendix to Ethics I where Spinoza writes that 'God is one', that 'he necessarily exists', and that 'he is and acts solely from the necessity of his own nature'. With regard to criterion 4: God did not literally 'create' the universe *ex nihilio*, but everything does flow forth out of God. With regard to criterion 5: God is not the transcendent, but the immanent cause of all things. (E-Ip18, p. 229; Letter 73, p. 942). Spinoza would again agree with 6: God is all powerful, because there is nothing outside God. (E-Ip34, p. 238). In a qualified sense he would agree with 7: all thoughts are contained in God's infinite intellect. (E-IIp1, p. 245). Spinoza would not agree with criterion 8: God is not a person. (E-I Appendix, p. 239). However, the common people benefit from understanding Him in this way. He would also disagree with criterion 9: goodness does not pertain to the nature of God, since goodness is a product of the human imagination. However, God is described as 'perfect', because there is nothing lacking from the divine nature (E-I Appendix, p. 241-242) and as an 'exemplar of true life', because 'all things exist and act through Him, and therefore we understand them through Him and see what is true, right and good through Him.' (TTP XIV-11, p. 183). Spinoza does not believe in the final two characteristics of God, because they are products of the prophetic imagination. He, however does think that these products of the imagination are useful, and can help people to lead better lives.

creative intelligence lurking behind the observable universe, no soul that outlasts the body and no miracles - except in the sense of natural phenomena that we don't yet understand'.

Atheism, according to Dawkins, is equivalent to philosophical naturalism, in which nature is understood as the 'physical world'. It arguably was and still is the interpretation of Spinoza as a philosophical naturalist who equated God with Nature which has given him his reputation as an atheist.[17] However, he himself denied that he was a philosophical naturalist in the sense described by Dawkins. Although he does reject the 'supernatural', nature is not confined to the existence of physical matter, according to Spinoza, as we will see.[18] The case of Spinoza shows that it remains difficult to formulate the demarcation criteria that can separate theist from non-theist positions.[19]

Religion Described By Means of Family Resemblances

'To define religion', Max Weber writes at the very beginning of his book on the subject, 'to say what it is, is not possible at the start of a presentation such as this. Definition can be attempted, if at all, only at the conclusion of the study'.[20] This denial to define religion at the outset of a study has been criticized on the grounds that of course one has a definition of 'religion' in mind when one starts to study the subject sociologically, as Weber does, singling certain aspects out for research while leaving others out of consideration. Although this criticism is justified, there is also something to say in favor of Weber's position: the definition of religion will always be a matter of dispute, and therefore it would be wise to have this discussion on a case by case basis, rather than in the abstract.

The other great sociologist of religion, Emile Durkheim, – in contradistinction to Weber – *has defined* religion as 'A unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things, that is to say, things set apart and forbidden – beliefs and practices which unite into one single moral community called a Church, all those who adhere to them'.[21] What is striking about the definition of Durkheim is that he does not think that belief either in the 'supernatural' or in a 'deity' is a necessary condition for a religion. Instead he speaks of the category of 'the sacred'. What also stands out in his definition is that religion is not only about beliefs but also about *practices*. Maybe most important in his definition of religion is its capacity to *unite* people in a community.

One aspect that seems to be lacking in the definition of Durkheim is *religious experience*. When the philosopher and psychologist William James tried to define religion it was this aspect

[17] Harris (1997), p. 33-41.
[18] See 2.2.
[19] Spinoza also denied that miracles could exist (TTP, chapter VI). He, however, does write that 'the human mind cannot be absolutely destroyed along with the body, but something of it remains, which is eternal.' (E-Vp23, p. 374)
[20] Weber (1965), p. 1.
[21] Durkheim (1995), p. 44.

that he singled out: 'Religion (…) shall mean for us the feelings, acts and experiences of individual men in their solitude, so far as they apprehend themselves to stand in relation to whatever they may consider the divine'.[22] The definitions of Durkheim and James can be considered as two extremes: Durkheim neglects personal religious experiences, but James neglects the effect of religions to create unified groups.

The idealist British philosopher, T.L.S. Sprigge has been influenced by James's approach. He considers this approach to be a form of 'religious realism'[23], because James is most of all interested in the real, psychological effects of having certain beliefs and practices. Sprigge has argued, using James's 'realist' religious approach, that Spinozism can be understood as a religion.[24] According to Sprigge a religion 'normally comprises five factors: (1) a set of beliefs about the world, (2) an emotional response to the world thus conceived, (3) a system of moral precepts somehow deriving from these beliefs, (4) certain ceremonial practices, and (5) an institutional organization exerting authority over the members of the religion'.[25]

Spinozism could, according to Sprigge, be called a religion 'as consisting of certain beliefs which are in some sense about spiritual matters, certain emotions prompted by these beliefs, and a set of moral precepts deriving from them'. Just as Sprigge I hold the view that 'this combination is capable of playing something like the same role in an individual's life as a religion in the fuller sense does for its members'.[26] Sprigge thinks that Spinozism would function as a religion for the person who believes that Spinoza in his philosophy has succeeded in formulating the true philosophy. But it is maybe more precise to argue that Spinoza's philosophy functioned at least for one person as a religion, and that is for Spinoza himself.

Because of the great variety of different religions and because of the great historical variety of different orthodox and heterodox interpretations within each of these religions, it is hard to name that what is essential to religion.[27] Instead of trying to identify a single essence of religion, we do better to follow Sprigge's example, and show that all these different religions share certain, what Ludwig Wittgenstein has called, family resemblances.[28]

As we saw in the cited definition of William James religion on an individual level comprises of beliefs, practices and experiences, but on a social level it, as Durkheim has pointed out, also has to do with a social identity and with the establishment of certain institutions that make the

[22] James W (1902), p. 31.
[23] Sprigge (2005), p. 191-202.
[24] Sprigge (1995), p. 137-163
[25] Ibid.
[26] Sprigge (1995), p. 142
[27] Leezenberg (2007), p. 13-15.
[28] Wittgenstein (1958), p. 32-33.

group last. These different dimensions of religion can also be classified in terms that make them more similar to philosophical disciplines. Religion can then be said to have 1) a metaphysics, ontology or certain worldview in which the notions of eternity, timelessness and immortality, as well as those of unity, oneness and wholeness and of almightiness, omniscience and omnipresence often (but not always) play an important role.

Apart from these metaphysical notions religions also bear family resemblances in that they provide us 2) with certain ethical-political tools that help us to deal with suffering, sin and death in order that we can find some sort of salvation, enlightenment or lasting happiness. Religions provide us therefore with things such as holy laws, divine rewards for good behavior and divine punishments for bad behavior, rules for living well as an individual, rules for living well as being part of a community, perfect examples we are encouraged to follow, and bad examples that function as a warning to us.

Religions provide us 3) with certain practices that can be described phenomenologically and that help us to experience the divine, such as sermons, rituals, prayers, meditation-sessions, exercises, songs, readings, dancing, etcetera.

In order to make the world-view, the ethical norms and the religious practices part of our daily lives religions also 4) know some sort of political-institutional organization or hierarchy, a clergy that is more or less freed from work so they can devote their time entirely to the study and teaching of religion.

Religion is also accompanied by a social-political 5) brotherhood, a community, an identity, and a tradition which encompasses the living, the dead, and those not yet born.

2.2. A Persistent Theme Throughout Spinoza's Life

Because I want to explore the possibility that Spinoza's philosophy functioned as a religion for himself, I will start on an autobiographical note. A further reason to begin the discussion on Spinoza's alleged atheism with his own life is that some have argued that the biographical fact that Spinoza was banned from the Jewish community in Amsterdam already reveals his 'atheism'. So, let us start by recalling some facts about Spinoza's life.

Baruch Spinoza, born 24 November, 1632, had to become wise fast, as he did not have an easy youth, and he was dead already at age 44. His life as a child, teenager, and young adult was tainted with a series of events that must have caused the young Spinoza intense grief and distress. His mother Deborah died on November 5, 1638 as Spinoza was about to turn six years old. On 24 September 1649, Spinoza was then sixteen years old, when his slightly older brother, Isaac, died at age seventeen. Three years later, October 23, 1652, his older sister Miriam died.

Two years later, Spinoza's father Michael suddenly died, making Spinoza, an orphan at the age of twenty-one.

Now he had to take over the family business in the import-export of fruits, together with his brother Gabriel. He soon found out that he had inherited a debt from his father, who had become responsible for managing the bankruptcy settlement of another Jewish merchant. Spinoza was able to escape these financial obligations by turning to Dutch law, instead of Jewish law. In March 1656 he was released from the obligation to pay his father's debt by the Supreme Court of Holland. Four months later, on July 27th of the year 1656, the most well-known biographical fact in Spinoza's life took place. He, then 23 years old, was officially banned from the Jewish community of Amsterdam.[29]

The Ban

The text of the excommunication (Hebrew: *herem*) is the following: 'The Senhores of the Mahamad make it known that they have long since been cognizant of the wrong opinions and behavior of Baruch d'Espinoza, and tried various means and promises to dissuade him from his evil ways. But as they effected no improvement, obtaining on the contrary more information every day of the horrible heresies which he practiced and taught, and of the monstrous actions which he performed, and as they had many trustworthy witnesses who in the presence of the same Espinoza reported and testified against him and convicted him; and after all this has been investigated by the rabbis, they decided with the consent of these that the same Espinoza should be excommunicated and separated from the people of Israel, as they now excommunicate him with the following ban (…) We order that nobody should communicate with him orally or in writing, or show him any favor, or stay with him under the same roof, or come within four ells of him, or read anything composed or written by him'.[30]

Read with the knowledge of hindsight, the text of the *herem* seems to suggest that Spinoza was condemned for holding his philosophical beliefs ('wrong opinions'), for expressing them in public ('which he (…) taught'), and for acting upon them ('monstrous actions'), and that this was something which was already going on for quite a while ('long since been cognizant').[31] However, '[a]s the matter stands, many key questions remain about Spinoza's problematic relations (if any) with the Sephardic community as well as the exact reason for his sudden expulsion. The *herem* imposed on him may well relate to the bleak financial situation of his father's estate, rather than

[29] Van de Ven (2011), p. 4-10.
[30] Quoted in Klever (1996a), p. 16.
[31] Klever suggests this as he highlights these parts of the *herem* by placing them in Italics.

to the philosopher's opinions in matters of religious revelation as is often assumed. (…) So much is clear: there are no archival sources, testimonies or writings whatsoever to confirm or prove that Spinoza had any deviant ideas or publicly preached at the time'.[32]

Although the wording of the *herem* is particularly harsh, Spinoza, according to his biographer Lucas reacted in the following way: 'All the better; they do not force me to do anything that I would not have done to my own accord if I did not dread scandal. But, since they want it in this way, I enter gladly on the path that is opened to me, with the consolation that my departure will be way more innocent than was the exodus of the early Hebrews from Egypt'.[33] It seems then that Spinoza, had already departed the synagogue, at least in spirit. Klever writes that Spinoza was not present during the *herem*, because he had already 'converted' to another outlook on life.[34]

Spinoza Announces His Project

This term 'conversion' seems to be rather apt if we read the first lines of the *Treatise on the Emendation of the Intellect*, a work which scholars believe to be Spinoza's earliest piece of writing. According to Mignini, Spinoza began writing it shortly after his excommunication at the end of 1656 or at the beginning of the year 1657.[35] The TIE starts in the following way: 'After experience had taught me the hollowness and futility of everything that is ordinarily encountered in daily life, and I realized that all the things which were the source and object of my anxiety held nothing of good or evil in themselves save insofar as the mind was influenced by them, I resolved at length to enquire whether there existed a true good, one which was capable of communicating itself and could alone affect the mind to the exclusion of all else, whether, in fact, there was something whose discovery and acquisition would afford me a continuous and supreme joy to all eternity'. (TIE 1, p. 3).

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[32] Van de Ven (2011), p.11.

[33] Nadler (1999), p. 154

[34] Since Judaism is not a 'faith', but a people with a faith, it was more than a conversion. From a Jewish perspective it was, as Hermann Cohen has called it a 'betrayal'. Spinoza turned his back on Judaism. He writes about Jews in a distant, cold, sometimes even quite hostile way. The crudest example of this is that he, a son of Jews who had to escape Spain and Portugal because of religious persecution, writes that 'it is not at all surprising that, after separating themselves from all the nations in this way, they brought the resentment of all men upon themselves, not only because of their external rites which are contrary to the rites of other nations, but also by the sign of circumcision which they zealously maintain.'(TTP III-12, p. 55) Different from Maimonides, Spinoza did not use the gift of his extraordinary intellect to help his people to reinterpret and refine the tradition. Instead, he decided that it would be better to leave Judaism behind, and to embrace the universal philosophical religion, which he tried to popularize by presenting it as an adapted form of Christianity.

[35] Mignini (1979).

These lines are reminiscent of Descartes' *Meditations* in which he writes that he finally took the time to question whether there is a stable base for our knowledge.[36] Spinoza's ultimate goal, however, is not of an epistemological but of a religious nature. He seeks 'the preservation of our being' (TIE 7, p. 4), meaning salvation or lasting happiness.[37] This salvation is found in the supreme good: 'the union which the mind has with the whole of Nature' (TIE 13, p. 6).

Spinoza in this youthful work writes 'Nature' and not 'God'. This could be interpreted as a sign of Spinoza's anti-religious naturalism. One could read 'the preservation of our being' then simply as the best way to survive, comparable to something that Hobbes might have written. This purely naturalistic interpretation, however, becomes highly unlikely if we read the seriousness with which Spinoza approaches the subject. For, he describes the normal situation in which he finds himself in as a 'disease' that is in desperate need for a 'cure': 'For I saw that my situation was one of great peril and that I was obliged to seek a remedy with all my might, however uncertain it might be, like a sick man suffering from a fatal malady who, foreseeing certain death unless a remedy is forthcoming, is forced to seek it, however uncertain it be, with all his might, for therein lies all his hope' (TIE 7, p. 4).

Spinoza not only wants to achieve this union of the mind with the entirety of nature, he wants to do what he can in order that 'many can acquire it along with me' (TIE 14, p. 6). In other words, Spinoza wants to convert as many people as possible to his religious outlook. This is the main task to which he devoted the rest of his short life.

The Theme in All His Works

That Spinoza's philosophical-religious project is about finding salvation is confirmed by the last chapters of the *Short Treatise on the Improvement of the Intellect*, which Spinoza presumably wrote between 1660 and 1662.[38] Therein he speaks of 'our blessedness' which consists out of the mind's union with God, established by the knowledge of God that leads to the love of God (ST 2-22, p. 94). This union with God saves us from death (ST 2-23, p. 95), and gives us joy in God and peace of mind. (ST 2-24, p. 96). In 1665 Spinoza writes to Blyenbergh that 'our supreme blessedness consists in love towards God, and that this love flows necessarily from the knowledge of God that is so heartily urged on us' (Letter 21, p. 823).

In the fourth chapter of the *Theological-Political Treatise*, written between 1665 and 1669[39], it is stated that 'since all our knowledge and the certainty which truly takes away all doubt depends

[36] Descartes (1996), p. 17-23.
[37] De Dijn (2009), p. 25-43
[38] Steenbakkers (2011), p. 343.
[39] Ibid, p. 347.

on a knowledge of God alone, and since without God nothing can be nor be conceived, and since we are in doubt about everything as long as we have no clear and distinct idea of God, it follows that our highest good and perfection depends on a knowledge of God alone' (TTP IV-3, p. 59). In other words, we are in need of salvation by means of acquiring knowledge of God, because otherwise we are lost in continuous doubt.

However, for the people who find it too difficult to have a clear knowledge of God, there is also another path to salvation. The simple, but true moral teachings of Scripture that can be understood by everyone. These can, Spinoza writes in chapter 7 of the TTP, likewise lead us to 'true salvation and blessedness', which consists in 'true contentment of mind' [*vera salus et beatitudo in vera animi acquiescentia consistit*] (TTP VII-17, p. 111).

Spinoza worked on his *Ethics* from the early 1660s till 1675[40]. But during this period his most fundamental philosophical-religious teaching remained the same. The *Ethics* ends by naming 'all the remedies [*remedia*] for the emotions' (E-Vp20s, p. 373) that toss us about 'like the waves of the sea when driven by contrary winds, unsure of the outcome of our fate' (E-IIIp59s, p. 310). Again we find here the imagery of disease from which we need to be cured, something that is also described as a form of slavery from which we need to be freed. And again the ultimate cure (or the ultimate freedom) consists in 'the knowledge of God', which 'begets love for something immutable and eternal (…), which we can truly possess (…), and which cannot be defiled by any of the faults that are to be found in the common sort of love, but can continue to grow more and more (…) and engage the greatest part of the mind (…) and pervade it' (E-Vp21s, p. 373). Our blessedness consists then in 'the constant and eternal love toward God', which 'properly can be called spiritual contentment' [*animi acquiescentia*] (E-Vp36s, p. 379).

In the final two years of his life, Spinoza worked on the *Political Treatise*.[41] He died on 21 February 1677, only 44 years old, before he could finish the work. Although the theme of 'religion' is less present in the TP, Spinoza also in this work states that 'the more a man loves God (…) the more he is free' (TTP III-22, p. 689).

To conclude, what I see in Spinoza's adult life – from his expulsion from the Jewish community onwards - is one persistent effort to formulate for himself true religion, and to convince others to embrace the knowledge and love of God as their highest good, because this is the path to salvation. This is, however, certainly not how others have perceived Spinoza's life works.

[40] Ibid, p. 351.
[41] Ibid, p. 355.

2.3. The Debate on Spinoza's Perceived Atheism

That Spinoza's rational, almost 'scientific' philosophy is at the very same time also a religion has always been a bitter pill to swallow for theists and atheists alike. Theists find many of the features of this philosophical religion – God is not a person, he did not create the universe out of nothing, he does not have a free will, and he is not interested in good and evil – to stand in outright opposition to what they believe revelation and upright tradition teaches as pertaining to the essence of 'religion'.[42] Atheists, on the other hand, as they embrace the teachings that the theists abhor, shy away from taking seriously the role of the search for salvation, the importance of the knowledge of God, and the idea that man knows he is eternal. Therefore, it seems as if this one question – was Spinoza an atheist or a 'God-intoxicated man? – has to be debated over and over again.

Pantheismusstreit

In 1785 German's celebrated poet, Johann Wolfgang von Goethe wrote a letter to the polemical anti-Enlightenment writer, Friedrich Heinrich Jacobi. Although Goethe and Jacobi were friends, they disagreed on the status of Spinoza. Jacobi started the *Pantheismusstreit* in Germany in the 1780's by publishing the accusation that Gottfried Ephraim Lessing[43] on his deathbed had confessed: 'Es gibt keine andere philosophie als die Philosophie des Spinoza'.[44] In his discussion with Lessing Jacobi 'argued that Spinoza's philosophy demonstrated that any attempt to proceed on the basis of reason alone inevitably resulted in a completely deterministic and fatalistic system that denied both the possibility of human freedom and the existence of a personal divinity'.[45]

By exposing one of the most celebrated advocates of the Enlightenment as a hidden Spinozist, and in making Spinozism equivalent to atheist materialism (for Jacobi interpreted Spinoza's *Deus cive Natura* as the idea that there is nothing except extended substance), Jacobi made clear where the whole Enlightenment would result in: materialist atheism. Goethe, however, strongly disagreed with his friend Jacobi on the interpretation of Spinoza, writing in his

[42] Copleston (1985), p. 245 and p. 262-263.
[43] Gottfried Ephraim Lessing was the author of the play *Nathan, der Weise* (1779), celebrating a sense of inter-faith toleration and friendship. In the play the main character, Nathan, is based on Lessing's close friend, the Jewish philosopher Moses Mendelssohn. Mendelssohn would a few years later, in his philosophical work, *Jerusalem* (1783) advocate religious tolerance. In the first part of *Jerusalem* Mendelssohn argued for freedom of religion. In the second part he plead for a transformation of the Jewish religion, abandoning the notion of rabbinic jurisdiction and submitting themselves to the authority of secular law. Menselssohn is remembered as the main contributor to the Jewish Enlightenment, the *Haskala*.
[44] Jacobi (2000), p. 22. 'His [Jacobi's] battle cry, which he first directed at the defenders of Enlightenment rationalism and then at Kant and his successors, was that 'consistent philosophy is Spinozist, hence pantheist, fatalist and atheist'. The formula had the effect of bringing Spinoza to the centre of the philosophical discussion of the day.' Giovanni (2016).
[45] Schmidt (1996), p. 12.

letter: 'He [Spinoza] does not prove the existence of God, but rather that existence is God. And if others for that reason inveigh against him as *Atheum*, I would like to call him *theissimum* and even *christianissimum* and praise him for it'.[46]

The great German philosophers, Kant and Hegel among them, felt obliged to react to the controversy that Jacobi had started. Their philosophical systems, in a very fundamental sense, can be seen as attempts to purify the philosophy of the Enlightenment from Spinoza, who, *hineininterpretierend*, was understood as the one who started the Enlightenment.[47] Not that they wanted to save the reputation of the Enlightenment from Spinoza's perceived atheism, for what influenced their ideas on Spinoza most was the account given of it by Herder, and Herder had quite convincingly refuted Jacobi's interpretation of Spinoza's philosophy as constituting mere atheism, demonstrating that Spinoza rather had to be considered 'an enthusiast' about God.[48] The philosophical systems of Kant and Hegel were therefore not really motivated by an attempt to overcome Spinozism as atheism, but rather by an attempt to overcome Spinozism as 'theocentrism', replacing it for philosophical systems in which not God, but man had to play the key role.[49]

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[46] Goethe's letter to Jacobi, dated June 9, 1785. Cited in Prandhi, Julie D. 1993. '*Dare to be Happy!: A Study of Goethe's Ethics'*. University Press of America, p. 19.

[47] Macherey (2011), p. 13, 14. 'For Hegel, everything begins with the realization that there is something exceptional and inescapable in Spinoza's philosophy. "Spinoza constitutes such a crucial point for modern philosophy that we might say in effect that there is a choice between Spinoza's philosophy and no philosophy at all *du hast entweder den Spinozismus oder keine Philosophie*" (…) For Hegel (…) Spinoza occupies the position of a precursor: something begins with him. (…) Spinoza's oeuvre is significant because it tends towards something that it does not achieve: to master its meaning is to follow this tendency beyond the limits that impede it, that is, to surpass it, by resolving its internal contradictions.'

[48] See: Lord (2010), p. 57, and Herder (1940), p 95: 'It is plain on every page that he [Spinoza] is no atheist. For him the idea of God is the first and last, yes, I might even say the only idea of all, for on it he bases knowledge of the world and of nature, consciousness of self and of all things around him, his ethics and his politics. Without the idea of God, his mind has no power, not even to conceive of itself. (…) He places all mankind's perfection, virtue and blessedness in the knowledge and love of God. And that this is not some sort of mask which he has assumed, but rather his deepest feeling, is shown by his letters, yes, I might even say, by every part of his philosophical system, by every line of his writings. Spinoza may have erred in a thousand ways about the idea of God, but how readers of his works could ever say that he denied the idea of God and proved atheism, is incomprehensible to me.'

[49] Krop (2018), p. 5. Translated by me. '(…) the contradiction between Kant and Spinoza cannot be bridged. The reason is the incompatibility of their respective notions of freedom. The theocratic perspective of Spinoza opposes the idea of human autonomy, because in Kant this is the starting point from both a theoretical as well as a practical point of view.'
In the case of Hegel this move from philosophical theocentrism to philosophical anthropocentrism becomes clear from Hegel's attempt to oppose the idea of Spinoza as an atheist, by simultaneously promoting the interpretation of Spinoza as a Jew with an 'oriental intuition': 'In oriental thought, the principal relationship is as follows: the single substance is as such the true, and the individual himself is without value (…)' Hegel cited in Macherey (2011)., p. 20. See also: Montag (2014), p. 92

How the Accusation Became a Sign of Admiration

In the twentieth century we find Spinoza scholars of name and fame declare that 'the charge of atheism, constantly flung at him in the eighteenth century, has gone out of fashion'.[50] Well, not anymore, did Walter Eckstein respond in 1943, since this charge of atheism 'constitutes the main content of a recently published book, *Spinoza and Religion* by Elmer E. Powell [published in 1941]. The thesis of this book is that Spinoza, an atheist at heart, (…) cloak[ed] his atheistic philosophy in the phraseology of religion'.[51]

How recognizable is this theory that Spinoza concealed his atheism, five years before Leo Strauss published *How to Study Spinoza's Theologico-Political Treatise* and sixty years before Jonathan Israel's *Radical Enlightenment* appeared. Of course, the idea has deeper roots, since it was already put to the fore by the Cartesian philosopher, Lambertus van Velthuysen in 1671, one year after the anonymous publication of the *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus*. Van Velthuysen claimed that the author of the TTP 'prompts atheism by stealth (…) teaching sheer atheism with furtive and disguised arguments'. (Letter 42, p. 877, 878).[52] This interpretation of Spinoza as an atheist in disguise has been revived in the twentieth century. As it was revived, it also slowly changed from an 'accusation' at the beginning of the twentieth century into a sign of 'admiration' at the start of the twenty-first as Spinoza became in the historical epos of Jonathan Israel the exemplar for all subsequent 'Enlightenment Heroes'.[53]

2.4. Spinoza's Metaphysics: God or Nature

In order to see whether Spinoza should be called an atheist or a religious man, I will look at three dimensions of religion in Spinoza's thought: namely the metaphysical dimension, the ethical dimension and the mystical dimension as they become manifest in his main work, the Ethics. It is not immediately clear how Spinoza's metaphysics, laid out in *Ethics* 1, can be read as the worldview of an atheist. God, Spinoza writes, not merely exists, but *God exists necessarily*. God cannot be conceived other than existing, because he has existence as its essence. (E-Ip11, p. 222).

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[50]Gebhardt (2009), p. 339: 'Goethe hat Spinoza als den *philosophus theissimus* gepriesen, Schleiermacher bezeugt, daß er *voll Religion* gewesen, Novalis erkännt daß er *die Theologie zum Sitz aller intelligenz gemacht*. Seitdem ist der religiöse Charakter der spinozanischen Philosophie von niemandem, auch ihren Bestreitern nicht, verkannt worden, und immer deutlicher hat sich die Unmöglichkeit erwiesen, die *Ethik* Spinozas mit der Erkenntnistheorie Descartes' oder der Methodologie Bacon's unter ein und denselben Begriff der Philosophie slechthin zu subsumieren.'
Eckstein (1943), p.153. I searched, but I couldn't find 'the short biography', published by Pollock a 'few years ago' [meaning a few years before 1943] where Eckstein cites from. It could not have been Frederick Pollock's magisterial *Spinoza, His Life and Philosophy*, because this biography was published by C. Kegan Paul & Co in 1880 and is almost 500 pages long.

[51] Eckstein (1943), p.153.

[52] In 3.2. the reader can find more on Van Velthuysen's criticism and Spinoza's reaction to it.

[53] Israel (2010), p. 944.

'A philosopher who spends so much space and careful argument to establish the absurdity of any form of denial of God's existence can hardly be accused of atheism with any justice'. [54] In order to interpret this as the view of an atheist one has to say that Spinoza's God is not the real God. Spinoza only used the word 'God' as an appeasing term, while he actually has materialist Nature in mind.

Spinoza's Reply to a Question of Oldenburg

In December 1675, Spinoza answered a request from Henry Oldenburg, secretary of the British Society with whom Spinoza had corresponded since 1661.[55] Oldenburg had asked him 'to elucidate and moderate those passages in the *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus* which have proved a stumbling block to readers'. The passages that particularly worried readers, Oldenburg had written, are 'those which appear to treat in an ambiguous way of God and Nature, which many people consider you have confused with each other'. (Letter 71, p. 940).

Spinoza replied:

> 'I entertain an opinion on God and Nature[56] far different from that which modern Christians are wont to uphold. For I maintain that God is the immanent cause, as the phrase goes, of all things, and not the transitive cause.[57] All things, I say, are in God, and move in God, and this I affirm together with Paul[58] and perhaps together with all ancient philosophers[59], though expressed in a different way, and I would even venture to say, together with all the ancient Hebrews[60], as far as may be conjectures from certain traditions, though these have suffered much corruption. However, as to the view of certain people that the *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus* rests on the identification of God with nature (by the latter of which they understand a kind of mass or corporeal matter) they are quite mistaken'.[61]

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[54] Harris (1973), p. 46.
[55] De Dijn (2008), p. 127: 'Nature which is being equated with God is not the collection of all things, or the universe, but *Natura Naturans*, the ultimate cause which has produced *Natura Naturata* as its effect (E-Ip29s).'
[56] They resumed their correspondence after a gap in their correspondence of about ten years, as there seems to have been no exchange of letters between 1665 and 1675.
[57] If God is the immanent cause of all things, everything is in God and remains in God, and everything flows naturally from the nature of God. If God is pictured as the transient cause of all things, God would be outside everything as the Creator of the universe.
[58] Spinoza might refer here to Paul's Letter to the Colossians 1-17: 'He Himself is before all things and in Him all things hold together'. Or to Paul's Letter to the Corinthians 8-6 'yet for us there is one God, the Father, from whom are all things and for whom we exist'.
[59] This is most clear for the Stoic tradition. 'Stoicism presents the doctrine of an immanent divine, which is only a small step to the renowned Spinozistic assertion that God is nature.' De Brabander (2007), p. 10. See also Aristotle (1998), Book 12, Chapters 6 till 10 where Aristotle argues that there must be an eternal substance which is the source of everything that exists and everything that thinks.
[60] In Judaism's central prayer, the Schema it is stated that there is only one God. This is often interpreted as stating that there is in fact only one thing - that is, God. There is nothing besides God.
[61] Letter 73, p. 942. Italics are not in the original.

Panentheism: Everything is in God

As Spinoza in this letter to Oldenburg explains, he understands himself as belonging and still standing in an old tradition. This is the tradition of monotheism: there is only one God. There is, however, a key difference between his conception of monotheism and the idea of this one God that most people have: God is not conceived by him as something external, something which is separated, and which stands apart from us. God is not the creator of the universe that has created everything out of nothing at a certain moment in time, because the whole of reality is contained in God and is continuously flowing out of God. The most important proposition of the *Ethics* for understanding Spinoza's idea of God is: 'Whatever is, is in God, and nothing can be or be conceived without God'. (E-Ip15, p. 224).

This proposition states, first of all, that there cannot be anything outside God. We can imagine God as a force among forces, but then we do not possess a clear understanding of God. For, outside God there is nothing, as everything is in God. Of course, this can be easily misunderstood. It is not the case that God is in any part of reality in the sense that we could say 'God is this particular extended thing' or 'God is this particular idea', since these are merely modes of God. But these modes – these things and ideas – are 'in God' in the sense that they are natural things that exist and act, because of the power of God or Nature that makes them exist and act in a certain determinate way. Everything is in God means that God or Nature provides the ground for everything there is.

From this it can be deduced, secondly, that nothing can be without God, and that, thirdly, nothing can be conceived without God. All things we know from empirical experience are in God in the sense that everything that we know in this way exists in extended space. Likewise, all things we know from rational thought are conceived in God in the sense that all things are adequately understood by the infinite intellect of which an adequate idea of an individual human mind is but a part.

God's Necessary Existence

But why would God exist? God exists necessarily, because he is a substance. A substance does not depend on anything for its existence. Nothing can prevent God from existing. The presupposition of Spinoza's system seems to be that there needs to be a ground for everything there is.

This principle of sufficient reason[62] is also implicit in the first axiom of Spinoza's system: 'All things that are, are either in themselves or in something else'. (E-Ia1). From this first axiom already follows logically that there are only two options. Either there is something in which all things are, but which is not in something else. Or there is an infinite regress: things are then in something else, and this something else is in its turn again in something else, and this is again in something else, and so forth and so on. Spinoza must have judged that the second option – an infinite regress - is absurd, because then there will not be a ground for the entire series to come into existence. This means that all things are either God, which is an independently existing substance, or they are modifications, that is, they are dependent on God for their existence.

The second axiom states: 'That which cannot be conceived through another thing must be conceived through itself'. (E-Ia2). This is an important presupposition of Spinoza: all things are understandable, because not only all extended things, but also all adequate ideas, are in God, either as attributes of substance or as modifications of substance. When we relate an idea to other finite modifications of substance we conceive something through another finite thing. We can also understand this finite thing as a modification of one of the attributes of substance, namely thought. In both cases we understand things through God. Without God we would not be able to understand anything. Whatever we understand are either modifications of God or the essence of God itself.

Understanding the Definition of God

God is formally defined by Spinoza as 'an absolute infinite being, that is, substance consisting of infinite attributes, each of which expresses eternal and infinite essence'. (E-Id6, p. 217). Let me try to explain the different components of this definition – 'substance', 'infinite', 'attribute', 'essence', and 'eternal' – one by one. God is 'substance' means that God's existence does not depend on any other thing than itself: 'Existence belongs to the nature of substance'. (E-Ip7, p. 219). God in this respect is unique. All things exist by virtue of causes that enable it to exist, and on which the existence of these things depends. But this is not the case with regard to God: his existence does not depend on any other thing than God himself. This is why Spinoza calls God a *causa sui*, a cause of itself.

Substance and Modes

According to Spinoza's metaphysics only two things exist: God as a reality that exists and is conceived in itself, and the modifications of God or all the things that are in God in the sense

[62] Lin (2017)

that they exist and can be conceived through God.[63] (Spinoza also calls God or the one substance that exists in itself *Natura naturans* or 'naturing nature', and the modifications that exist in God *Natura naturata* or 'natured nature'.) Everything in God or Nature happens according to necessary laws that come forth out of the nature or essence of God.

Now, the modifications of God's attributes are again divided by Spinoza into three different kinds: there are infinite immediate modes, there are infinite mediate modes, and there are finite modes (E-Ip21 till E-Ip23p. 230-232).

Finite modes are easiest to understand: these are all the objects and all the ideas that we find in reality. Our bodies and our minds are both finite modifications of respectively the attribute of extension and the attribute of thought. The infinite immediate mode of the attribute of thought is the infinite intellect, the infinite immediate mode in the attribute of extension is motion and rest, and the infinite mediate modification in the attribute of extension is 'the face of the whole universe, which, although varying in infinite ways, yet remains the same'. Spinoza strangely enough does not mention what would be the infinite mediate modification of the attribute of thought (Letter 64, p. 919).

Infinite, Attribute, Essence

A quite complex concept is that of the 'infinite'.[64] In the *Ethics*, Spinoza distinguishes the thing that is 'absolutely infinite' from the thing that is 'infinite in its kind' (E-I Definition 6 ex., p. 217). God is an 'absolute infinite being' in that there is absolutely nothing besides God, which of course also means that there is nothing that could limit God. This much is clear.

But it is unclear what Spinoza means writing that God as substance 'contains infinite attributes'. Does he mean: a) that God has an infinite amount of attributes, meaning that there cannot be an attribute which doesn't belong to God; b) that God contains attributes that are infinite in the sense that each attribute is infinite in its own kind?

I believe that both of these interpretations are true. In order to understand this, we first have to explain attributes. 'By attribute I mean that which the [infinite] intellect perceives of substance as constituting its essence'.[65] (E-I Definition 4, p. 217). Spinoza states that the human mind is

[63] Newlands (2018)

[64] Spinoza states in his letter to Lodewijk Meijer that 'the infinite' can be distinguished in four different ways, allowing for eight (!) different descriptions of what 'infinite' means: as that 1) which is infinite by virtue of its nature or 2) as that which is infinite by nature of its definition; as 3) that which is infinite by virtue of its essence or that 4) which is infinite by virtue of its cause; as that 5) which is infinite because it is unlimited or that 6) which is unlimited because it cannot be equated with any number; that 7) which is called unlimited by the intellect or that 8) which is called unlimited by the imagination. (Letter 12, p. 787)

[65] There are also two interpretations of attribute: in the subjective interpretation of Hegel and Wolfson attributes are understood *by the human mind* to be the essence of substance; in the objective interpretation attributes of Gueroult are

only capable of understanding two attributes of God (Letter 64, p. 918): thought and extension (E-IIp1 and E-IIp2, p. 245). Now, these two attributes – thought and extension – are infinite in their kind in that extension or space spreads out and knows of no limits, and the same applies to thought. It is impossible to understand an extended object which does not participate in the attribute extension. And, likewise, it is impossible to understand an adequate idea that does not participate in the attribute thought. Also, inadequate ideas of the imagination participate in the attribute thought, only they do so in a partial and mutilated way in the sense that they are partly directly participating in God and partly indirectly, in that some other thing that is in God makes them think this way. Because not all the ideas that are in the human mind participate directly in the infinite mind of God, it is possible for humans to be more or less united with God. If this were not the case, we would always experience the perfect unity with God.

Why are the attributes infinite in their kind? Because it is possible to understand things that are outside thought, which makes the attribute of thought not 'absolutely infinite'. An extended object, for example, does not belong to thought, and in this way the attribute is limited. And, likewise, thoughts do not belong to extension, which makes these two attributes not absolutely infinite, but 'infinite in their kind'. (E-Id2, p. 217).

In order to explain why each attribute expresses infinite essence, we first have to understand what Spinoza means by essence. This again is a difficult topic.[66] However, what is clear is that it belongs to the essence, that is, the nature of God, to exist. 'God's essence is his existence' means that God cannot be adequately conceived as non-existing. But Spinoza also states: 'God's power is his very essence'. (E-Ip34, p. 238). God's 'essence' not only equals 'existence', but also equals 'power'.[67] Therefore, when Spinoza writes that God's attributes express infinite essence, he means that God's attributes express the absolutely infinite power, which makes that everything exists and also persists in its being.

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understood *by the infinite mind of God* to be the essence of substance. I hold the objective interpretation to be true, because otherwise attributes would depend on a finite mode (namely the human mind). It seems to me that Spinoza must have held that a finite mode such as the human mind depends on the attribute of thought, and not the other way around. See: Van Bunge (2012) p. 22-23 and Shein (2013).

[66] Michael Della Rocca has written that Spinoza is hopelessly contradictory on the issue of whether there are shared essences or that each individual thing has its own essence: Della Rocca (2004), p. 132. Karolina Hübner has argued that we can solve the problem by stating that finite, particular things possess unique essences, whereas shared essences only exist in finite minds and are produced by the imagination: Hübner (2015), p. 58-88. Some have suggested two kinds of modal essences: actual essences that are unique to the individual mode and formal essences which can be shared by different individual things, making that "human nature" exists, but that there is also something like "the nature of hope" or "the nature of a circle": Martin (2008), p. 489-509.

[67] An attribute is that which is conceived by the intellect 'as constituting its essence', and since Spinoza writes 'God's power is his very essence' (E-Ip34) it seems logical that God's power is also an attribute of God. But this is not the case. Just as that 'existence' is not an attribute of God, while 'Existence [just as well] belongs to the nature of substance' (E 1-7), and God is a substance. From this I conclude that Spinoza confines the meaning of attributes to aspects of God that are infinite in their kind, whereas 'power' and 'existence' are absolutely infinite.

The Power of God

No finite mode has to exist *necessarily*. Surely, it could be the case that triangles, fish, and men would not exist. That they, however, do exist is due to the fact that their existence and their essence flow with necessity from the nature of God. God, namely, has existence as his essence. This is the power of God: he necessarily exists and by his existence he makes it possible that all other things exist. 'From the necessity of the divine nature there must follow infinite things in infinite ways [*modis*] (that is, everything that can come within the scope of infinite intellect). (E-Ip16, p. 227).

All things, in so far as they exist, share in this power of God. They all have an essence that comes forth out of the essence of God. The essence of such particular things defines them positively in a determinate way. This is to say that all things do what their nature, which is the power of God, determines them to do. This, Spinoza calls the 'conatus' or the supreme law of nature, which makes all things endeavor to persist in their being. (E 1-24 till 29 and E 2-6 till 9; see also TP 2-2). It is the conatus which makes an individual that consists out of multiple parts act as if it were a unity, striving to persists in its being. The *conatus* is the central doctrine in connecting Spinoza's metaphysics to his psychology, his ethics and his politics.[68]

Time and Eternity

God is eternal, because existence pertains to his essence. (E-I Definition 8, p. 217). God cannot not be. He is and will always be. Eternity in Spinoza's philosophy is not meant to describe a thing which endures forever, from the beginning of time till the end of time, because time itself is considered something which exists only in the imagination. Eternity should be conceived of as something which stands outside of time (E-I Definition 8, p. 217). We might visualize this if we understand time to be one of the four axes in a four-dimensional description of our universe. On this axis we can then put all the moments in time from the beginning till the end. But as we look at all these moments on the axis, they are not moving, they are an infinity of frozen moments which can all be conceived of at once. This, arguably, is how time would look from the standpoint of eternity.

A difficulty with Spinoza's understanding of time as something imaginary, and this image of eternity which I just sketched, is that 'motion and rest', according to Spinoza, are real as they are the infinite immediate mode of the attribute of extension. But how can something 'move' or 'rest'

[68] Matheron (1969), Part 1

if there is no time to measure it?[69] Maybe we can try to understand it by means of another metaphor: when watching a movie the observer experiences moving images. The person who is showing the movie knows, however, that the illusion of moving images is created by one spool of film. In every shot in the movie things are either moving quickly or more slowly or sometimes they even stand still. We can say then that 'movement and rest' are in the whole movie, as well as in all its parts, and still understand that the movie itself is in the spool that has remained the same. Just as the movie comes forth out of the spool, does the eternal immediate mode of 'motion and rest' come forth out of the attribute extension of eternal and infinite substance. And just as all shots in the movie can be considered as parts of the whole movie in which images move at different speed, so do all the finite modes in the infinite mediate mode of our universe move and rest. And so can the universe as a whole be conceived of as moving and resting in a fixed ratio.

There are in other words two levels on which we can understand 'movement and rest': on the level of the finite modes we are experiencing how all things move and rest in time as a series of durational causes and effects; on the level of the infinite modes we see movement and rest as something that is not durational, but as something that stands outside of time. For, we understand reality from the eternal, unchanging laws that cause the constant movement and rest of each thing, while the whole of reality remains the same.

Does Spinoza Have A Naturalist Conception of God?

To truly understand Spinoza's system we need to arrive at 'knowledge of God'. This knowledge cannot easily be substituted by 'knowledge of nature', without seriously altering the meaning of that word in the nowadays dominant, naturalistic understanding of it, because, as Spinoza himself explains in his letter to Oldenburg, the meaning of 'Nature' is not confined to material things alone. As 'God is a thinking thing' (E-IIp1, p. 245), also Nature must be a thinking thing. And as 'God is eternal' (E-Ip19, p. 230), also Nature should not be understood as a temporal succession of events, but as an eternal order, standing outside time, being wholly unaffected by it.

[69] See for this problem: Harris (1973), p. 101: 'Can there be motion in any sense without lapse of time?' Henri Krop has suggested to me to understand Spinoza's use of 'movement and rest' not as something that belongs to Newtonian physics in which movement is understood in terms of both space and time, or in Kantian epistemology in which space and time are considered the necessary conditions for any kind of observation, but more in relation to mathematics. Just as a circle can be adequately conceived as 'the space described by a line of which one point is fixed and the other moveable' (Letter 60, p. 913) one can describe all relationships between finite things in the attribute of extension to move from one to the other in a mathematical, timeless way.

God or Nature not only changes the meaning of the word 'God', it just as well, and just as drastically, changes the meaning of the word 'nature'.[70] As we – as finite modes – can only understand a small part of infinite and eternal attributes of substance, all that modern science can tell us about the universe will never give us God or Nature in its entirety. To grasp it, we should not use the methods of modern science, but we should come to an intellectual understanding of infinite substance itself.

Spinoza, writes Errol Harris, 'regarded phenomenal nature, what appears of the world to us through sense-perception, as for the most part the product of illusion and error. He would have certainly not identified it with God or have deified it in its phenomenal form, although he would have maintained that is was a "part" of God misconceived by us through our ignorance of its true place in the whole'.[71]

Eric Schliesser has argued that the depiction of Spinoza 'as a fellow-travelling mechanical philosopher and proto-scientific naturalist is misleading'.[72] Spinoza seems to be way more interested in self-knowledge than in the laws of physics. The highest kind of knowledge allows us to understand ourselves as eternal. Knowledge of eternity is considered way more important than knowledge of 'Measure, Time, and Number (…) [which] are nothing other than modes of thinking, or rather, modes of imagining' (Letter 12, p. 789). Nature then, according to Spinoza and different from Galilei, is not written in the language of mathematics.

That there is something 'teleological' and misleading in the depiction of Spinoza as the first modern naturalist or materialist scientist also can be found in Spinoza's ordering of the three kinds of knowledge. The lowest kind of knowledge is sense-perception. The highest kind of knowledge is not reason, but intuition.

2.5. Spinoza's Philosophical-Ethical Religion

In the *Ethics*, Spinoza uses the word 'religion' [*religio*] nine times, twice in the sense of false religion [*religio falsa*], once in connection to a historically existing religion, and six times in the positive sense of a philosophical-ethical path to salvation.[73] Spinoza comes closest to a formal definition of religion as he writes: 'Whatever we desire and do, whereof we are the cause insofar as we have the idea of God, that is, insofar as we know God, I refer [*refero*] to Religion [*religio*]'. (E-III7s1, p. 339). Spinoza doesn't define religion here. He designates something with the name 'religion'. In this way he seems to indicate that what he calls 'religion' is different from what we

[70] Pollock (1912), p. 331: 'God has not been reduced to Nature, but Nature exalted to God.'
[71] Harris (1997), p. 34-35.
[72] Schliesser (2017), p. 155-190.
[73] Juffermans (2003), p. 165.

normally call religion. But why would he name it religion? The Straussian answer is that he did this in order to make his atheist philosophy look religious. Another possibility is that he wanted to indicate that his philosophy, although different from what we normally call religion, resembles religion in so many things that we can understand this philosophy as a kind of religion.

A Religion Which makes Us Autonomous, Reasonable and Free

The kind of religion that Spinoza advocates is one in which we 'desire and do things', because we have 'knowledge of God'. How can we understand this? Well, when humans normally desire and do things, they desire and do them, because they are made to desire and do them by the fact that they are reacting to external things that are affecting their bodies (E-IVp16, p. 256; in combination with E-IVp4, p. 324).[74] However, when we understand that we are a part of God or Nature in which everything is determined by God's eternal decrees or Nature's necessary laws, and we understand that we are determined by God or Nature to try to persevere in our own being, but that we, at the same time, are being affected by many forces that make us react in ways that are not helpful in the endeavor to persevere in our own being, we arrive at another way of looking at ourselves and another way of living in the world.

To illustrate what Spinoza means here I will use an example coming from our modern times. If someone from watching a commercial gets the desire to buy the product, and as he goes on his way to buy the product, he is merely reacting to something external to him. If we live in this way, being constantly pushed around by external incentives, we are not the cause of ourselves. In that case we would also have a very inadequate idea of God, as we would only understand fragments of God in the things that our bodies stumble upon in this world. But when we come to ponder over these experiences, and the mind is not pushed to react to external incentives, but is 'determined internally', it 'perceives things from the common order of nature', as it is 'regarding several things at the same time, to understand their agreement, their differences and their oppositions' , then 'it understands things clearly and distinctly'. (E-IIp29s, p. 262).

When we understand things 'clearly and distinctly', we have adequate ideas, those are ideas that have 'all the properties (…) of a true idea' (E-IId4, p. 244), or, in other words, there is then nothing missing in our idea of something, because it is complete and perfect considered in itself, without reference to an external thing.[75] Now, the most complete and most perfect idea is the

[74] It is a mistake, according to Spinoza, to think that we can desire something, because we judge it to be good. Rather, it is the other way around: we call something good, because we desire it. (E 3-9s, p. 284) Hence, we cannot be the cause of our desires by knowing right from wrong. When Spinoza speaks about 'being the cause of oneself' he refers to something else than knowledge of good and evil.
[75] Klever (1996b), p. 97-99

idea of God, because everything is in God. As we increase our knowledge of God, and as our understanding becomes more and more complete and perfect, we become more and more the causes of our desires and acts. We no longer see an isolated event. Instead, we understand it as a part of a chain of events that is produced by the laws of nature. Or we understand it as determined by the power of God to be and act in a specific way. It is this understanding of all particular things in the context of the whole which creates peace of mind, reasonableness and love. We arrive at another state of mind in which we desire and act in a way that helps us and the people in our societies to persevere in our own being. This is what Spinoza 'refers to' as religion.

Spinoza's description of religion seems even more peculiar to us than it did to his contemporaries, because it conflicts with the way in which religion often is depicted. In the popular narrative of the "new atheists" religious people are supposed to not 'dare to think for themselves'.[76] Religious people are thought of as 'heteronomous' and 'unfree'. But Spinoza's philosophical religion is the opposite of all of that as he makes clear that this religion makes us reasonable, autonomous and free.

A Religion Focused On What We Desire and Do

Spinoza's religion is also peculiar for a second reason. In the conversations on religion I often have, for example, I find that people most often consider religion to consist out of a bunch of beliefs. A religious person in this regularly defended point of view is supposed to hold certain opinions about God, the afterlife, the human soul and a whole bunch of other things. Depending on the content of these kinds of beliefs my conversational partners think they can decide whether they can call a person 'religious' or not. But although Spinoza's religion comes forth out of 'knowledge of God, this religion shows itself not in having certain opinions, but in our intentions and in our acts. This is why Juffermans calls Spinoza's philosophical religion a philosophical-ethical path to salvation. Spinoza's religion is philosophical because the religion is about arriving at a deeper understanding – coming to the knowledge of God. But this religion is also ethical, because this understanding can only be called religious if it also shapes our desires and affects the way in which we act in the world.

Spinoza's description of religion as what we desire and do insofar as we know God is the first *scholium* to the following proposition: 'The good which every man who pursues virtue aims at for himself he will also desire for the rest of mankind, and all the more as he acquires a greater knowledge of God'. (E-IVp37, p. 339) To be religious, in other words, has in Spinoza's thinking

[76] This is of course not how Kant meant this phrase. See: Kant (1996). Cliteur has, for example, been defending this position that religion makes us less autonomous. See 7.1 on secularism for a description of his view.

something to do with pursuing virtue and with desiring something good, not only for yourself, but for everyone. [77]

How can the knowledge of God make us more virtuous? The basis of virtue is 'the very conatus to preserve one's own being' (E-IVp18s, p. 330). However, we can only preserve our own being by means of many things outside ourselves. Think of things such as air, water, food and the like. Since we are most of all dependent on other human beings, nothing helps us better in persisting in our own being than to unite with other people in a society (E-IVp18s, p. 331). Pursuing virtue means then to seek social harmony, and in order to obtain social harmony justice is needed as well as charity.

Unfortunately obtaining social harmony and political stability is often impossible as we are the victims of passive emotions. Many of these emotions drive us apart. The desire for uncertain things causes jealousy, ambition, anger, hatred, and the like. These emotions make us enemies. The more we come to be led by reason, that is, the more we obtain knowledge of God, the better we can control the passions and the better are we able to achieve social harmony.

The religious man, writes Spinoza, desires the good he wants for himself also for everyone else. Notice how this makes the religious man differ from the vulgar man who desires things like wealth, sex, glory, and fame for himself alone, and certainly not for everyone else. These uncertain desires also make people ambitious, envious, and hateful towards others who they imagine to possess what they want for themselves. In this way these desires towards uncertain goods are creating strife between men, and creating disharmony in society.

But the desire of the religious man, which is to know and to love God, is not a scarce good whose value diminishes as more people share in it. Therefore, this desire does not create strife, but peace.

A Religion that Advises Us To Do Well and Be Glad

The virtuous man 'who lives by the guidance of reason endeavors as far as he can to repay with love or nobility another's hatred, anger, contempt, etc. toward himself'. (E-IVp46, p. 345). Such a man 'hates nobody, is angry with nobody, envies nobody, is indignant with nobody, despises nobody, and is in no way prone to pride'. (E 4-73s, p. 357-358). These points 'concern the true way of life and religion', and mean that the virtuous or truly religious person, conquers hatred by returning love and that he is guided by reason to seek for others the good that he seeks for himself. He has 'this foremost in mind, that everything follows from the necessity of the divine nature, and therefore whatever he thinks of as injurious or bad, and also whatever seems impious,

[77] Juffermans (2003), p. 196-202.

horrible, unjust, and base arises from his conceiving things in a disturbed, fragmented and confused way. For this reason, his prime endeavor is to conceive of things as they are in themselves, and to remove obstacles to true knowledge, such as hatred, anger, envy, derision, pride, and similar emotions that we have noted. And so, he endeavors, as far as he can, to do well and to be glad [*bene agere et laetari*]'.

This is the shortest possible summary of Spinoza's ethical teaching: 'Do Well & Be Glad'. His philosophy wants to attain this goal and help people to become more virtuous, which also means that they become more religious, because true religion shows itself internally in peace of mind and externally in the acts of people. We become more virtuous and religious by increasing our knowledge of God. The highest kind of knowledge is to come to the realization that our finite minds participate in God's infinite intellect and are therefore eternal. (E-Vp23, p. 374)[78]

A Religion of Understanding

Spinoza emphasizes in the *Ethics* that it is first and foremost necessary to *know thyself*. Once we understand what kind of being we are, that is, once we understand how we by nature are determined to function in a particular way, we can also understand how we can function in the best way. In his description of what kind of functional being we are, Spinoza remains close to the tradition. In Aristotle we find the twofold definition of man as a thinking animal and as a social animal. As a consequence thereof, there are two kinds of life which are really fulfilling for the human being: the contemplative life in which man has perfected his theoretical reasoning capacities, and the active life in which man has perfected his practical reasoning capacities. Likewise for Spinoza, our happiness consists in two things: in perfecting our understanding and in perfecting our bonds with our fellow men.

Virtue is described by him as nothing but strength of mind [*fortitudo*], which is the mind exercising understanding. The only thing which is truly good is to understand things. (E-IVp27, p. 334). This main virtue is subdivided by Spinoza into courage [*animositas*] and nobility [*generositas*]. Courage he defines as 'the desire whereby every individual endeavors to preserve his own being according to the dictates of reason alone'. Nobility he defines as 'the desire whereby every individual, according to the dictates of reason alone, endeavors to assist others and make friends with them'. (E-IIIp59s, p. 310). The best life, for the ancients as well as for Spinoza, is a life led by reason. It is reason that shows that humans have to perfect themselves as thinking beings and as social beings.

[78] Juffermans (2003), p. 239-241

Juffermans has outlined how Spinoza's description of virtue at the end of *Ethics* 3 is mirrored in his description of religion in E-IVp37s2.[79] Just as strength of mind falls apart in acting rationally out of one's own self-interest and acting rationally out of care for the other person, so does religion subdivide in 'piety' [*pietas*] on the one hand, which is 'the desire to do good which derives from our living by the guidance of reason' and sense of honor [*honestas*] on the other hand, which consists out of 'the desire to establish friendships with others, a desire which characterizes the man who lives by the guidance of reason'. (E-IVp37s1, p. 339). Religion and ethics both lead us then to the cultivation of what the Aristotle would have called theoretical wisdom and practical wisdom.

A Religion that Focuses on This Life

The final two propositions of the *Ethics* make clear that for Spinoza the knowledge of our own eternity is not the most important thing. His focus lies on salvation *in this present life*. 'Even if we did not know that our mind is eternal, we would still regard as being of prime importance piety and religion (…)' (E-Vp41, p. 381). In its most important sense 'salvation' means being liberated from the slavery of the passions in order to lead a life in which we love God and our neighbor. In other words, a life in which we 'do well and be glad', not because we are expecting a reward for this behavior in an afterlife, but because we come to realize that the reward of virtue is virtue itself. (E-Vp42, p. 382)

Spinoza's primary endeavor is to show people the way to an ethical and religious life. But to obtain this life is not a matter of the will. For, there is no such thing as a free will. It is a matter of arriving at a new and higher understanding of the world. It is by means of the *knowledge* of God that we can find salvation.

2.6. Salvation Through Knowledge of God in the *Ethics*

Because Spinoza spent his life in the pursuit of something he called 'salvation', which he hoped to achieve by means of something he called 'knowledge of God' one could argue that in fact the burden of proof lies with those who claim that Spinoza was not a religious man, but an atheist. However, as can be argued against this point of view, it is not enough merely to cite Spinoza's words, as his habit was to give existing words another meaning.[80] In order to understand the meaning of Spinoza's words, we have to reconstruct them within the context of his philosophical system. This is what I will try do this in this section as I will analyze the meaning of the words

[79] Juffermans (2003), p. 196-202
[80] Jongeneelen (2001), p. 11-128

'salvation' and 'knowledge of God'. I will discuss these things mainly by following the overall structure of Spinoza's main work, the *Ethics*, but sometimes also the discussion will turn to parts of the *Theological-Political Treatise* that deal with the same subject.

Salvation

Salvation in Spinoza's philosophy is described in three different ways. It can be used in a purely physical sense of 'living securely and in good health'. In order to achieve this goal you most of all need good government and good laws. It can be used in an emotional-political sense in controlling the passions, 'that is to acquire the habit of virtue'. (TTP III-5, p. 45) (This is also political, because controlling the passions leads to both *peace* of mind as well as to *peace* in the state.) And it can be used intellectually as the intellectual love of God.

Salvation in This Life and Eternal Salvation

What exactly Spinoza meant by salvation remains a matter of considerable debate in the secondary literature.[81] That Spinoza changes – one could also say 'naturalizes' – the meaning of the word 'salvation' in order to include also a meaning of it which simply has to do with leading a happy life on this earth, can be used as an argument for the ones who hold that he was a 'closet-atheist'.

The Need For Salvation

However, one could also say that most (contemporary) atheists seem to deny what Spinoza affirms here, namely that humans are in need of salvation.[82] This follows from Spinoza's account of our normal life which is, although it is (most often) described in detached terms, quite gloomy.[83] By nature we are all inclined to superstition, which means that we are forced by nature

[81] The main problem here is that Spinoza seems to give two different accounts of salvation: one by means of adequate understanding in the *Ethics* 5-36S and one in the TTP XIV and 15 by means of obedience alone. The debate in the secondary literature centers therefore on the question whether these two accounts can be reconciled. Sylvain Zac has maintained that philosophy or the natural theology described in the *Ethics* is the true path to salvation: Zac (1965), p. 230. Rice (1994) agrees with Alexandre Matheron and Douglas den Uyl that the obedience of the *Treatise* is compatible, though a lesser kind of obedience than the one in the *Ethics*. See on this same issue also: Matheron (1971), Chapter 3. Michael Rosenthal and Douglas den Uyl make a distinction between salvation and blessedness. Den Uyl believes that '[p]hilosophy is the road to blessedness, religion to salvation', Den Uyl (1999), p. 152. Rosenthal: 'The purpose of outer religion [a religion based on ceremonial laws] is to achieve salvation (rather than blessedness), which is nothing other than the good of the body secured through secure and healthy living.' Rosenthal (2001), p. 50. Angela Roothaan, on the other hand, maintains that salvation by means of obedience alone is not of a lesser kind than obedience by means of the third kind of knowledge. Both equally lead to salvation or blessedness. Roothaan (1996), p. 54.

[82] In 2009 there were 30 buses driving around London for a month carrying the slogan, meant to propagate a peaceful and uplifting atheist message: 'There's probably no god. Now stop worrying and enjoy your life'.

[83] See E-IIIp59s and TTP Preface for a distant yet gloomy account of the natural state of man as being the slave of the passions.

to desire uncertain goods, which will have the effect on us that our feelings will fluctuate, making us oscillate all the time between happiness and sadness, hope and fear and pride and self-abasement. This in its turn will make us search desperately for some good omens that can give us false assurance, making us more superstitious and less accountable to reason. The emotions that badger us in this way, make us enemies of our own true interest and of each other, 'for by the laws of appetite, everyone is drawn in different directions' (TTP XVI-5, p. 198). Passions such as envy, hatred and the desire to take revenge make our societies very unstable. If we want to live in peace and if we desire not to be constantly swayed around by our passions – which we want, because we desire to be preserved in our own being – then we also want to be saved.

The Path to Salvation

The path to salvation, outlined in the *Ethics*, is one which starts with God or metaphysics (part 1), goes on to deal with the human being and human knowledge, or philosophical anthropology and epistemology (part 2), proceeds by explaining the emotions or human psychology (part 3), then describes ethics or the knowledge of good and evil (part 4) to end in a description of our freedom, salvation or blessedness (part 5). The procedure that Spinoza follows is telling, in that it makes him more of a classic than a modern. Descartes is often called the first modern philosopher, because his philosophy starts with an epistemological question (How can we know for sure?) and not with a metaphysical question (What kind of things exist?). Spinoza's philosophy, however, is more traditional in this regard that it starts with a metaphysical account and then moves on to discuss epistemology.

In Spinoza's epistemology the three kinds of knowledge occupy a central place.[84] These three kinds of knowledge are clearly connected to the three different ways in which we exist: 1) as finite modes that are being affected by other finite modes (it is then that we know things by the first kind of knowledge or the imagination); 2) as finite modes that are part of infinite modes (it is then that we understand things by means of the second kind of knowledge or reason); and 3) as modifications of divine attributes (it is then that we can immediately grasp things by means of the third kind of knowledge or the intuition).

The First Kind of Knowledge

Let me describe the three kinds of knowledge one by one with somewhat more care and attention in order to better understand how *knowledge* of God leads to salvation and because they

[84] Spinoza described the three kinds of knowledge with some minor differences in TIE 19, p. 7; ST 2-1, p. 62-63 and E-IIp40s2, p. 267.

are so central for understanding Spinoza's philosophical system. Most important for understanding Spinoza's philosophy, I find, is his theory of the imagination. This is why I have taken some more time to describe it.

Affections of the Body

In the *Ethics* Spinoza starts to discuss the first of the three kinds of knowledge - the imagination - in a series of propositions that deal with the human body. The first and most important of these propositions, dedicated to the body is: 'The object of the idea constituting the human mind is the body – i.e., a definite mode of extension actually existing, and nothing else'. (E IIp13, p. 251) The human mind is the idea of the body. On the lowest level this means that the mind registers the ways in which the body is being affected by other bodies. As the mind not only registers, but also memorizes these affections, it becomes a kind of knowledge in which one can understand new experiences in light of the old experiences. In associating a new thing that the body encounters with an old thing that the body has encountered in the past, the mind actually regards as present something that does no longer exist.

But it is not only things from the past that we imagine to still be here. It are all these things that make our minds understand reality as if it were in a continuous flux, passing moments in time. We imagine things when we look back in time, and we imagine things when we understand them to be in the here and now, and we imagine things to be in the future, as 'nobody doubts that time, too, is a product of the imagination' (E-IIp44s, p. 269). To obtain adequate knowledge means to conceive things to stand outside time, corresponding to eternal laws of nature or existing and acting out of the eternal nature of that particular thing. Spinoza writes: 'to retain the usual terminology, we will assign the word "images" [*imagines*] to those affections of the human body the ideas of which set forth external bodies as if they were present to us (…). And when the mind regards bodies in this way, we shall say that it imagines *[imagines]*. (E-IIp17s, p. 257)

Incomplete Representations

With introducing the imagination Spinoza starts his analysis of error. However, he immediately notes that the imagination in itself contains no error. The imagination is not untrue, but incomplete. An example that Spinoza gives to illustrate this point is that we think that we have free will, because we experience ourselves as making certain choices in life. There is nothing wrong with this knowledge in itself, but what is lacking from it are the causes that make us decide this or that. Another example which Spinoza gives is that the sun appears to us to be not too big and not too far away. There is nothing wrong with this knowledge in itself as this is how the sun

presents itself to our senses, but what is missing is the knowledge that the sun actually is very far away from us and extremely large, and what is also missing is the knowledge which reveals the ways in which the senses work (E-IIp35s, p. 264). The first kind of knowledge is characterized, not by its falsity, but by its incompleteness.

Associations

To understand something by means of the imagination is to associate certain words or certain images with other words and other images. Spinoza gives the example of a Roman who, from hearing the sound 'ponum', immediately thinks of an apple, just because his body has been trained to associate the sound of this word with that particular thing. Similarly the mind of a soldier, who sees the tracks of a horse in the sand, will think of a rider and from there to war and so on, whereas a famer, seeing the same tracks, will think of a plough and from there to a piece of land and so forth (E-IIp18s, p. 258). That the mind is able to do this, is not a weakness, but a strength. Spinoza differentiates between imaginings that are conducive our well-being and those who are not. The imagination becomes a problem when the mind cannot experience any rest any more, but is continuously triggered to think now about this, and then about that, without any order and without control over ourselves. But the imagination is fine if we put it to use to reflect on the things that we want to reflect on. In other words: if the imagination is triggered by external incentives, the mind is unfree, but if the imagination depends solely on its own nature, that is, if it is determined from within, then the mind is free (E-IIp17s, p. 257).

The Relevance of the First kind of Knowledge

By means of the imagination alone we cannot arrive at an adequate knowledge of God. We cannot form a picture of God, because God is not a mode or a thing in the universe, but the force that makes all things exist and function in the ways that they do (E-IIp47s, p. 271). It seems then that the first kind of knowledge cannot help us to attain the kind of blessedness that is hinted at in the *Treatise on the Emendation of the Intellect*, and that is being described in the *Short Treatise* and in the *Ethics*, because through the imagination we can only understand fragments of God, but we cannot experience the full fusion of the mind with God. However, this does not mean that we should equate knowing God with the first kind of knowledge to superstition. We can understand God solely with the first kind of knowledge without being superstitious.

The imagination is often evaluated as a negative force, because Spinoza writes that the imagination gives us only fragmentary and confused ideas, and is therefore 'the only source of falsity' (E-IIp41, p. 268), that the imagination stands at the root of superstitious beliefs (E-I

Appendix, p. 239), that the imagination makes us suffer from the passions (E-IIIp1 proof, p. 279), and that last, but not least, the imagination makes man turn against man, because we only differ in nature in so far as we are subject to passive emotions (E-IVp32 and 33, p. 336). In this way it seems as if the imagination is indeed something we should try to get rid of if we want to persists in our own being. [85]

But the imagination is not entirely negative according to Spinoza. The imagination, in the sense of the things that we have learned from experience, has enabled Spinoza to 'know almost everything that is of practical use in life'. (TIE 20, p. 7) And it is the imagination in the sense of creating a reality by means of words and images, that has enabled the prophets 'to perceive much beyond the limits of the intellect. For far more ideas can be formed from words and images than from the principles and concepts alone on which all our natural knowledge is built'. (TTP I-28p. 26)

Spinoza's evaluation of the imagination is nuanced. Several scholars have payed attention to the warnings about the first kind of knowledge that Spinoza has given us, but in this process they have neglected or downplayed the importance of those passages in which Spinoza endorses the imagination.[86] Without the imagination we would not be as creative as we can be now, envisioning other realities than the one that exists at the moment. (E-IIp17s, p. 257) Without the imagination Spinoza indicates we would not be able to do the simplest things, such as recognizing our friends or knowing the way to our house or to know how to cross the street.[87] Without shared imaginations, it would be impossible to have people live together in peace and harmony.[88] Therefore we have to understand that it is certainly not the case that Spinoza wants to rid us of the imagination. It has been Cornelis de Deugd who has stressed as one of the first 'the significance of Spinoza's first kind of knowledge', and it is De Deugd who writes about the role of the imagination in the *Theological Political Treatise*: 'The imagination proves to be the power by which the people learned *everything* needful for the attainment by righteousness and for leading the just and pious life – everything to be known of man and God, life and death'. [89]

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[85] de Deugd (1924), p. 148.

[86] Steven B. Smith writes: 'The purpose of the *Treatise* is the therapeutic one of liberating reason from superstition or, what comes to the same thing, the power of the imagination', Smith (1997), p. 30. We see a less clear expression of the same sentiment in Jonathan Israel's description of the liberation of man by means of reason. 'Social cohesion and political stability become possible only where men live according to the guidance of "reason".' Man in Israel's account of Spinoza can clearly not be liberated by means of the imagination: Israel (2001), p. 260.

[87] 'Without the imagination', Piet Steenbakkers writes in his lemma on *imaginatio*, 'the mind would be deprived of all knowledge of its body and of external things. Though inadequate, this knowledge is essential for interacting with the world around us and thus forms part of our conatus, our essential striving to maintain our existence': Van Bunge et al (2011), p. 231.

[88] Gatens & Lloyd. (1999). James. (2010), p. 250-67

[89] de Deugd (1924), p. 139.

The first kind of knowledge, as we have seen, can be used in a way that is conducive to our well-being and in a way that is not conducive to it. The imagination makes us unfree when it consists in a continuous series of chaotic reactions to external incentives, creating unrest in the soul. But the imagination can also make us free if it is used in conformity with our own nature, that is when it is used to find peace and the love of God. This certainly also applies to the knowledge of God that we can acquire by means of the first kind of knowledge. Sure enough, this knowledge is incomplete and can be used to make us superstitious in the sense that we come to fear God as we want him to provide us with the uncertain things that we love, and as we want him to love us over all others. But the imagined idea of God as a perfect and all powerful *external* force can also be used in order that we come to accept our fates and become more just and charitable. (We will return to the subject how salvation by means of an imagined idea of God is possible in our discussion of Biblically revealed faith in the next chapter.)

Salvation By Means of the First kind of Knowledge

Most of the debates on how Spinoza exactly understood salvation center around the account of salvation given in the *Ethics*, and the question to what degree this account is compatible with 'the salvation of the ignorant' which is described in the TTP.[90] In so far it is acknowledged that the imagination can help us to reach salvation, it is often assumed that this liberating force is only being outlined in the TTP. But the importance of the imagination for reaching salvation is not only found in the TTP, but also in the fourth and in the final part of the *Ethics*. The imagination can help us to picture a model [*exemplar*] of human nature that we strive to. (E-IV, Preface, p. 322). This model is described by Spinoza in the propositions about 'the free man' (E-IV67 till 72, p. 355-357); this free man does not exist in reality, but only in the imagination, which can be a help as we memorize the rules of conduct that this model of human nature teaches us, 'and to commit them to memory and continually apply them to particular situations that are frequently encountered in life, so that our casual thinking is thoroughly permeated by them and they are always ready to hand'. (E-IVp10s, p. 369) We can, in other words, make use of the mechanisms of the imagination in order to associate hateful behavior with a loving response, and this will help us to react in a different way.

Universal Notions

Spinoza describes the first kind of knowledge as a kind of knowledge, which provides us with 'universal notions'. By connecting different memories to each other, we arrive at general

[90] Matheron. (1971).

conclusions. The universal notions we obtain in this way, or by means of symbols such as 'man', 'horse', 'dog' are not adequate ideas, because these notions are by necessity incomplete as the mind is not able to understand all the differences between individual men, between individual horses, and between individual dogs. That this is the case can be noticed in the fact that different philosophers have named different things to belong to the essence of 'man', depending on their personal experiences. 'For example, those who have more often regarded with admiration the stature of men will understand by the word "man" an animal of upright stature, while those who are wont to regard a different aspect will form a different common image of man, such as that man is a laughing animal, a featherless biped, or a rational animal'. (E-p40s1 and s2, p. 266 till p. 268) Not only the philosophers, but also the prophets likewise formed a universal notion of God by means of the imagination, and it is for that reason that they have understood God in very different ways. (TTP II-7 till 2-11, p. 30-32)

We see here that Spinoza turns against the tradition as he states that both the philosophers as well as the prophets did not provide us with adequate knowledge of God, in so far as they failed to make the distinction between universal notions which are derived from the imagination, and from universal notions which are derived from reason.

The Second Kind of Knowledge

We can also form universal notions by means of 'common notions and adequate ideas of the properties of things'. Spinoza calls this kind of knowledge "reason" and "knowledge of the second kind" (E-IIp40s2, p. 267).

Common Notions

In order to understand common notions we have to go back to Spinoza's statement that the object which constitutes the human mind is the idea of the body. The body, however, consists out of many parts, and is a composite individual. For example a human body consist out of a heart and a system of blood circulation, a digestive system and a system to process food, sense organs and a system to process sensory input, bones and muscles and a system which allows us to move around and more. These systems consist again out of different components. Spinoza writes: 'nobody as yet has determined the limits of the body's capabilities: that is, nobody as yet has learned from experience what the body can and cannot do, without being determined by mind, solely from the laws of its nature insofar as it is considered as corporeal. For nobody as yet knows the structure of the body so accurately as to explain all its functions (…)' (E-IIIp2, p. 280).

The body is a very complex, composite individual. But this composite individual can also be understood as to – together with other composite individuals – make up a larger body. And why stop there? As we continue to understand extended reality in this way, 'we shall readily conceive the whole of Nature as one individual whose parts – that is, all the constituent bodies – vary in infinite ways without any change in the individual as a whole' (E-IIp13 Lemma7s, p. 255).

The same idea is expressed in Spinoza's letter to Oldenburg in which he gives the example of 'the tiny worm in the blood'. As this worm can conceive the smallest particles in the blood (chyle, lymphe, etc.) 'that worm would be living in the blood in the same way as we in our part of the universe, and it would regard each individual particle of the blood as a whole, not a part, and it would have no idea as to how all the parts are controlled by the overall nature of the blood and compelled to mutual adaptation as the overall nature of the blood requires, so to agree with one another in a definite way. (…) Now all the bodies in Nature can and should be conceived in the same way as we have now conceived the blood; for all bodies are surrounded by others and are reciprocally determined to exist and to act in a fixed determinate way, the same ratio of motion to rest preserved in them taken all together. (…)' (Letter 32, p. 849).

The mind comes to form a more adequate idea of the body as it understands this body to be a part of the whole of extended nature.[91] Spinoza writes in his letter to Schuller that this one individual body in which all bodies are but a part (or 'the face of the whole universe') is a mediate, infinite modification of the attribute of extension, while 'motion and rest' is called an immediate infinite modification of this same attribute of God (Letter 64, p. 919).

Now that we have a somewhat more adequate understanding of the body we can see better what Spinoza means when he states that we can arrive at the second kind of knowledge through common notions 'that are common to all things and are equally in the part as in the whole' (E-IIp37, p. 265), and are also 'common to all men' (E-IIp38c, p. 265). What is common in all things is 'that all bodies agree in certain respects' (E-IIp13L2, p. 252): 'all bodies agree in this: in that they involve the conception of one and the same attribute (..), and also in that they move in varying speeds, and may be absolutely in motion or absolutely in rest.' (E-IIp13, Lemma 2, Proof, p.252).

Salvation by Means of Knowledge of the Second Kind

Let us now return to the question at hand: how does reason help us to the knowledge of God? By means of reason we understand God's infinite modes, his eternal decrees that rule over all

[91] This infinitely stretched out individual body to which our human bodies belong, should not be confused with God. God cannot be equated with *natura naturata*, but only with *natura naturans*.

matter and over all thought as universal and eternal laws. This kind of knowledge of God helps us to understand ourselves and the emotions that enslave us and stand in the way of our true happiness, as we obtain an adequate understanding of these things (E-Vp4s, p. 366). We find then how the power of reason alone can provide us with the remedies against the sickness to which Spinoza was already searching a cure in his youth work. (E-Vp20s, p. 372).

The Third Kind of Knowledge

The most perfect knowledge of God is intuitive as the *Short Treatise* and the *Ethics* tell. This third kind of knowledge 'proceeds from an adequate idea[92] of the formal essence[93] of certain attributes[94] of God[95] to an adequate knowledge of the essence of things'. (E-IIp40 scholium 2)

[92] 'By an adequate idea', Spinoza writes, 'I mean an idea which, insofar as it is considered in itself without relation to its object, has all the properties, that is, intrinsic characteristics, of a true idea', (E-II def. 4). An adequate idea needs to be differentiated from a true idea, Spinoza explains in Letter 60 to Tschirnhaus: 'the word "true" has regard only to the agreement of the idea with its object, whereas the word "adequate" has regard to the nature of the idea in itself'. A true idea is then an idea which describes something existing in reality, whereas an adequate idea is an idea in which all the different components of the idea perfectly fit together, without there being necessarily an existing thing that corresponds with this idea. Spinoza does not give this example, but one might think of the idea of a bridge inside the mind of an architect. This idea of the bridge is true when the bridge in the mind of the architect corresponds to an actually existing bridge. This idea is adequate when all the different elements of the idea fit perfectly together, creating a bridge that could possibly exist in reality.

[93] In the TIE Spinoza explains the distinction between 'formal essence' and 'objective essence' in the following way: 'A true idea (for we do have a true idea) is something different from its object. A circle is one thing, the idea of a circle another. For the idea of a circle is not something having a circumference and a center, as is a circle, nor is the idea of a body itself a body. And since it is something different from its object, it will also be something intelligible through itself. That is, in respect of its formal essence the idea can be the object of another objective essence, which in turn, regarded in itself, will also be something real and intelligible, and so on indefinitely' (TIE, 33). According to Spinoza, 'the objective essence' of a circle is the material circle itself, whereas 'the formal essence' of a circle is the adequate and true idea of a circle. When Spinoza writes that the third kind of knowledge proceeds from 'the formal essence of certain attributes of God', he simply means that this kind of knowledge comes forth out of 'the adequate and true idea of certain attributes of God'.

[94] 'By attribute I mean that which the intellect perceives of substance constituting its essence' (E-I def. 4). Still, essence here means something different from the definition of E-II def. 2, because this definition of essence pertains only to modes or things. An attribute is *not* that without which substance can neither be not be perceived. This would be absurd, since: 'By substance I mean that which is in itself and is conceived though itself; that is, that the conception of which does not require the conception of another thing from which it has to be formed' (E 1 def. 3). Rather, 'whatever can be perceived by infinite intellect as constituting the essence of substance pertains entirely to the one sole substance. Consequently, thinking substance and extended substance are one and the same substance, comprehended now under this attribute, now under that' (E-IIp7s, p. 247). Some of the difficulties surrounding the understanding Spinoza's concept of attributes are described in Shein (2013)

[95] God is defined by Spinoza as 'an absolutely infinite being, that is, substance consisting of infinite attributes, each of which expresses eternal and infinite essence' (E-I def. 6). Spinoza hastens to add that we need to distinguish between that what is 'absolutely infinite' and that which is 'infinite in its kind' (E-I def. 6 Explication). Extension and thought are both infinite in their kinds, that is, the time-space continuum is infinite in its kind, and also the mental space in which all thoughts can exist is infinite in its kind. They are not absolutely infinite because there are things which are not included in extension (namely all thoughts) and there are things that are not included in thought (namely all things that make up physical space). God, however is 'absolutely infinite' in the sense that there is nothing outside of God. 'Whatever is, is in God, and nothing can be or be conceived without God' (E-Ip15).

Knowledge of the Particular Thing

The highest kind of knowledge for Spinoza is not knowledge of the whole, but the knowledge of the particular thing, understood in the light of the knowledge of the whole. In a certain sense therefore one could say that the third kind of knowledge brings us back to the first kind of knowledge, after this has undergone a transformation thanks to the second kind of knowledge. After we have understood that our bodies are a part of one infinite body in which everything happens according to the same universal and eternal laws, we come to see the power of the eternal and infinite God in every finite thing.

The second kind of knowledge, in as far as it is based on common notions, fails to make us understand the essences of particular things.[96] In other, naturalized words, the second kind of knowledge gives us knowledge of the universal laws of nature, but it fails to give us knowledge of the particular nature that each thing has. The immediate insight which the intuition provides us with is to grasp the nature of individual things such as the chemical formula of mercury, the definition of a circle or the essence of jealousy.[97] It is this particular essence, definition or nature of these things which determines how all these individual things persevere in their being (the conatus).

Intuition as Experience

To understand something with the third kind of knowledge is not only connected to the notion of 'immediacy', but also to a certain kind of 'experience' of things that 'leads to the highest possible contentment of mind'. (E-Vp27, p. 375). Spinoza introduces the third kind of knowledge in the fifth part by first stating that 'we feel and experience that we are eternal'. 'So although we have no recollection of having existed before the body, we nevertheless sense that our mind, insofar as it involves the essence of the body under a form of eternity, is eternal, and that this aspect of its existence cannot be defined by time, that is, cannot be explicated through duration' (E-Vp23s, p. 174).

The third kind of knowledge brings us back to the first kind of knowledge. It makes us *experience* the finite modes once again, but now in a completely transformed way, as all things are known to come forth out of an infinite and eternal being. In this experience, time disappears as we understand things not as being in a continuous flux, but as we come to understand these things without relation to time, in the same way as God sees them (E-Vp29 and E-Vp30, p. 176).

[96] Soyarslan (2016), p. 27–54.
[97] Van Buuren (2016), p. 131.

Jon Wetlesen writes that: 'the main difference between the second and the third kinds of cognition is an existential difference.(…) It is not sufficient that he [the wise man] cognizes the general contents of definitions, axioms, propositions, etc. which explain how the essence of man is internally determined by the essence of God: he must feel it and experience it in his own body and mind, so to speak, starting from a direct intuition of his own dependence on God. (…) this means that the person must first experience the concrete duration of his own body from the viewpoint of eternity'.[98]

Understanding the Structure of the Ethics

Understanding the three kinds of knowledge and the idea of salvation through knowledge of God makes Spinoza's main work intelligible. The last three parts of the *Ethics* are structured around the three kinds of knowledge. But it is not the case that the third part is about the imagination, the fourth part about reason, and the fifth part about intuition.

The Passions

Spinoza devotes most attention to the first kind of knowledge, which is the subject of the third as well as the fourth part. Let me explain this. The third part deals with 'the origin and nature of the emotions'. Emotions are by Spinoza divided into passive emotions and active emotions (E-IIIp58, p. 309). We are passive in so far as the mind has inadequate ideas; we are active in so far as we have adequate ideas (E-IIIp1, p. 279). As all inadequate ideas belong to the first kind of knowledge (E-IIp41 Proof, p. 268), and as the third part of the *Ethics* is almost entirely devoted to the origin and nature of the passive emotions to which we are subjected[99], we can say that the third part is about the emotional effects of the first kind of knowledge.

Our Bondage

From the title of the fourth part of the *Ethics* – 'On Human Bondage, or the Strength of the Emotions' – one can see that Spinoza intended also the fourth part to be about the grip that the passive emotions, which come forth out of the imagination, have on us. It is slightly confusing, however, that Spinoza, from the scholium of proposition 18 onwards, starts to discuss what 'reason prescribes for us' (E-IVp18s, p. 330). Therefore, it seems as if only 18 of the 73 propositions of the fourth part deal with the power of the passions or the imagination; whereas the other propositions are devoted to what follows from the dictates of reason. Those supposedly are the things that we understand by using reason.

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[98] Wetlesen (1979), p. 63.
[99] Only proposition 58, the final proposition of the third part, is dedicated to the active emotions.

However, the ideal life that prescriptive reason shows us still belongs to the imagination. Prescriptive reason tells us what is good and what is bad in the sense that it makes clear what is most useful to us. But to think of the world in terms of 'good' and 'bad' is to still be in the grip of the imagination. These words, according to Spinoza, do not describe anything real in the world, but only the way in which our bodies are being affected. If the mind thinks that the body is being affected in a way that helps the body to persist in its own being, it experiences pleasure, which the mind calls 'good'. And when the mind thinks that the body is being affected in a way which decreases its ability to persist in its own being, then it feels pain, which it names 'bad' (E 4-8, p. 326 and E-IIIp11, p. 285,285).

Knowledge of good and evil alone does not empower us. Spinoza cites Ovid approvingly: 'I see the better course, and I approve it, but pursue the worse course'. Ecclesiastes, traditionally attributed to King Solomon, likewise hints at this inability of us to do the good, only from understanding it, as the Bible states: 'He who increaseth knowledge increases sorrow'. (E-IVp17s, p.330). Traditionally, this problem is understood as something that can be overcome by an effort of the will. But free will is an illusion, according to Spinoza, and therefore this traditional solution disappears.

It does, for this reason, make sense that the fourth part of the *Ethics* in its entirety is devoted to our powerlessness and slavery, as the knowledge of how we should live only underlines the desperateness of our situation. The only remedy against the grip that the passions have on us which is offered in the fourth part, is to counter a passion by a stronger, opposite passion, for example, to keep someone's desire in check by instilling fear of punishment in him (E-IVp7, p. 325 and E IVp37s2, p. 341). It is obvious that this person, in this way, still remains the slave of the passions.

Our Freedom & Salvation

The fifth part finally discusses the power of reason, which is the power that comes forth out of the second and the third kinds of knowledge. By understanding the causes of the emotions, we become active instead of passive, as we exchange inadequate ideas for adequate ones. The most important knowledge with regard to the good life that we seek is therefore self-knowledge, understanding how we, human beings, as a part of nature, are affected by the other modes of nature, and how all this happens according to universal and eternal laws which can be adequately understood by us (See: E-III, Preface, p. 277-278).

Spinoza's remedy against our illness is to counter passive emotions by stronger, active emotions, i.e., the pleasure which comes forth out of understanding. Since love is defined as

'pleasure accompanied by the idea of an external cause' (E-III Ex.6, p. 312), and since we couldn't understand anything without God being its cause, we come then to the love of God. However, as we understand by means of the third kind of knowledge that God is not an external cause, but an internal cause, this knowledge and love of God by means of the third kind of knowledge cannot be destroyed by any external thing. In this eternal knowledge and love of God we find our true salvation and blessedness.

Spinoza's Mysticism

Many commentators have argued that, although the end of the *Ethics* is difficult to follow[100], we should definitely not interpret this section of Spinoza's work as endorsing a kind of mystical knowledge.[101] '[O]ne must not let oneself be misled to the use of phrases such as 'intellectual knowledge of God' into interpreting Spinoza as though he were a religious mystic like Eckhart. (…) The notion that the philosophy of Spinoza was a philosophy of religious mysticism arises only if one persists in neglecting the definitions of terms like 'God' and 'love' and the light shed on those definitions by the system as a whole'.[102]

That Spinoza's conception of God is quite distinct from how the religious tradition has seen God is a truism, but Spinoza's point is – again and again – to show that his new interpretation of God is capable of explaining almost all the phenomena which, according to tradition, follow from God and from the understanding of God. His account of how we feel that we are eternal resembles the accounts of mystics who have claimed to have had direct experiences of God.

What is mysticism? The Islamic Sufi and philosopher Al-Ghazali, says,

> 'I knew that the complete mystic "way" includes both intellectual belief and practical activity; the latter consists in getting rid of the obstacles in the self and in stripping off its base characteristics and vicious morals, so that the heart may attain to freedom of what is not God and to constant recollection of him. (…) [W]hat is most distinctive of mysticism is something which cannot be apprehended by study, but only by immediate experience (*dhawq*- literally "tasting"), by ecstasy and by a moral change. What a difference there is between knowing the definition of health and satiety, together with their causes and presuppositions and *being*

[100] The analytic philosopher Jonathan Bennett has called the end of the *Ethics* for this reason a 'disaster': 'I [Bennett] don't think that the final three doctrines [the mind's eternity, intuitive knowledge, and the intellectual love of God] can be rescued. The only attempts at complete salvage that I have encountered have been unintelligible to me and poorly related to what Spinoza actually wrote. (…) After three centuries of failure to profit from it, the time has come to admit that this part of the Ethics has nothing to teach us and is pretty certainly worthless.' Bennett (1984), p. 357.

[101] Knol, (2009) p. 116. Knol names Ferdinand Alquié, Wim Klever and Steven Nadler as scholars who have criticized this idea of Spinoza as a mystic.

[102] Copleston (1963), p. 263.

healthy and satisfied. What a difference between being acquainted with the definition of drunkenness (…) and being drunk!' [103]

What is striking in the description of Ghazali is that mysticism comes forth out of intellectual knowledge, just as the third kind of knowledge is only made possible once we have obtained the second kind of knowledge; that this knowledge furthermore frees us from certain wrong ideas about God, such as the ones which Spinoza describes in the appendix of the first part of the *Ethics*, and that this new understanding is coupled to a change in moral attitude, and that last, but not least, this kind of knowledge is described by both Ghazali as Spinoza as an immediate knowing.

In case one finds the quotation of an Islamic Sufi from the eleventh and twelfth century a bit too exotic for the interpretation of Spinoza, here is Jan Knol, a Dutch reformed minister, who after his retirement spent sixteen years (from 2000 till his death in 2016) in understanding and spreading the ideas of Spinoza. Knol has made the point that if we understand mysticism to be 'something mysterious, secretive, vague, exaggerated, woolly and sentimental' then surely Spinoza was not a mystic. But if we understand mysticism to contain certain characteristics such as the following that Jan Knol has described, then Spinoza could very well be called a mystic:

1. 'The universe is being experienced as a unity.
2. The world is experienced as something that is not all about man.
3. There is a reconciliation with evil as it is placed within the context of the whole of reality.
4. One doesn't compare and doesn't judge, but accepts everything as it is and not as one wants things to be.
5. Conflicts and polarities are being resolved.
6. The world is accepted as perfect.
7. Tensions and the fear of death disappear. (…)'[104]

The knowledge that the propositions of the *Ethics* are meant to transmit, can make someone aware that there is something way more important than our individual persons, something on which we completely depend in everything. This knowledge also makes it possible to change our lives and to behave differently towards each other – less hateful and more loving.

The knowledge of God is not to be found in words. For words are mere 'corporeal motions far removed from the concept of thought' (E-IIp49s, p. 274). The reader of the *Ethics* – or of any book – has to make the necessary leap from reading the words on the page to the understanding of the ideas with the mind. 'For everything we understand clearly and distinctly is dictated to us

[103] Ghazzālī (2005), p. 47.
[104] Knol (2009), p. 113-114.

(…) not in words, but in a much more excellent manner which agrees very well with the nature of the mind, as every man who has experienced intellectual certainty has undoubtedly felt within himself'. (TTP I-4, p. 14).

And this is a second reason why Spinoza's philosophical religion is a kind of mysticism: he urges us to not forget that words, mathematics and logic are mere means or tools that help us to arrive at a certain destination that lies beyond the limits of what can adequately be expressed, because it can only be experienced.

In the end Spinoza's paradoxical message is not to trust any messages. Spinoza's theory of language in this respect seems to express a universal theme, which could be called a kind of mysticism, a theme which is echoing through the entire history of philosophy, from Plato's *Seventh Letter* and his *Phaedrus* to Spinoza's friend Pieter Balling who urges his readers in *The Light Upon the Candlestick* to turn away from words and to use their own intellect: 'We direct, thee, then, to within thyself'.[105] And from there to Ludwig Wittgenstein, who writes in one of the last propositions of the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*: 'My propositions are elucidatory in this way: he who understands me finally recognizes them as senseless, when he has climbed out through them, on them, over them. (He must so to speak throw away the ladder, after he has climbed up on it.) He must surmount these propositions; then he sees the world rightly'.[106]

The image of the ladder Wittgenstein might have gotten from Spinoza, who writes: '[W]e see that reasoning is not a principal thing in us, but only like a staircase by which we can climb up to the desired place, or like a good genius which, without any falsity or deception, brings us tidings of the highest good in order thereby stimulate us to pursue it, and to become united with it; which union is our supreme happiness and bliss'. (ST 2-26, p. 100).

2.7. Spinoza's Defense Against the Charge of Atheism

One of the three stated reasons Spinoza had for writing the *Theological-Political Treatise* is: 'The opinion of me held by the common people, who constantly accuse me of atheism. I am driven to avert this accusation as far as I can'.[107] Spinoza therefore is quite upset by Van Velthuysen's

[105] Balling (1963)
[106] Wittgenstein, Ludwig. 1922. *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*. Translated from the German by C.K. Ogden. Hypertext of the Ogden bilingual edition Retrieved from: http://www.kfs.org/jonathan/witt/tlph.html. Proposition 6.54.
[107] Letter 30, p. 844

opinion that the author of the *Treatise* was teaching atheism, which he tries to prove by bringing up the following three arguments to which Spinoza reacts.[108]

Van Velthuysen's first argument is that Spinoza's fatalism makes morality impossible. Spinoza rejects free will, not only in man, but also in God. Everything happens from necessity. This means that man cannot help it if he does good or evil. Man cannot choose to follow the laws of God. The idea, central to Christianity, that God rewards the righteous, while he punishes the wicked becomes senseless in a universe in which even God is subjected to fate. 'And so we can see that the author makes no mention in his writing of the use of prayer, just as he makes no mention of life or death or of any reward or punishment which must be allotted to men by the judge of the universe'.[109] The fear of punishment for trespassing the law and the hope of reward for obeying the law disappear in Spinoza's account, and that makes it atheistic.

Van Velthuysen's second argument is that Spinoza uses religion in a Machiavellian fashion, as a mere tool to establish political stability. Spinoza needs religion to keep the masses in check. 'For in the case of men of the common sort their minds are so constituted and so ill-trained that they can be urged to the practice of virtue only by arguments deriving from the nature of law, and from fear of punishment and hope of reward. But men of true judgment understand that there is no truth or force underlying such arguments'.[110] Spinoza, according to van Velthuysen, doesn't believe in the truth of religious dogmas, but he thinks that they serve an important political function, because they enable simple people to obey and lead a pious life. This is the position of an atheist.

Thirdly, Van velthuysen maintains that since Spinoza holds that religion can only be judged in terms of people's 'works', not by their content, Spinoza cannot say any more that Islam is a false religion and Christianity a true one. All religions can in principle inspire people to love their neighbor. This makes clear that Spinoza cannot believe that Christianity is somehow special. '(…) the author has not left himself a single argument that Mahomet was not a true prophet. For the Turks, too, in obedience to the command of their prophet, cultivate those moral virtues about which there is no disagreement among the nations, and, according to the author's teaching, it is not uncommon to God, in the case of other nations to whom he has not imparted the oracles given to the Jews and Christians, to lead them by other revelations to the path of reason and obedience'. [111]

[108] For the three points and the reaction of Spinoza I lean heavily on the work done by Rosenthal (2012), p. 814-815
[109] Letter 42, p. 870
[110] Letter 42, p. 870
[111] Letter 42, p. 877

Spinoza Against Van Velthuysen: 'I Am Not An Atheist'

Spinoza reacts to Van Velthuysen – in a letter addressed to Jacob Ostens, that probably is written in 1671, and that is known to us as letter 43 – to these three points:

First Spinoza points out that Van Velthuysen is wrong in believing that Spinoza's philosophy is doing away with rewarding good and punishing evil. God is free in the sense that he is forced by his own nature alone and not by anything outside of this nature – because there is nothing outside God. This 'inevitable necessity of things does not do away with either divine or human laws. For moral precepts, whether or not they receive the form of law from God himself, are still divine and salutary. And whether the good that follows from virtue and love of God is bestowed on us by God as a judge, or whether it emanates from the necessity of divine nature, it will not on that account be more or less desirable'.[112] We don't need to believe in God's last judgment in order to be inspired to act morally. What Van Velthuysen, according to Spinoza fails to understand is that the virtue of understanding is in fact enough of a reward for those who understand, while the vice of stupidity is the punishment for the stupid.

Spinoza does not deal directly with Van Velthuysen's second accusation that his theological-political teaching is Machiavellian (and therefore atheistic), as Rosenthal also notes. Rosenthal accordingly mentions the influential Straussian reading as one that completely depends on the idea that Spinoza is a Machiavellian.[113] What Rosenthal doesn't mention is that Spinoza is different from Machiavelli in that he doesn't believe that people need to be ruled by fear.[114] True religion is about the love of God. It doesn't matter whether this love is arrived by means of the philosophical religion or through Biblically revealed faith, in both ways we should not love God out of fear.[115] Therefore, Van Velthuysen is mistaken – not in making the distinction between the philosophical religion of the few on the one hand and the universal faith for the multitude on the other hand, but in believing the Machiavellian point of view that the multitude is better guided by

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[112] Letter 43, p. 879-880

[113] Rosenthal offers his own solution to the apparent contractions in the TTP that Strauss notes: Rosenthal (2003a). I will deal with these 'contradictions' in chapter 5.

[114] Machiavelli (2016), p. 40: 'Upon this a question arises: whether it be better to be loved than feared or feared than loved? It may be answered that one should wish to be both, but, because it is difficult to unite them in one person, is much safer to be feared than loved, when, of the two, either must be dispensed with.' Spinoza TTP V-8 and 9, p. 73: 'human nature does not allow itself to be absolutely compelled (…) no one has maintained a violent regime for long (…) For while men are acting from fear alone, they are doing what they do not at all want to do (…)[Moses] took great care to ensure that the people would do its duty willingly and not through fear.' Spinoza TP V-6, p. 700: 'For a free people is led more by hope than by fear'.

[115] 'The sum of the divine law therefore and its highest precepts is to love God as the highest good, that is, as we have already said, not to love him from fear or punishment of penalty, nor for love of some other thing by which we desire to be pleased' (TTP IV-5, p. 60).

fear than by love. For Spinoza, this is also what distinguishes the religious person: that he acts out of the love of God.

Spinoza reacts to Van Velthuysen's third point by stating that he is wrong that there is no argument to prove that Mahomet is an impostor. Since 'he [Mahomet] completely abolishes the freedom which is granted by that universal religion, revealed by the natural and prophetic light (…)'.[116] In other words, we can judge a religion by looking how much freedom it allows its citizens to think and speak freely about their own convictions. Furthermore, Spinoza is willing to accept that if the Muslims 'worship God by the exercise of justice and by love of their neighbor, I believe that they possess the spirit of Christ and are saved, whatever convictions they may hold in their ignorance regarding Mahomet and oracles'.

Piety and true religion can only be detected in someone's deeds, not in the beliefs he holds. Atheists, Spinoza writes, 'are usually fond of honors and riches which I have always despised'. This is consistent with the way Spinoza defines faith in the *Treatise* where Spinoza comments on John's first Epistle in which it is said that we should love our neighbor, because God is love.[117] This passage is followed immediately with Spinoza quoting the text from the first letter of John that also figures as the motto of the *Treatise* on the opening page.[118] What Spinoza is saying here is that he is not an atheist, because you can judge this from his works, in the way he lives, in that he loves his fellow human being, just as the apostle John writes. Spinoza's defense against the charge of atheism is therefore in the first place, that he is not an atheist because he tries to fulfill the obligations of Biblical morality to be just and charitable.

True religion shows itself, according to Spinoza, when people believe that God must be acknowledged as the highest good and loved, while atheists or people who renounce all religion do not hold these beliefs. Spinoza rejects the accusation of atheism by arguing that he does not deny the existence of God as the first cause of everything there is. On the contrary, he claims that our highest good exists in the knowledge of and the love for this God: 'Does that man, pray, renounce all religion who declares that God must be acknowledged as the highest good, and that he must be loved in a free spirit?'.[119]

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[116] Letter 43, p. 881.

[117] 'From this it follows that we can only make the judgement whether someone is faithful or unfaithful from his works. If his works are good, he is one of the 'faithful', even if he differs from the other 'faithful' in matters of belief.' (TTP XIV-7, p. 181)

[118] The First letter of John 4-12 and 13: 'if we love one another, God lives in us, and his love is perfected in us. By this we know that we abide in him and He abides in us, because he has given us of his spirit'.

[119] Spinoza refers in the TTP, among others to Paul's letter to the Romans (1-20), because he states there that God is known by 'the things he has made.' In other words, natural theology is endorsed by Paul and thus by the Bible (TTP IV-12, p. 67).

Applying Spinoza's own Criteria of Atheism to Himself

If we would try for a moment not to consider Spinoza's defense against the accusation that he is an atheist immediately as a strategic maneuver, but as the position he honestly held, we would first of all have to take a look at Spinoza's life itself. We see then the life of someone who didn't care for luxury[120] or reputation[121], but only lived in order to come to a clearer understanding and love of God, trying to have as many people as possible to share in this understanding. He tried to live then according to the rules of his own philosophical religion, and this is something that has struck commentators throughout the ages.[122]

[120] In the oldest biography of Spinoza, by Jean Macimilian Lucas, it is stressed over and over again that Spinoza did not care for riches and that he also did not desire to be admired by people. Both Lucas as well as Colerus mention in their biographies that Simon Joosten de Vries, a prosperous merchant, offered to support Spinoza financially with a yearly allowance of two thousand florins, so that he would be able to live more comfortably. However, Spinoza refused. According to Colerus he did so because he was afraid that the thought of his indebtedness to someone else would distract him from his philosophical work. Spinoza also did not want to inherit De Vries's money. He convinced him to not put himself but his own brother in his testament. Steven Nadler (1999), p. 261-262.

[121] In Letter 48 Spinoza politely refused the offer to have an honourable position at the University of Heidelberg, a proposition offered in Letter 47, p. 886 and 887.

[122] Bayle (2011), p. 90: 'Those who were acquainted with him, and the peasants of the villages where he had lived in retirement for some time, all agree in saying that he was sociable, affable, honest, obliging, and of a well-ordered morality.' Russell (1945), p. 569: 'Spinoza (1634-77) is the noblest and most lovable of the great philosophers. Intellectually, some others have surpassed him, but ethically he is supreme.'

3. Spinoza's Treatment of the Bible in the *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus*

In this chapter I argue against the scholars who have seen in the *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus* only a critique of religion. For, as will become clear, Spinoza's most important teaching in the TTP is a positive one, stating the importance of revealed religion for leading a good life.

The first section introduces the reasons why Spinoza turned to study Scripture: he wanted to defend his philosophical religion against 'the prejudices of the theologians', to refute the claim that it was atheistic, and to plead for the freedom to have a philosophical religion.

He second section addresses the teleological approach to Spinoza's study of the Bible and his treatment of Biblical faith as it comes to the fore in Samuel Preus's book: *Spinoza and the Irrelevance of Biblical Authority*.

In the third section Preus's book is criticized. It is argued that Preus's interpretation does not succeed in understanding Spinoza's TTP as a whole, but instead leads to a very incomplete picture of it.

The fourth section turns again to the context of the Dutch Republic as it is explained that Spinoza's approach to the Bible needs to be understood as a reaction to Reformed Orthodoxy, to Orthodox Cartesians, and to Lodewijk Meijer, showing that Spinoza's approach was heretical for the Reformed Orthodox as well as for Orthodox Cartesians.

The fifth and final section of this chapter as it argues that Spinoza did not criticize his friend Meijer in his attack on Maimonides, but that he did differ with Meijer in this respect: Spinoza concluded from his study of Scripture that the Bible teaches the philosophical religion in a form adapted to the level of understanding of the multitude, i.e., it teaches the people only to accept the practical results of the philosophical religion as *fides*. That is a kind of obedience to an imagined deity, and not as *religio*, which would be instead based on understanding the truth about God.

3.1. Why Did Spinoza Turn to Scripture?

What is Spinoza's judgement on the Bible and Biblical faith? In order to answer that question we need to study the *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus* (TTP), the book in which Spinoza developed his new method for interpreting Scripture. Whereas Spinoza's philosophical religion plays a role in all his philosophical writings, his views on the Bible are almost exclusively documented in the TTP. A considerable part of the text of the TTP consists of Biblical citations and Spinoza's commentary on these Biblical passages. In his other works we find very little direct references and only a few

allusions to the Bible. But in the TTP we find, with the notable exception of chapters 16 and 20, that every chapter deals in some way with what Scripture has to tell us on a certain matter.

But why did Spinoza turn to Scripture? So far it is argued that there is one theme dominating all of Spinoza's writings, and this is the search for salvation by means of the knowledge of God. The path towards this goal that we find in the *Treatise on the Emendation of the Intellect,* the *Short Treatise on God, Man and his Well-Being,* the *Ethics*, and in the *Theological-Political Treatise* has been called Spinoza's philosophical religion. Spinoza's life project was to think through this true religion, to help as many others as possible to embrace the true religion, and to defend the true religion against accusations. It is this last motive that prompted Spinoza to write the *Theological-Political Treatise*: 'I am now writing a treatise on my views regarding Scripture. The reasons that move me to do so are these: 1) The prejudices of theologians. For I know that these are the main obstacles which prevent men from giving their minds to philosophy. So I apply myself to exposing such prejudices and removing them from the minds of sensible people. 2) The opinion of me held by the common people, who constantly accuse me of atheism. I am driven to avert this accusation too, as far as I can. 3) The freedom to philosophize and to say what we think. This I want to vindicate completely, for here it is in every way suppressed by the excessive authority and egotism of preachers'. (Letter 30, p. 844).

The Prejudices of the Theologians

The prejudices of the theologians, Spinoza accordingly writes in the Preface of the TTP, 'turn rational men into beasts since they completely prevent each person from using his own free judgment and distinguishing truth from falsehood. They seem purposely designed altogether to extinguish the light of the intellect. Dear God! Piety and religion are reduced to ridiculous mysteries and those who totally condemn reason and reject and revile the understanding as corrupt by nature, are believed without question to possess the divine light (…) Furthermore (…) what I see in their actual teaching [that is, the teaching of the theologians] is nothing more than the speculations of the Aristotelians or Platonists. (…) It was insufficient for them to be mouthing nonsense themselves, they also desired, together with the Greeks, to render the prophets equally nonsensical! This proves clearly that they cannot even imagine what is really divine in Scripture'. (TTP*,* Preface 9, p. 7).

The theologians, as this citation makes clear, do two things to which Spinoza objects: 1) they reject the use of reason if it is not supported by something which is stated in the Bible; 2) they supply the teachings of the ancient philosophy of Plato and Aristotle with Biblical authority (TTP XIII-2, p. 168). Both are threats to his philosophical religion. The first is most serious as it

denies that reason suffices for finding salvation. Spinoza wants to liberate his philosophical readers from this 'prejudice' (TTP Preface 15-12). The second, however, also forms an obstacle for understanding God adequately in a non-teleological, non-dualistic, and non-transcendent way.

Dogmatists and Sceptics

In chapter 15 of the TTP Spinoza accordingly turns to criticize these two prejudices more elaborately. The first position he calls the position of 'the sceptics' who 'deny the certainty of reason'; the other position he calls the one of 'the dogmatists', who advocate that 'Scripture should be accommodated to reason' (TTP XV-1, p. 186). He doesn't openly attach these positions to the theologians of his time, but instead names them as the position of two Jewish scholars: Rabbi Jehuda Al-Fakhar stands for the 'sceptic' position which wants to subordinate reason to theology; Maimonides stands for the 'dogmatic' position which wants to subordinate theology to reason.

Often it is assumed that Spinoza, by attacking these two positions, in fact attacked two different parties in the debate on Scripture that was going on in his time (because it seems unimaginable that someone could be 'dogmatic' and 'sceptical' at the same time), but I think this interpretation is wrong.[1] The 'prejudices of the theologians' that Spinoza wants to fight in the TTP are the prejudices of people such as the Utrecht theologian Gisbertius Voetius, who were 'sceptical' and 'dogmatic' at the very same time.

Theologians such as Voetius were 'sceptical' in their denial that we can freely use reason, because our reasoning capacity is corrupted by the fall. (Instead, they claim, that we have to base all our reasoning on Scripture.) But at the same time they are 'dogmatic' in insisting that the Bible teaches 'reason', understood as the scholastic way of doing philosophy.

This interpretation, namely, that Spinoza in the TTP implicitly accused theologians such as Voetius of being simultaneously 'sceptical' and 'dogmatic', although it might seem unlikely at first sight, can be made less unlikely by pointing to the historical context. Spinoza had one real enemy in the Dutch Republic whom he really feared, and these were 'the theologians (…) [who] with their customary spleen will attack me, who utterly dread brawling'. (Letter 6, p. 776).

[1] The standard interpretation of what Spinoza actually meant with 'dogmatism' is that he objected to theologians and philosophers who detect their own philosophical theories in Scripture. See for example Preus (2001), p. 190 and James (2012), p. 155. However, as Spinoza in the TTP does write how his own philosophy is being affirmed by Scripture, this cannot be his real position. Rather, Spinoza objected to a procedure in which philosophical ideas receive their status as reasonable teachings solely from the fact that they are found in the Bible. The fact that a Biblical text states that this or that is true doesn't make it true, because truth can only be discovered by reason. For more arguments against the standard interpretation see 3.5 which describes how Spinoza's approach to the Bible relates to the one of Meijer as well as to the one of Maimonides.

Theological-Political-Philosophical Alliances

Spinoza feared the theologians as the ones who were keeping him, as this early correspondence with Oldenburg testifies, from publishing his ideas. He had reason to fear them because the Dutch Republic of the seventeenth century was in the grip of a large conflict in which several groups aligned with each other. Spinoza was in the camp of free-thinkers, collegiants and supporters of Johan de Witt, who were being opposed by the (neo)-orthodox reformed theologians, the pastors of the Reformed Church and the supporters of the Orangists.

Spinoza in his TTP is engaged in this theological-philosophical-political struggle that was going on at the time. There was a theological conflict between Voetius, theologian at Utrecht University and his colleague Coccejus, theologian at Leiden University on the status of the Ten Commandments: did or didn't the commandments on ceremonies still have the authority of law in the Dutch Republic? Johannes Coccejus denied this was the case, Voetius insisted it was. Then there was a philosophical conflict between 'the Voetians' who desired to teach the old philosophy at the universities on the one hand, and, on the other hand, the Cartesians who wanted to teach the new. Finally, there was also a political debate between the regents, which was the regime of 'true freedom' of Johan de Witt at the time that Spinoza wrote his TTP, and the Stadtholder, which was William III. 'These philosophical, theological, and political conflicts coincided in the sense that the followers of the States Party [of Johan de Witt] tended to support the sympathizers of Coccejus in the public church and of Cartesianism in the university and vice versa. (…) external factors brought these groups together, that is, the common enemy, the Voetian Further Reformation'.[2]

This so-called 'Further Reformation' was a theological-political movement which pushed to purify society from impiety: 'Speaking out against pawnbrokers, dancing, and long hair and in favor of the strict keeping of the Sabbath, they needed the support of the magistrate in order to put their reform program into practice.[3] Part of this program to purify society was also the attempt to silence heretical ideas, including philosophical ones.[4]

Against the background of the 'Further Reformation' the theological conflict that broke out in 1648 between Voetius and Cocejus also had political relevance. This conflict was on what the Bible taught with regard to the laws that should regulate a truly Christian nation, such as the Dutch Republic. According to Coccejus' theory of reading of the Ten Commandments, the commandment to 'remember the Shabbat day and keep it holy' belonged solely to the Jewish

[2] Krop (2012), p. 79. See also: James. 2012, p. 8-9
[3] Ibid, p. 71.
[4] Van Bunge (2012), p. 138-140.

religion. This went straight against the idea of the Further Reformation. Spinoza in the TTP defends the Coccejan point of view as he states that the law of Moses was only meant for the period in which the Hebrews were in possession of their state.

The context of these philosophical-theological-political conflicts coming together in the Dutch republic of the 1660's makes a case for the interpretation that Spinoza attacked the theologians as being both 'sceptic' as well as 'dogmatic' at the same time, because Spinoza both wanted to argue – against these theologians – for the freedom to freely think without the Bible, as well as to freely think without the old philosophy of Plato and Aristotle.

The three main prejudices of the theologians that get attacked by Spinoza in the TTP are then the following:

The theological idea that reason is corrupted and that we need the light of Scripture in order to obtain the knowledge necessary for salvation.

The philosophical idea that the teachings of Plato and Aristotle are true, and also affirmed by Scriptural authority.

The political idea that the Bible provides us with universal laws that should be installed to rule over our societies.

All these three prejudices are direct or possible threats to Spinoza's philosophical religion. Spinoza writes to Oldenburg that he also wants to defend himself against the accusation of atheism and that he thirdly wants to plead for the freedom to have and express your own ideas about God and other things. In this way Spinoza seeks to defend his true philosophical religion against the accusation that this religion would undermine religious piety and political peace (TTP, subtitle). How does he proceed?

What Does the Bible Say About the Philosophical Religion?

The accusation stands that his philosophical religion in which man finds a path to salvation by means of comprehending the insights provided by the new philosophy, goes against the teachings of the Bible and biblically-revealed faith. In order to fight against this claim that the philosophical religion is the same as atheism, that the Bible and true faith do not allow for it, and that it should be outlawed in the name of piety and true religion, Spinoza goes back to study the Bible and Biblically-revealed faith. What he wants to show is that the Bible allows for his philosophical religion, yes, that the Bible even recommends it. Biblically-revealed faith is the true philosophical religion, but then adapted to the understanding of the majority of mankind, that is, the book is written by and for people without any kind of philosophical or scientific education.

This, however, makes the aim of biblically-revealed faith quite different from the aim of philosophical religion, even so distinct that the two should be strictly kept apart from each other. The philosophical religion aims at understanding the truth, at having adequate ideas with the third kind of knowledge that make the human mind become aware that it is united with the infinite mind of God and that everything is in God and is determined by the power of God to be and to act in the way that it exists and acts. Biblically-revealed faith does not aim at such an understanding, but at obedience to a God, imagined (with the first kind of knowledge) as an all-powerful, just and loving law-giver, prince and judge. As they aim at different things – one at truth and the other one at obedience – they still have the same psychological, moral and social effects on people. Both lead to salvation.

What is most important in his reading of the Bible is to show which teachings of the Bible are true and divine, and which are not. That is to say: he wants to make clear what parts of the biblically-revealed religion are in accordance with his philosophical religion and what parts of the biblically-revealed religion are in variance with it. He namely knows what is true and divine, because he has found these things in his philosophical religion. His epistemology, which plays – as we have seen – such a crucial role in his philosophical religion, helps him also to understand what kind of book the Bible is: a book in which God is understood by means of the first kind of knowledge in order that the majority of mankind can obtain the knowledge of God, necessary for their salvation.

3.2. The Depiction of Spinoza as a Modern Bible Critic

Traditionally the Bible is understood as the holy and definitive Word of God, and therefore as the absolute and final truth about the world and man. Now, there are at least two ways in which this authoritative status of the Bible can be attacked: by means of reason and by means of historical criticism. As we study the Bible as something we believe to be reasonable, we ask questions such as: How can this or that passage be understood in order to make sense? For example, as reason dictates to us that God does not have a body, God cannot have a hand, and therefore we have to the understand the 122 Bible verses which mention 'the hand of God' as merely ways of speaking. This way of criticizing the Bible has always been a little controversial as the reactions to Maimonides's *Guide to the Perplexed* prove.[5] The criticism by means of reason, however, is also limited, since it leaves from the presupposition that the truth cannot contradict the truth, meaning that the revealed word of God in the Bible cannot contradict the clearest teachings of reason. It can therefore never say that the Bible is teaching anything untrue, only it

[5] Bosmajian (2006), p. 45

can reinterpret the teachings of the Bible in such a way that they become compatible with what reason teaches.

Historical criticism of the Bible, on the other hand, can be more radical, because the 'eternal truth' of the text is then no longer necessarily presupposed. Instead, the text is studied as a historical document that raises questions such as: When was this written? Who was the author? Were there multiple authors? How does the historical context influence the writing? Can we detect how the personal experiences of the author have influenced the writing? What was the contemporaneous meaning of the words and expressions used? Historical criticism of the Bible is also partly based on linguistics, as it investigates how words and expressions were used at the time, making sure that we do not attribute anachronistic meanings to words.[6]

Did Spinoza Engage in Historical Criticism?

It is true that – when we look back from our times into the past – we can find in Spinoza's TTP one of the first expressions of this historical criticism of the Bible.[7] This comes most clearly to the fore in Spinoza's criticism of the teachings of the Prophets. Instead of searching for ways in which these teachings can be reconciled with those of reason, Spinoza simply states that it is obvious that the prophets were ignorant about many things.

The prophet Joshua for example did not understand astronomy, as he imagined that the sun was moving around the earth, instead of the other way around (TTP II-13, p. 33-35). Another example of it is the way in which Spinoza argues that Moses could not possibly have been the author of the Pentateuch, as Deuteronomy not 'only tells how Moses died and was buried, and was mourned by the Hebrews for thirty days (…) but also compares him with all the prophets who lived later, claiming he excelled them all'. (TTP VIII-4-2, p. 122).

Spinoza did not try to explain this as a mystery which is in need of a rational solution. He simply claimed that it is evident that Moses could not have been the author of the Pentateuch. Spinoza was not the first to mention this, but his historical criticism of the Bible was unrivaled in its 'willingness to go wherever the textual and historical evidence led, regardless of religious ramifications, ushered in modern biblical source scholarship'.[8]

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[6] This debate between the ones advocating a rationalist and the ones advocating a historical interpretation of texts just as well takes place with regard to philosophical texts. Spinoza can be read in a way, presupposing that he found a timeless truth or he can be read as a historical text, expressing the truth as he perceived it in his time. Leo Strauss has advocated the first approach with regard to the interpretation of historical texts, and Quentin Skinner the second one. In this dissertation a combination between the two is tried.

[7] See Touber (2018) and Van Rooden (1984) for a critique of this approach.

[8] Nadler (2011), p. 106.

Spinoza's Criteria For Evaluating Scripture

The *Theological-Political Treatise* is a scandalous book that breaks away from the tradition, because Spinoza, in the Preface, denies that Scripture should be considered 'true and divine throughout', before this has emerged 'from a critical examination and understanding of Scripture' (TTP Preface-9). This presupposes that Spinoza already has a standard at his disposal in order to judge to what degree the Bible is 'true and divine'. This standard is supplied to him by reason and his philosophical religion, not by the Bible itself. Scripture can be called divine, Spinoza writes, because 'we see from Scripture itself, and without any difficulty or ambiguity, that the essence of the Law is to love God above all things, and one's neighbor as oneself'. (12-10, p. 170). Spinoza's Biblical criticism in other words is not an internal criticism: he is not judging the Bible by its own standard. He uses a standard that is external to the Bible, because he uses the standard of reason in order to judge the Bible.[9]

This is why the title of Leo Strauss' first book on the *Theological-Political Treatise* is *Die Religionskritik Spinozas als Grundlage seiner Bibelwissenschaft* [10]*(…)*: underlying Spinoza's criticism of the Bible is the conviction that the truth is found in the use of natural reason and that true religion consists in acting out of the intellectual love of God. Before Strauss, most scholars believed that Spinoza used his method for interpreting Scripture as a tool to criticize religion. But Strauss made clear that he did not use his method in order to criticize religion. Rather, his distance from the Bible made his criticism of the Bible possible.[11] A traditionally religious person would not presuppose from the outset that everything found in the Bible can be judged by reason, as Spinoza did. The fact that parts of the Bible seem inconsistent or even incomprehensible, according to these true believers, only shows that God's ways are unsearchable and are above our understanding. Strauss interprets the fact that Spinoza, from the outset, denies the possibility of something being beyond human comprehension, as a proof of his irreligiosity, and this irreligiosity is then the basis for his critique of the Bible.

Spinoza, the First Modern Bible-Critic?

Samuel Preus's book on Spinoza's treatment of the Bible likewise argues that Spinoza, in treating the Bible as just an ancient text that can be investigated with the same tools as one would investigate a text from any other ancient past, has paved the way for the historical-critical study of

[9] See Levene (2011), p. 545-573.
[10] Strauss (1930).
[11] Janssens (2005), p. 8-11

the Bible.[12] Preus approaches Spinoza as a critic of religion, rather than as someone who thought that religion was important for individuals as well as for society at large: 'No doubt Spinoza used pious language in part to tranquilize unwary readers and camouflage his own subversive purposes – and he does so with "snakish cunning"'.[13]

Preus's main point in his book is, as the title already indicates, that Spinoza's *Theological Political Treatise* was written with the intention to make the 'authority' of the Bible 'irrelevant' in the sense that there are no 'eternal truths' in the Bible that we, in our societies, must worry about. Preus therefore begins his book in the following way: 'The fact that we are not governed by interpreters of divine law, not intellectually answerable to alleged divine revelations, is a major aspect of modern liberty. For this we are hugely indebted to writers of the seventeenth century, above all to the Jewish philosopher Benedict Spinoza'.[14]

According to Preus Spinoza tried to liberate us by stripping 'the Bible of its usefulness to such theocratic interpreters – not, as is commonly supposed, merely by submitting it to a critique from the perspective of pure (i.e., seventeenth-century) reason, but by reconceiving and exhaustively explaining the Bible itself *and* its religion in a radically new way: historically. Under Spinoza's relentless critique the Bible would become one ancient book among and comparable to others, irrelevant as an authority'.[15]

Preus goes further than Strauss. He not only wants to claim Spinoza as the one who made the historical-critical study of the Bible possible by approaching the Bible as just an(other) ancient text, he also wants to present Spinoza as someone for whom the historical critical approach is the most important approach for understanding the Bible.

Maimonides: Stand-in For Meijer?

Preus believes this can be demonstrated as Spinoza attacks 'dogmatists' such as Maimonides who believe that they can make Scripture subservient to reason. As Spinoza clearly indicates that this Maimonidean approach is bad (we should not assume from the outset that Scripture is reasonable, because the people who wrote the Bible were not philosophers), Spinoza's criticism of the Bible should not be understood as a rationalist critique, but as historical criticism.

Now, according to Preus, as well as according to a host of other commentators, the real target of Spinoza's attack on Maimonides's dogmatism was the book of Spinoza's good friend Lodewijk Meijer, *Philosophia Sanctae Scripturae Interpres* (PSSI, *Philosophy as the Interpreter of Holy*

[12] Preus (2001).
[13] Preus (2001), p. 13, n. 39.
[14] Preus (2001), p. 1.
[15] Preus (2001), p. 2

Scripture), published in 1666, four years before the TTP. In this book Meijer argues that philosophy should be the interpreter of Holy Scripture, meaning with 'philosophy' the new philosophy of Descartes and maybe even more so, the philosophy of his friend Spinoza that went further from where Descartes's philosophy stopped.[16]

The publication of Meijer's anonymous book had aroused a scandal in the Republic and many refutations were written against it. Spinoza, according to Preus, turns the arguments of Meijer's opponents into arguments against the authority of Scripture. What was argued against Meijer's idea that philosophy should be the interpreter of the Bible was 'that the essential biblical discourse was *historical*, not philosophical, and that the investigation of original *meanings* must be prior to and separate from the question of truth'.[17] This, Preus argues, is exactly the method that Spinoza uses in the TTP: this method, according to Preus, is not based on his philosophical system, but on a secure investigation of the meaning of words, and the historical context in which the Bible has to be understood. 'Spinoza did not believe in "revelation" as a source of truth and knowledge independent of reason, or as a heteronomous authority over reason. But this does not allow us to infer that his *method* of scriptural interpretation was "rationalistic". Rather his reasoning led him to propose a method that dismissed Meyerian rationalism and mapped a new route into scripture by way of history'.[18]

3.3. Why the Depiction of Spinoza as a Modern Bible Critic is Limited

In this section I will investigate the first three of the following claims that Samuel Preus makes:

1) Spinoza sought to make the Bible 'irrelevant as an authority'.[19]
2) Spinoza 'did not try to derive his own approach from scripture'.[20]
3) Spinoza's criticism of the Bible is not based on his philosophy, but on the historical-critical method.
4) Spinoza targeted his friend Meijer in criticizing the dogmatism of Maimonides.[21]

Did Spinoza consider the authority of the Bible to be irrelevant?

To a very large extent, Preus is fully justified in stating this: Spinoza had his own philosophical religion which was authoritative to him, and the exact words of the Bible did not impress him.[22]

[16] Descartes uses his method only for the things that we find in nature, but he did not dare to use his method to come to a clear understanding of God itself, which according to the Cartesians was a matter of 'theology', and not of 'philosophy'.
[17] Preus (2001), p. 17
[18] Preus (2001), p. 202
[19] Preus (2001),p. 2.
[20] Preus (2001), p.2 and p. 202
[21] Preus (2001), p. 7, note 21 and p. 202

Spinoza's Theological Reasoning

However, the claim needs to be qualified. There are many chapters in the TTP in which Spinoza seems to turn to the authority of Scripture in order to prove one of his points. For example, Spinoza, in chapter four seeks to argue that the Bible does fully support the natural divine law, which is that our supreme good consists in the knowledge and love of God, the most important teaching of his philosophical religion.

Spinoza then points to Scriptural evidence for the truth of his philosophical religion: '[the] Bible fully endorses the natural light of reason and the natural divine law'. (TTP IV-12, p. 67). Many other examples can be given from chapters in the TTP where Spinoza seeks to prove that his own philosophy is supported by Scripture. For example, that God can only be understood from contemplation of his eternal order, and not by means of miracles, is a reasonable and timeless theory which is supported by Scripture: 'I will show from Scripture that the edicts and commands of God, and hence of providence, are nothing other than the order of nature. (…)' (TTP VI-12, p. 89).

Spinoza likewise seeks to show that the Bible approves of the standard of what is to be called true and divine, which he uses to judge Scripture (TTP XII-6, p. 165). Many more examples can be given of Spinoza using the Bible as an 'authority', such as all these paragraphs that have to do with the political lessons of Scripture. The authority of the Bible seems then not completely 'irrelevant' for Spinoza. Time and time again, he refers to the Bible in order to support his own philosophical theory.

Preus might argue that these appeals to Scriptural authority, although there are many to be found in the TTP, cannot be taken as indications that Spinoza seriously believed that the Bible contains truths that cannot be found by reason. Spinoza has already made sufficiently clear that such is not the case.

Some Things The Bible Teaches Are Beyond Reason

But is it really true that he doesn't find anything in Scripture which cannot likewise be understood by means of reason? The most important thing that the Bible teaches – faith through obedience –

[22] See the exchange of letters between Spinoza and the grainbroker Van Blyenbergh: 'When I read your first letter', Spinoza writes to Van Byenbergh, 'I had the impression that our views were nearly in agreement. From your second letter, however (…) I realize that this is far from being so, and I see that we disagree not only in the conclusions to be drawn by a chain of reasoning from first principles, but in those very first principles, so that I hardly believe that our correspondence can be for our mutual instruction. For I see that no proof, however firmly established according to the rules of logic, has any validity with you unless it agrees with the explanation, which you, or other theologians of your acquaintance, assign to Holy Scripture. However, it is your conviction that God speaks more clearly and effectually through Holy Scripture than through the light of the natural understanding which he has also granted us (…)' (Letter 21, p. 822)

is not something that we could have found out by means of reason alone. '[W]e are unable to prove by means of reason whether the fundamental principle of theology – that men are saved by obedience alone – is true or false'. (TTP 15-7, p. 191). Prophecy, Spinoza writes, 'exceeds the limits of the intellect' (TTP I-6, p. 15). He does not understand by what 'natural laws prophetic insights occurred' (TTP I-27, p. 25), nor does he understand how it is possible that we can be saved by obedience alone. But, still, he can accept these Biblical teachings with moral certainty (TTP XV-7, p. 192-193). It is then untrue that Spinoza thought there is nothing in Scripture that cannot be found by reason alone.

That Scripture remains an authority in Spinoza's hands is furthermore shown by his treatment of the fundamental dogmas of the faith. Scripture teaches the dogmas of faith, dogmas that everybody needs to know. These dogmas can only be known from Scripture, and not from reason. So, in a certain sense Scripture is an authority, which teaches things that cannot be understood by reason alone. Of course, Preus might reply that everybody is free to interpret these dogmas as he likes, making them not really an authority. That is also true. Nevertheless, we only know these dogmas from Scripture, and they need to be taught to everyone. Therefore, it is not entirely true to state that the 'authority of Scripture' has become totally ' irrelevant'.

A Paradoxical Truth

There remains a puzzle, however. For how can Spinoza simultaneously use his philosophy to evaluate Scripture while he uses Scripture to support his philosophy? The paradoxical truth here is that Spinoza denies Scripture its authority *by the authority of Scripture*. A response to Preus's book about the TTP should therefore bear the title: *The Relevance of Biblical Authority For Understanding the Irrelevance of Biblical Authority*. In order to see this we only have to read what Spinoza writes carefully: 'Those who consider the Bible in its current state a letter from God, sent from heaven to men, will undoubtedly protest that I have sinned 'against the Holy Ghost' by claiming the word of God is erroneous, mutilated, corrupt and inconsistent, that we have only fragments of it, and that the original covenant which God made with the Jews has perished. However, if they reflect upon the facts I have no doubt that they will soon cease to protest. For both reason and the beliefs of the prophets and the Apostles evidently proclaim that God's eternal word and covenant and true religion are divinely inscribed upon the hearts of men, that is, upon the human mind'. (TTP XII-1, p. 163).

Spinoza uses the words of Paul in 2 Corinthians 3, that the new covenant is not 'written with ink but with the Spirit of the living God, not on tablets of stone, but on tablets of the human heart', as the authority to undermine the authority of the Bible. He can do this because the Bible

is a book consisting out of letters. To revere a book or to think of a certain combination of letters as holy is to revere an external thing. This rises to a form of superstition, comparable to thinking that some kind of statue or mountain or any object is God. True religion is the idea of God within us. This is testified to not only by reason but also by the Bible itself. That is to say: the Bible can lead the 'philosophical reader' (TTP, Preface 15, p. 12) to discover that Christ and Paul actually taught true salvation by means of adequate knowledge of God. But for the majority of men the Bible teaches salvation though obedience by means of the first kind of knowledge of God. In the case of the philosophical religion as well as in the case of universal faith, true religion is not about venerating a book or a bunch of words, but about 'worshipping God' with the 'mind' (TTP, Preface 8, p. 6).

Spinoza: 'I Don't Think That The Authority of the Bible is Irrelevant'

Spinoza himself flatly denies that he tries to undermine the authority of Scripture. Again, it might be interesting to read his argumentation here, before stating that it is a pious cover-up. Spinoza addresses the issue of whether he has contributed to the idea of 'some impious persons who find religion a burden (…) [who may] discern an excuse for wrongdoing here and may infer, without any justification, but merely to indulge their pleasures that Scripture is thoroughly flawed and corrupted and consequently *lacks authority*. One can do nothing to help such people. It is a commonplace that nothing can be so well formulated that it cannot be perverted by *wrong interpretations*'. (TTP XV-3, p. 164, Italics not in the original).

Scripture still has authority, because of the parts in it that are uncorrupted and that teach the natural divine law, which states that our highest good consists in the knowledge and the love of God.

Spinoza Did Seek His Own Philosophy in Scripture

On Preus's second claim – that Spinoza did not seek to find his own philosophy in Scripture – we can be brief. This is not correct as we have already made clear. Christ and probably also Paul embraced Spinoza's philosophical religion and Spinoza's idea of God. However, they chose to remain silent about it (TTP IV-10, p. 64-65). Spinoza did not consider it problematic at all to detect his own philosophical teachings in Scripture. This might strike one as a little hypocritical. It seems to be exactly the kind of thing that Spinoza reproaches Maimonides for, and the theologians that have followed Maimonides in his 'dogmatism' (TTP VII-21, p. 115). However, as I will show in my discussion of Preus's fourth claim, Spinoza does not object *per se* to pointing

to true philosophical teachings in Scripture. He only objects to the theological tradition, because of the scholastic philosophical 'nonsense' it projects onto the prophets (TTP, Preface 9, p. 8).[23]

Didn't Spinoza Criticize the Bible By Means of Reason?

Let's move then to Preus's third claim: that Spinoza criticizes the Bible not by means of his philosophy of reason, but by means of historical criticism. I will first indicate to what extent Preus is right before I will start my criticism of this view.

Spinoza in His Biblical Hermeneutical Makes Use of Historical Criticism

Preus is right that history, according to Spinoza, is extremely important for understanding Scripture. This is clearly stated by Spinoza in chapter 7 of the TTP: 'The universal rule for interpreting Scripture is to claim nothing as a biblical doctrine that we have not derived, by the closest possible scrutiny from its own [i.e. the Bible's] history' (TTP VII-5, p. 99-100). Spinoza makes clear that we, if we want to interpret Scripture, have to make a taxonomy, containing:

1) an overview of the way in which the Bible uses certain words and expressions like Spinoza has done with regard to the different uses in the Bible of the Hebrew word *ruagh* (TTP I-22, P. 20-21).
2) An overview of the different opinions that are being expressed on each topic in the way that Spinoza has done with the different views of the prophets on the subject whether God repents of his decrees (TTP II-18, p. 40). When we find internal contradictions in the Bible on a particular subject, these can often be solved by linguistic studies. An example of an inconsistency in the Bible that is solved by means of the study of expressions is that Moses both states that God does not bear any resemblance to physical objects, while he, on the other hand states that God is fire. This is solved when we know that fire in Hebrew also means 'emotional'. Since Moses testifies on many occasions that God has emotions, the internal contradiction disappears. As we see from this example, Spinoza does not use reason to interpret the Bible. Doing so would have made clear that God does not have any emotions.
3) An overview of the tradition that handed the books down to us, telling us also about the different biblical authors and the different historical circumstances they faced while writing. Spinoza will demonstrate in chapters 8 till 10 that we don't possess clear knowledge of how the books were handed down to us, and this is one of the reasons that there will be parts of the Bible

[23] His criticism of Maimonides in chapter 7 is actually that he took refuge in the Bible's teachings the moment he failed to understand clearly the proof for the eternal order of nature. His criticism also in this case is therefore not a criticism of a theological practice, but of the philosophical tradition.

that we cannot adequately understand, because we lack this crucial information (TTP VII-5, p. 100-101).

Spinoza urges his readers that everything that we say about the Bible needs to be based on facts, meaning, the literal statements made in the Bible. 'I demonstrate how Scripture must be interpreted, proving that we must derive all our knowledge of it and of spiritual matters from Scripture alone and not from what we discover by the natural light of reason' (TTP, Preface 10, p. 10).

Just as we, when we study nature, should take care not to project the laws of human reason, 'which aim only at the true interest and conservation of humans' onto nature as a whole (TTP XVI-4, p. 197), we should also be careful in presupposing that the biblical authors understood things in a reasonable way. We should first understand the 'true meaning' of their words, that is, the things that they intended to say, before investigating whether we have to judge these words as true or not.

Spinoza's Aim is to Find What is True and Divine in Scripture

However, after we have discovered what the true meaning is, 'we must necessarily use our judgment and reason before giving assent to it'. (TTP XV- 3, p. 188). It is, in other words, not true that Spinoza only wants to establish a historical overview of the different things that we find in the Bible. He does this, because he wants to know to what extent the Bible can be called 'true and divine' (TTP I-9, p. 8). This clearly separates him from the modern Bible scholar who approaches the Bible in a historical-critical fashion. Such a detached scientific observer would not be interested at all in finding out what is true and divine in the Bible, as he would assume from the outset that there is not such a thing as an ahistorical truth, to remain silent on the subject of there really being anything that can be rightfully called 'divine'. The presupposition of such a modern Bible scholar is in other words clearly different from the presupposition of Spinoza, who did believe that there was something which was true and divine. This was of course his philosophical religion, on which he had been working for seven or eight years, before he interrupted his writing of the *Ethics* in order to write the *Theological-Political Treatise*.

Preus cannot say that Spinoza only made use of the historical-critical method and that his rationalism played not an important role in his Bible-interpretation, for the ultimate goal of his pursuit is to find out what is true and divine in Scripture. Chapters 8 through 10 (where Spinoza investigates who has written the Bible, what parts are written by one author, what by other authors, what parts are missing, what parts are inconsistent or incorrect, etcetera) are not

considered by Spinoza to be the most important part of the book. The 'cardinal points' he makes in the *Treatise* are, according to Spinoza himself, those that show what the Bible positively and universally teaches, which are the dogmas of the universal faith that everyone needs to have in order to be obedient (TTP XIV-14, p. 185).

Spinoza's Epistemology

But not only does Spinoza use reason to evaluate the degree of truth and divinity of the Bible, his reasonable philosophy is also the most important instrument for interpreting Scripture. The first six chapters of the TTP investigate 'the philosophical matters' that Scripture teaches (chapters 12 through 14 deal with what the Bible teaches 'about questions of daily life'). Most important for understanding 'the philosophical matters', is first to inquire '(…) what prophecy and revelation is, and what it chiefly consists in. Then we must ask what a miracle is, and continue thus with the most general questions' (TTP VII-8, p. 104). In other words, what is needed first and foremost for an adequate understanding of Scripture is to know what kind of book it is. Since the Bible is a book that is based on prophecy, Spinoza asks what the nature is of Biblical revelation. Spinoza answers that the Bible has to be understood as a book which was written by people to which only the first kind of knowledge of God was revealed. There are a few Biblical figures who did receive more adequate knowledge of God (Christ and Paul), but they decided to only teach the first kind of knowledge of God to the common people. This epistemological insight also underlies the choice for a historical-critical method. For, if the Bible was not written in the language of the imagination, the whole historical-critical method would not be justified, as Spinoza makes clear by naming the books of Euclid as an example of books that are not in need of the historical critical method (TTP VII-17, p. 111). We conclude, then, regarding the third claim of Preus, that it is not true that the historical-critical method for studying Scripture was more important for Spinoza than his own reasonable philosophical system.

Preus's fourth and final claim – Spinoza criticized the rationalism of Meijer by attacking Maimonides – is more complex, and brings us to a whole new subject.[24] This fourth claim will therefore be treated separately in the last section of this chapter. But before arriving there we have to do one other thing: describe the context of the Dutch Republic in order to find out how Spinoza's approach to the Bible related to the three other main approaches of the Bible in the Republic of his time.

[24] In order to fully grasp how Spinoza relates to both Maimonides as well as Meijer one has to know Maimonides's way of interpreting Scripture, Meijer's method for interpreting Scripture, and Spinoza's method for doing so. Besides that one also needs to take the historical context of the Dutch Republic of the 1660's into account, or, more specifically, one needs to know the debates that were going on at that time about how one should interpret the Bible.

3.4. Context of the Dutch Republic

Theo Verbeek has conveniently distinguished between the three different approaches to the interpretation of the Bible which existed in the Republic of the 1660s, and to which Spinoza in one way or the other had to relate.[25] The first was that of Orthodox Reformed theology. That found an assertive spokesperson in Gysbertius Voetius (1589-1679). Crucial in the Orthodox Reformed approach was the slogan *sola Scriptura*.

Sola Scriptura

Sola Scriptura meant in the first place that biblical knowledge was the most certain knowledge that one can obtain. Martin Luther and John Calvin had taught that because the Fall of man had corrupted the natural light, philosophy or natural theology had to be deeply distrusted. As reason is corrupted, people have to turn to the Bible for guidance. In theory, therefore, the Reformation stood hostile towards philosophy. But in practice reformed theologians soon went back to the scholastic way of using the philosophies of especially Aristotle. For example, Voetius and some other Reformed theologians had developed what they called 'Mosaic physics', which was based on the Bible as well as the teachings of Aristotle.[26] The Voetian approach is therefore characterized by Verbeek as 'an uneasy compromise between scholastic rationalism and the rule of *sola Scriptura*'.[27]

In the second sense *sola Scriptura* meant that, for understanding the teachings of the Bible itself one had no need for a pope and bishops, like the Roman Catholic Church has, nor for a rabbinical tradition such as Judaism has. Scripture could be understood from Scripture alone, without traditions and offices of interpretation. Orthodox Reformed theologians posit that the less clear passages in the Bible can be explained by means of the more clear ones.[28]

One of the major threats to true faith in the Dutch Republic in the seventeenth century, in the eyes of Voetius, came from the enormous success that the philosophy of René Descartes had in the universities. Voetius believed – rightly, it turns out – that the methodological doubt of common-sense experiences would not stop at the theoretical truths of physics, but would also affect the theological teachings.

[25] Verbeek (2003), p. 94-99.
[26] Douglas (2013), p. 569-570.
[27] Verbeek (2003), p. 95.
[28] Verbeek (2003), p. 94.

Orthodox Cartesians and their Defense of the Freedom to Philosophize

The orthodox Cartesians, the second group of people that Verbeek distinguishes in their approach towards Scripture, defended themselves from the accusation that they were a threat to piety by stating that there was something called 'the freedom to philosophize', by which they meant that philosophy needed to be separated from theology.[29] Philosophy, according to the orthodox Cartesians, was the way to the truth with regard to knowledge of natural sciences such as physics; whereas theology knew the truth with regard to all supernatural and practical matters.[30]

Separating philosophy from theology, in other words, meant that each – philosophy as well as theology - possessed the truth on its own terrain. In this way philosophy could be free from theology, just as theology could be free from philosophy. Cartesians such as Johannes de Raey (1622-1707) insisted that his mathematical method should not be used with regard to things such as God, the soul, or the way to salvation.[31] These things still had to be derived from theology. The freedom to philosophize therefore meant that just as philosophy was no threat to theology, theology was no threat to philosophy, because each ruled over its own terrain.

'Heretical Cartesians'

It is exactly this attempt to find a *modus vivendi* between Orthodoxy and Cartesianism, by means of strictly separating philosophy from theology, that was threatened by the third group that stood for yet another approach to Scripture. The 'heretical' Cartesians, such as Lodewijk Meijer (or Spinoza and his other friends), believed that the Cartesian mathematical method could be used in order to arrive at adequate knowledge of God, the soul, and the way to salvation; or, as Meijer's argued in his anonymously published scandalous book *Philosophy as the Interpreter of H. Scripture*, this method could also be used in order to interpret Scripture.

Meyers approach was heretical for three reasons, according to Verbeek: 'first and mainly, because he explicitly rejects the Reformed principle of absolute clarity of Scripture (…) Meyer's book is also a provocation because he gives the same weight to the authority of Scripture and the authority of the Cartesian method. (…) Finally, Meyer's proposal is a provocation because he does not restrict his argument to natural philosophy but extends it to all those subjects the Cartesians had so far avoided'.[32]

[29] Verbeek (2011), p. 252.
[30] Verbeek (1994), p. 5-8.
[31] Verbeek (2003), p. 95-96.
[32] Verbeek (2003), p. 99.

The Relation Between Spinoza and Reformed Orthodoxy

How did Spinoza's method of studying Scripture, described in the *Treatise*, relate to these three different approaches? With regard to the relationship between Spinoza and Reformed orthodoxy, it seems that Spinoza might have stayed close to its principle of *sola Scriptura* by stating that 'we must derive all our knowledge of it [Scripture] and of spiritual matters from Scripture alone and not from what we discover by the natural light of reason' (TTP, Preface 10, p. 10. See also: TTP VII-5, p. 99-100; TTP XV-6, p. 191). But what Spinoza means is far removed from what Reformed orthodoxy meant. For, Spinoza denies that Scripture is either wholly true or wholly divine.

Because the Bible is not a consistent book, written by one author, but a book full of contradictions, written by many different authors, it would be a big mistake to explain the less clear parts of the Bible by means of using the clearer ones. Instead we have to investigate the different meanings of the different parts of the Bible. In this search we have to accept that many things that the Bible states cannot be understood, because the Bible is a selection of texts, which is handed down to us incompletely. Many of the Biblical authors write things that are not understandable, as they write about the products of their own imagination, and because the Bible is also written in a language (namely Hebrew) in which words always can be interpreted in many different ways.

Spinoza spends so much time on this criticism of the Bible, because the idea that the Bible is true and divine throughout gives rise to 'the prejudices of the theologians', which were already mentioned in 4.1. Spinoza's TTP is written against the orthodox theologians. Since reason 'claims the realm of truth for itself' (TTP XV-8, p. 194), Scripture in itself, *sola Scriptura,* cannot teach us the truth. This doesn't mean that there are no truths to be found in Scripture, only that these truths have to be discovered by reason and cannot be trusted to be truth on the mere ground that they are part of Holy Scripture. Only reason can tell us what is true and what is untrue in Scripture, and only reason can tell us what is divine and what is not divine in Scripture.

Spinoza and the Orthodox Cartesians

The second question we should ask is: how does Spinoza's approach towards the Bible relate to the one of the orthodox Cartesians? Here again it seems as if he shared their principles, because he – just like them – defended the 'freedom to philosophize' and the 'separation of philosophy from theology'. Also in this case, he was using these slogans to designate very different things. He says: 'It remains only to show that there is no interaction and no affinity between faith or theology, on the one side, and philosophy, on the other. (…) For the aim of philosophy is

nothing but truth, but the aim of faith, as we have abundantly demonstrated, is simply obedience and piety. The foundations of philosophy are universal concepts, and philosophy should be drawn from nature alone. But the foundations of faith are histories and language and are to be drawn only from Scripture and revelation'. (TTP XIV-13, p. 184).

In other words, Spinoza wanted to give philosophy much more space than the Cartesians did, since he held that it is his philosophy which can teach us to find a lasting happiness, and how we can be saved. Theology or the teachings of Scripture was not meant to teach theoretical truth, but only practical, moral lessons. Theology on the grounds of Scripture is meant to teach 'obedience' to the people by helping them to imagine God as a perfect exemplar of how one should live, who rules over them as a prince and a lawgiver and who must be obeyed by performing acts of justice and charity. Theology is then good for helping simple and uneducated people to behave in a moral fashion, but in itself theology does not contain the truth of what exactly God is or how he relates to the world and to man. This is of course very different from what the Cartesians meant by the separation of philosophy from theology, in which theology does know the truth about practical and supernatural things, whereas philosophy knows the truth about natural things.

3.5. The TTP and Meijer

This brings us then to the third and most complicated question (and to the fourth of Preus's claims): How does Spinoza's account of Scripture relate to Lodewijk Meijer's in his book *Philosophy as the Interpreter of Holy Scripture*? A large group of commentators believe that when Spinoza in chapter 15 attacks the position of those who think that 'Scripture should be accommodated to reason' – people whom Spinoza calls 'dogmatists' and whom he associates with Maimonides – Spinoza is actually targeting his friend Meijer.[33]

Maimonides Is *Not a Stand-In For Meijer*

However, as Klever has pointed out, Spinoza himself clearly denied this was the case when the orthodox Cartesian Velthuysen made exactly the same claim. Velthuysen believed that the anonymous author of the *Treatise* considered 'all those who deny that reason and philosophy are the interpreters of Scripture will be on his side'. Spinoza would then have rejected 'the view of those who agree with the paradoxical theologian [that is, Meijer]' (Letter 42, p. 871). Spinoza's

[33] See for this view that Spinoza in fact is targeting Meijer with his attack on Maimonides: Zac (1965), p. 27-28; Lagrée (1988); Walther (1995); James (2012), p. 156-160; Preus (2001), p. 37; Hunter (2005), p. 106; Huenemann (2008), p. 115. Two people who have come to the opposite view and think that Spinoza and Meijer agree that philosophy should be the interpreter of Scripture are Klever (1997), p. 81, and Verbeek (2003), p. 108.

reply: 'I do not see why he says that I think that all those will agree with me who deny that reason and philosophy are the interpreters of Scripture. For I have refuted the views of these and of Maimonides'. (Letter 43, p. 881). Spinoza writes that *he has refuted* the views of those people who believe that reason or philosophy is *not* the interpreter of Scripture, in other words, Spinoza affirms, just like Meijer, that reason or philosophy *is* the interpreter of Scripture, and he somehow differentiates between this view and the faulty view of Maimonides which he rejects.

Meijer seems to agree with the dogmatist position of Maimonides, as he writes that the Bible is 'the true and infallible word of God'. However, in order to understand what he meant we must turn to Meijer's theory of language, as explained in the Epilogue of his *Interpres*. There he writes: words in themselves can never possess truth. Truth is not something that pertains to words. Words are two things: they are material things as well as signs that denote other things. Words are material things because they are either spoken, and then they are soundwaves in the air; or they are written, and in that case, they are, say, ink on paper. Words are signs, because the sound or ink points to something else. For example, the word 'tree' can make us think about a tree, and then we have an idea of the tree. Notice that we can only understand the word 'tree' as a sign that pertains to the idea 'tree', if we first are in possession of the idea 'tree'. We first learn to know the ideas of the things, and then only later attach words to these ideas. Words themselves, therefore, do not possess truth. It is rather the ideas that the mind understands as the things to which words points us.

The Theory Of Language of Meijer and Spinoza

Does this mean that the Bible, a book consisting out of words, does not contain any truth? No, according to Meijer, it contains truth in the sense that the words of the Bible give us little impulses that trigger the mind to think about certain things. Truth is not to be found in the words of the Bible itself, but in the way in which these words make the mind contemplate the nature of God and our supreme happiness. The 'greatest and most useful assistance' that books can give to us is that 'they inspire the reader to think and they urge him towards ideas which he already possesses in his mind in clear and distinct form. (…) In no way can they lead the intellect either of itself or through itself to a true knowledge of things; far less can they implant in the mind clear and distinct ideas if they were not already infused and implanted in it, nor can they infuse, impress, or in other way generate such ideas'.[34]

In other words, the Bible according to Meijer is nothing but an instrument to lead us to the knowledge of God. That is the religion dictated to us by God. He is in us as the light of reason.

[34] Meyer (2005), p. 238.

Only when we have arrived at this true religion, will we be able to interpret the Bible. We then understand that it is the true and infallible word of God, since it has led us to this true religion. This is all very similar to Spinoza's ideas, and also very far removed from what Maimonides taught.

Spinoza, just as Meijer, criticizes the idea that words and books in themselves can be holy. 'They [his adversaries, the orthodox theologians] are converting religion into superstition, indeed verge, unfortunately, on adoring images and pictures, i.e., paper and ink, as the word of God'. (TTP XV-3, p. 164). Spinoza also thinks that philosophy is the true interpreter of Holy Scripture in the sense that only those who understand Spinoza's philosophical religion will grasp the true and infallible word of God. 'Scripture is properly termed the word of God only with respect to religion, i.e. the universal divine law'.(TTP XII-10, p. 169) In other words, Spinoza understand Scripture, just as Meijer, to be true and divine, because it teaches the same things as the natural light of reason does: the natural divine law, which is 'the law which looks only to the supreme good, that is, to the true knowledge and love of God' (TTP IV-3, p. 59).

Spinoza's Critique of Maimonides

Maimonides, however, is criticized, not, because he interprets passages in Scripture as corresponding to what he considers to be the teachings of reason (as the whole series of scholars that I have earlier mentioned believe). This cannot be Spinoza's criticism, because Spinoza himself namely also interprets the Bible in ways that make it correspond to reason. An example of this practice is that Spinoza explains the story of Adam who was forbidden to eat from the tree of knowledge of good and evil as a 'parable', teaching that we should 'seek good for the love of good rather than for the fear of harm'. (TTP IV-11, p.65).

Rather, the problem with Maimonides' way of interpreting the Bible is that he believes that revelation provides us with a light above reason, which helps us to detect what reason really teaches, while not understanding it ourselves. For, Maimonides chooses to believe the account of creation in the Bible, because he himself is still in doubt about the question of whether the earth is eternal as Aristotle thought or that the earth is created as the Torah states.[35] That is to say: because the things shown to him by the natural light of reason are not clear enough for him, he decides to believe in something on the basis of revelation, rather than on the basis of reason.

[35] Spinoza cites: Maimonides. *Guide of the Perplexed* II. 25 (TTP V-20, p. 113).

Spinoza's criticism of Maimonides is then not that he is too rationalist, but rather that he is not rationalistic enough.[36] This lack of rationalism makes it impossible for Maimonides to see what truth the Bible really teaches. 'For while the truth of a thing is not fully evident we will not know whether it agrees with reason or contradicts it and, consequently, will also not know whether the literal sense is true or false' (TTP VII-20, p. 113-114).

There is only one real way to understand the Bible, and this is that one already knows the truth which is shown by the natural light and not by the revealed light. 'Indeed, just as light makes manifest both itself and darkness, so truth is the standard both of itself and falsity' (E-IIp43s, p. 269).

Spinoza's Critique of Scepticism and Dogmatism

When Spinoza criticizes Maimonides's 'dogmatism' or the idea that the Bible 'contains nothing that is contrary to or that does not accord with reason' (TTP VII-20, p. 113), or the idea that the Bible 'should be accommodated to reason' (TTP XV-1, p. 186), he is not criticizing Meijer's idea that philosophy is the true interpreter of Scripture. No, he is criticizing the entire tradition up to that point which holds that there are two lights: a natural light provided by reason and a supernatural light provided by revelation. Whereas 'skepticism' claims that we should not trust reason, but that we should trust only revealed faith, 'dogmatism' claims that we can trust the supernatural light always to be in accordance with reason, without having fully to understand it ourselves. This is dogmatic, because it orders us to believe something to be rational on the mere grounds that the Bible states that this is the case. Meijer's *Interpres*, as well as Spinoza's *Treatise*, are scandalous, because they both equally defy the tradition. This they do because the two close friends both were convinced of the philosophical religion in which salvation is reached by means of the reasonable understanding of God alone.

The only truly important difference between Spinoza and Meijer is that Spinoza remained in a certain sense a Maimonidean in distinguishing between the philosophical religion which will always remain the preserve of a few, and revealed faith which brings salvation to the masses by means of obedience alone. This faith, or the knowledge provided by theology, should be clearly separated from the knowledge provided by philosophy. The first only aims at obedience, the second one only at truth. That is to say: Spinoza criticizes Maimonides as well as Meijer for

[36] Spinoza also criticizes Maimonides for his lack of rationalism as Maimonides believes that reason in itself is not sufficient for piety and salvation, but that only 'the teachings prophetically revealed to Moses' make someone 'belong to the pious or learned of the nations' (TTP V-19, p. 79)

believing that the Bible was meant to teach theoretical truth; whereas it was meant to have a purely practical function in making people obey the divine law.

4. Athens and Jerusalem, Philosophy and Theology

Spinoza's philosophy, as it comes to the fore in the *Treatise on the Emendation of the Intellect*, in the *Short Treatise on God, Man, and his Well-Being*, in the *Ethics*, and in different sections of the *Theological-Political Treatise*, is best understood as a philosophical religion. In order to better understand this philosophical religion, this chapter will place Spinoza's philosophical religion in its historical context.

The first section researches the relation between philosophy and religion in the tradition, arguing that Spinoza still remained in this tradition of thought

The second section argues that Spinoza inherited certain ideas from the tradition of philosophical religions, and discusses the question to what extent his philosophical religion can be adequately understood as the attempt to stretch the long Medieval tradition of philosophical religions to its most radical, logical conclusions.

The third section examines the distinction between faith and religion in the Tradition, and argues that faith and religion can logically coexist if one makes certain distinctions in the bridge concept of 'theology'.

The fourth section sketches Spinoza's circle of friends. Often they have been described as 'freethinkers', but although they were criticizing orthodox religion, they were at the same time quite religious themselves, yet not in an orthodox way.

4.1. Religion and Faith in the Tradition

When a religious person expresses the opinion that religion is 'true and good' he can mean two distinct things, depending on how he understands the relationship between God and man. If he understands God to be external to him, as someone who commands him from outside to do certain things (things that he doesn't understand to be 'true and good' with his own reasoning capacities, because his own reasoning capacities are limited or obscured or both), he believes religion to be true and good out of faith alone.[1] If, on the other hand, this person understands himself to be part of God, and that God is part of him, because he participates with his mind in God's eternal mind, he understands that certain things are true and good, because this is shown

[1] Calvin (1846), p. 101: 'The corruption of our nature was unknown to the philosophers who, in other respects, were sufficiently, and more than sufficiently, acute. Surely this stupor itself was a signal proof of original sin. For all who are not utterly blinds perceive that no part of us is sound; that the mind is smitten with blindness, and infected with innumerable errors; that all the affections of the heart are full of stubbornness and wickedness; that vile lusts, or other diseases equally fatal, reign there; and that all the senses burst forth with many vices. Since, however none but God alone is a proper judge in this cause, we must acquiesce in the sentence which he has pronounced in the Scriptures. In the first place, Scripture clearly teaches us that we are born vicious and perverse.'

to him by an internal light, the light of reason, which he shares with God, because he is made in the image of God, and God is reasonable. Spinoza's philosophical religion, as it comes most clearly to the fore in the *Ethics*, leaves from the idea that the human being – just as everything – participates in God, but that the human being as a thinking being participates in the infinite intellect of God, and as such, can adequately *understand* what is true and good, and that he doesn't have to accept it on faith alone.[2]

Spinoza and Aquinas

Is Spinoza's religion entirely alien to what we normally designate by that name? Can we call a person 'religious' who not merely obeys God, but who understands him? To react to the presupposition that is contained in the first question, Spinoza in his definition of religion and the highest good stays very close to what Thomas Aquinas wrote about these issues. Also, for Aquinas religion or, as he called it, 'the sacred doctrine' is the same as wisdom, and 'he who considers absolutely the highest cause of the whole universe, namely God, is most of all called wise'.[3] Aquinas, furthermore, equated man's final end with 'knowing and loving God'.[4] If Spinoza, in his definitions of religion and the highest good stays close to how these things were described by Thomas Aquinas, Spinoza's idea of religion and our supreme good might not break away entirely from the religious tradition.

Aquinas On Religion and Faith

Aquinas, just as Spinoza, also made a distinction between religion and faith, only maybe less clearly so, as he separated philosophy (or science) from faith: '(…) it is impossible that one and the same thing should be believed and seen [that is, understood by means of reason alone] by the same person'.[5] According to Aquinas, and also according to Spinoza, 'it was necessary for man's salvation that there should be a knowledge revealed by God besides philosophical science built up by human reason; (…) it was necessary for the salvation of man that certain truths which exceed human reason should be made known to him by divine revelation'.[6] Spinoza agrees with Aquinas that revelation was 'necessary' for the salvation of the masses. And just as Aquinas he calls revealed religion something which exceeds human reason. A crucial difference between Aquinas and Spinoza is that Aquinas thought that revelation was in a certain sense 'above reason',

[2] 'Our mind, insofar as it knows both itself and the body under a form of eternity, necessarily has a knowledge of God, and knows that it is in God, and is conceived through God' (E-Vp30, p. 376).
[3] Aquinas (1920) First Part, Question1. Article 6.
[4] Aquinas (1920) First Part of the Second Part. Question 1. Article 8.
[5] Aquinas (1920) First part of the Second Part. Question 1. Article 5.
[6] Aquinas (1920) First part. Question 1. Article 1.

as it helped to direct the mind to certain truths it would not have been able to grasp without divine revelation. Spinoza, on the other hand, denies that there is anything above reason, and he uses the expression 'transcending the limits of the intellect' in another way.[7]

Aquinas' and the Salvation of the Ignorant

Finally, Spinoza does agree with Aquinas again as the last mentioned wrote: 'Even as regards those truths about God which human reason could have discovered, it was necessary that man should be taught by a divine revelation; because the truth about God such as reason could discover, would only be known by a few, and that after a long time, and with the admixture of many errors. Whereas man's whole salvation, which is in God, depends upon the knowledge of this truth. Therefore, in order that the salvation of men might be brought about more fitly and more surely, it was necessary that they should be taught divine truths by divine revelation. It was therefore necessary that besides philosophical science built up by reason, there should be a sacred science learned through revelation'.[8]

Of course, there are important differences between the two, but surprisingly enough there are also points of agreement to be found between the 'Doctor Angelicus' of the Roman Catholic Church and 'the atheist Jew from Voorburg'.

Athens in Jerusalem and Jerusalem in Athens

The tradition of philosophical religions, to which Spinoza can be said to belong, bridges reason and religion, two things that are often considered to be unbridgeable. Leo Strauss, for example, thought that the notion of a 'philosophical religion' would be an oxymoron: 'The fundamental question (…) is whether men can acquire that knowledge of the good without which they cannot guide their lives, individually or collectively by the unaided efforts of their natural powers, or whether they are dependent on Divine Revelation. No alternative is more fundamental than this: human guidance or divine guidance'.[9]

These two – Athens versus Jerusalem – are set up by Strauss to constitute the fundamental dichotomy, underlying the whole of Western civilization, a dynamic tension which cannot be overcome by 'any harmonization or synthesis', because in every attempt to do so one is given more weight than the other, and therefore the tension remains.

For Spinoza, however, it would not have made sense to speak of a man using reason as 'unaided', because the human mind is 'part of the infinite intellect of God; and therefore when

[7] See 5.3.
[8] Aquinas (1920). First part. Question 1. Article 1. Compare this to TTP XV-10, p. 194
[9] Strauss (1965), p. 74-75.

we say that the human mind perceives this or that, we are saying nothing else but this: that God (…) has this or that idea' (E-IIp11c, p. 250). In other words, in Strauss's interpretation of the tradition there exists an opposition between man and God that does not exist for Spinoza, because he thinks of man as participating in God. Is Spinoza deviating then from the tradition? Not necessarily. The most important philosophers in these traditions, such as Maimonides in Judaism, and Thomas Aquinas (who was influenced by 'Rabbi Moses' as he referred to him) in the Roman Catholic tradition, can also be understood in a different way. To state it in the Tertullian terms of Strauss: Athens, for these philosophers, is in Jerusalem. And, also, the opposite is true: Jerusalem is in Athens.

Following on the leads of men such as Farabi, Maimonides, and Aquinas, Spinoza believed that the stories of the Bible were necessary for the salvation of the common people, that is, the majority of mankind, who would not be able to reach salvation by means of reason alone. Strauss interpreted this as 'the exoteric teaching' of these philosophers. In their 'esoteric teachings' they would transmit 'the truth' to a small elite of people fit to philosophize: only philosophy is true, revealed religion is not. But maybe these philosophers were not expressing 'noble lies', but the truth as they stated the opinion that it is possible to think of revealed religion as an accommodation of the philosophical religion in order that the common people can live a moral and peaceful life.

4.2. Spinoza as the Last of the Medievals

Is Spinoza's philosophical religion best understood as the outcome of a long tradition? Harry Austryn Wolfson's study of Spinoza's *Ethics* from 1934, still unmatched in academic erudition, functions as a perfect example of an approach which takes its bearing from this presupposition.
In the preface, Wolfson famously describes Spinoza's mind to consist out of two persons: Baruch and Benedictus. 'In the case of the *Ethics* of Spinoza, there is, on the one hand, an explicit Spinoza, whom we shall call Benedictus. It is he who speaks in definitions, axioms and propositions; it is he, too, who reasons according to the rigid method of the geometer. Then there is, on the other hand, the implicit Spinoza, who lurks behind these definitions, axioms, and propositions, only occasionally revealing himself in the scholia: his mind is crammed with traditional philosophic lore and his thought turns along the beaten logical path of medieval reasoning. Him we shall call Baruch. *Benedictus is the first of the moderns; Baruch is the last of the medievals*'.[10]

[10] Wolfson (1965), p. vii. Italics added.

Wolfson argues that all authors of Great Books build upon the knowledge that was acquired by the famous minds that have preceded them in time; extensive knowledge of the philosophical tradition is therefore mandatory if one wants to understand these works. This is why Wolfson's study of Spinoza's *Ethics* starts with him retelling a conversation he had with his friends on the topic of 'the importance of philology and bookish learning in general for the study of the history of philosophy', in which Wolfson remarks that if we would 'cut up all the philosophic literature that was available to him [Spinoza] into slips of paper, toss them into the air, and let them fall back to the ground, then out of these scattered clips of paper we could reconstruct his *Ethics*'.[11]

Wolfson understood Spinoza as someone who used the way of reasoning of the Medieval tradition, the very tools thereof, to bring this tradition to its logical conclusion, and therewith to its end. In this tradition the difficulty had always been to bridge the gap between the freedom of God and the human being on the one hand, and the logical necessity with which the laws of nature, which are the laws of God, functioned on the other hand. Another difficulty in this tradition had been the problem of how to understand the relation between a completely spiritual God and a material universe created by this God – a problem which is the theological variant of 'the interaction problem' between mind and body that Spinoza found in Descartes' anthropology.[12] To solve it, Spinoza granted God the attributes of extension as well as thought.[13] Furthermore he simply denied that God as well as man have a (free) will.[14]

Spinoza's Break With Tradition?

In this way Spinoza transformed the traditional fusion of philosophy and religion into his own 'religion of reason'[15]. 'Spinoza broke away from the traditional theology and started a new kind of theology and a new kind of rationalization'. However, Spinoza did this, according to Wolfson, while he was 'under the delusion that he was merely spinning on the traditions of religion and that he was only seeing in a truer light which others before him had seen, to use his own

[11] Wolfson (1965), Volume 1, p. 5
[12] The interaction problem: if one understands, as Descartes does, matter and mind as two distinct substances that do not have anything in common with each other, how can it than be that there is interaction between man's mind and man's body? Spinoza in his *Ethics* immediately goes after this dualism in the tradition as well as in Descartes, as he writes right at the beginning of his *Ethics*: 'Things that have nothing in common with each other cannot be understood through each other, that is, the conception of the one does not involve the conception of the other.' (E-Ia5, p. 218) Explicitly he attacks Descartes' dualism in the preface to the fifth part: '(…) he has conceived mind as so distinct from body that he could assign no one cause either of this union or of mind itself (…)' (E-V Preface, p. 364)
[13] Wolfson (1965), Volume 1, p. 80-85
[14] Wolfson (1965), Volume 1, p. 313-319
[15] Wolfson (1965), Volume 2, p.325

expression "as through a mist". The true nature of his new theology, however, was more accurately understood by others than by himself'. [16]

This idea that Spinoza unconsciously broke away from tradition, as he tried to remain within it, and that others have understood him better than that he understood himself, has been severely criticized. Strauss has criticized both of these views, because he believed that Spinoza *consciously* broke with the tradition. Strauss writes that if Wolfson is correct in calling Spinoza's concept of God 'merely an appeasive term for the most comprehensive principle of the universe', 'one would have to rewrite the whole *Ethics* without using that term, i.e., by starting from Spinoza's concealed atheistic principles'.[17]

Carlos Fraenkel has, on the other hand, argued that Spinoza did not really break away from the tradition. But this, according to Fraenkel, is due mostly to the fact that the dominant view misinterprets the tradition. The dominant view we find in scholars such as Wolfson, Strauss, and Israel holds that medieval philosophy was groaning under the yoke of religious doctrines, until Spinoza came to the fore, liberating philosophy from its role of a handmaid to religion.[18]

But this is a false depiction, Fraenkel argues, because this tradition actually wanted to use religion for a philosophical purpose, making religion the handmaid to philosophy instead of the other way around. If this is true, Fraenkel argues, Spinoza was right (to a very large extent) to think of himself as someone who still belonged to the tradition, because he, just as well, believed that religion served a philosophical purpose: to bring as many people as possible to understanding.

Philosophical Religions

In his study *Philosophical Religions from Plato to Spinoza* Fraenkel describes how the philosophers who endorsed a philosophical religion wanted 'to direct us to a life that is guided by reason towards the perfection of reason. For the best and most blissful life is the life of contemplation, culminating in knowledge of God. God himself, they argue, is the perfect model of this life. Being pure reason, he eternally knows and enjoys the truth, unencumbered by hunger, pain, ignorance, and other afflictions that come with being embodied. The task of religion is to make us as much like God as possible. Plato marks the beginning: Laws, he contends, are divine if they direct us to "Reason who rules all things." (*Leges* 631d). The same idea is echoed in Spinoza:

[16] Wolfson (1965), Volume 2, p. 347
[17] Wolfson (1965)Volume 1, p. 177. Strauss (1952), p. 189.
[18] Fraekel (2012), p. 28.

while human laws aim only at prosperity and peace, divine laws aim at "the true knowledge and love of God"' (TTP IV-3, p. 59).[19]

As Fraenkel guides his readers through the history of philosophical religions – in Judaism from Philo to Maimonides, in Islam from Farabi to Averroes, and in Christianity from Clement and Origen ('Philo's Christian students')[20] to Spinoza (!) - Fraenkel comes to describe what a philosophical religion is by means of two essential ideas. The first essential idea of philosophical religions is that philosophy is the only true and universal religion for the whole of mankind. By developing his reasonable capacities, the philosopher amplifies the part that is divine in him in order that he can come closer and closer to understanding the whole of reality. In this way his mind becomes more and more united with God, because God reflects the whole of reality in thought.

Philosophy as the Interpreter of Historical Religions

The second essential idea of philosophical religions is that the religions that have real historical existence, such as Judaism, Islam and Christianity - are to be understood *or have to be reinterpreted* as pursuing, what Fraenkel calls 'a pedagodical-political program' in helping the non-philosophical majority of mankind on a path to become more reasonable and more divine themselves.[21] This also means that these religions help people to become more autonomous in the sense that people who are guided by reason 'both know the good and are motivated to act according to this knowledge'.[22]

Founders/Prophets

The role of the founders of religions is extremely important, because they are understood or reinterpreted as philosophers, capable of adapting the teachings of reason in such a way that the masses can develop themselves on a path towards reasonableness and autonomy. Al Farabi, who influenced both Averroes and Maimonides, explained the difference between the philosopher and the prophet 'in terms of Aristotle's psychology: the prophet not only perfects reason, but also has a perfect imagination. (…) Through the imagination the prophet is thus able to translate philosophical contents into the language of the cave-dwellers. The late ancient version of Aristotle's *Organon*, which distinguishes between demonstrative, dialectical, rhetorical, and poetical modes of argumentation, is integrated into this Platonic framework: to philosophers the

[19] Fraenkel. (2012), p. ix.
[20] Fraenkel. (2012), p. xii.
[21] Fraenkel. (2012), p. 13: 'Its overall goal is to lead all members of the community to the highest possible perfection while taking their temporary or permanent limitations into account'.
[22] Ibid, p. 9

prophet presents things like God, angels, or celestial spheres as they truly are and then leads them to assent through demonstrations. To non-philosophers he presents mostly poetic imitations of these things and then leads them to assent through rhetorical or dialectical arguments'.[23]

Not All People Are Equal

The philosophers who have embraced the idea of a philosophical religion are furthermore characterized by: 1) the idea that man's command of reason is a matter of degree; that there is a spectrum: some people are better able to lead an autonomous life than others.[24] (This idea that reasonableness comes in grades is an important difference with how Strauss and his followers have understood the Farabic-Maimonidean tradition, which they have understood much more as an unbridgeable gap with the philosophers standing on one side, and the common people on the other); 2) the idea that reasonableness comes in grades also applies to societies at large: the extent to which people can be brought to the universal religion of reason varies from situation to situation (and this goes against the teleological approach which thinks that all people are equal and that there are universal rights that should be granted to all people in all societies, independent of the particular nature of that society). 'This implies (…) that the excellence of religious communities can vary depending on the circumstances under which they were established'.[25]

Spinoza Belongs in This Tradition

Fraenkel also uses this model of the philosophical religion to understand Spinoza. In the common narrative of commentators such as Harry Wolfson and Jonathan Israel 'philosophy became the handmaid of theology until Spinoza restored its independence and secular nature'.[26] According to Fraenkel, however, Spinoza's critique of religion should not be understood as a critique of all religions. He specifically wanted to target the Calvinist orthodoxy of the Dutch Republic. Spinoza's aim in the *Theological-Political Treatise* is therefore not to free people from religion. 'Like ancient and medieval proponents of a philosophical religion, Spinoza chose the philosophical reinterpretation of existing beliefs, practices, and institutions over a cultural revolution. Since he is writing in a Christian context and for a Christian audience, it is not surprising that the outcome of his efforts is a version of Christianity. (…) [T]he vocabulary and concepts Spinoza uses for this purpose were in part shaped by the dialogue with his Christian audience – above all Collegiate and other progressive groups in the Netherlands. The distinctive

[23] Ibid, p. 160
[24] Ibid, p. 19
[25] Ibid, p. 21
[26] Ibid, p. 35

features of this interpretation, however, have no counterpart in contemporary Christian circles. They are best understood in light of the philosophical interpretation of Judaism and Islam, in particular as set forth by Maimonides and Averroes'. [27]

That Spinoza not only reacted to his contemporaries, but that he was also under the influence of a tradition of philosophical traditions, is something to be remembered. In the context of the present study, which seeks to present Spinoza's theory of religion as a key for understanding his philosophy as a comprehensive whole, Fraenkel makes three other important points. The first point is that 'the relationship between philosophy, religion and politics in Spinoza is not intelligible if we fail to take his commitment to the concept of a philosophical religion into account'.[28] The second point is that Spinoza's presentation of religion contains, what I have called, the two essential ideas of philosophical religions: Spinoza wanted people to experience the unity with God as they become more reasonable, and he understood the teachings of the Bible to be part of a pedagogical-political program in order to make the general population more reasonable. The third point is that reasonableness, in reality, is something that comes in degrees, both in individuals as in societies.

Is Spinoza's Philosophical Religion Inconsistent?

However, understanding Spinoza completely in the light of this or any other tradition also knows its limits. Fraenkel does not succeed in explaining Spinoza's philosophy of religion as a consistent whole. On the contrary, his attempt to understand Spinoza's philosophical religion in the light of this long tradition makes him conclude that Spinoza was 'inconsistent'.[29] For, Fraenkel believes that it is impossible to convince anyone that the historical religions were in fact intended as pedagogical-political programs without the idea that the Bible transmits deep, philosophical truths. In demonstrating, by means of a very precise reading of the Bible, that the prophets were not philosophers and the Bible should not be read as a work of philosophy, Spinoza undermined the value of the philosophical-religious tradition. This is why, according to Frankel, it is logical that 'the tradition seems to come to a close with Spinoza's critique of religion in Spinoza's *Theological-Political Treatise*. The historical-critical method discloses an emperor without clothes. Read on its own terms, Spinoza argues, the Bible contains no evidence for the claim that the prophets were accomplished philosophers who set up a pedagogical-political program to guide non-philosophers'.[30]

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[27] Ibid, p. 217.
[28] Ibid, p. 37.
[29] Ibid, p. 283.
[30] Ibid, p. xiii

Fraenkel is right that Spinoza refused to make the prophets into philosophers, as he didn't think that 'the sense of Scripture should be accommodated to reason' (TTP, 15-1, p. 186).[31] But Spinoza still believed that it was possible to hang on to the traditional notion that revelation contained a pedagogical-political program to guide non-philosophers, while at the same time going against this tradition in claiming that the prophets were no philosophers. Fraenkel doesn't follow Spinoza's reasoning in its entirety, because he fails to distinguish between the three different perspectives on religion that are found in his work. To separate philosophy from theology means that the pure philosophical religion should be distinguished from Biblically revealed faith.

4.3. Last of the Ancients or First of the Moderns?

We have stated above that in a certain sense, also for Spinoza, Athens is in Jerusalem and Jerusalem is in Athens. Yet, at the same time Spinoza tries to separate the two as he wants to separate philosophy from theology, because the first aims only at truth, the second only at obedience. This makes the question where to place Spinoza in the tradition a complicated one.

The exact nature of the relationship between Athens and Jerusalem, discussed by Strauss and Fraenkel, is also described by Spinoza in chapter 15 of the TTP. Some, such as Rabbi Jehuda Al Fakhar, he writes, want to 'subordinate reason to theology', whereas others, and Spinoza mentions here Maimonides, want to 'subordinate theology to reason'. However, both are wrong: Al Fakhar in putting 'Athens under Jerusalem' and Maimonides in putting 'Jerusalem under Athens'. Different from Strauss and from Fraenkel, Spinoza maintains that each – philosophy as well as revealed religion – can have its own domain, and that 'neither is subordinate to the other; each has its own kingdom; there is no conflict between them' (TTP XV-9, p. 194).

Strauss cannot accept this teaching of Spinoza as the thing he truly meant. What Spinoza wanted to convey to only a few, by means of installing certain contradictions in his text, is that 'philosophy and theology, far from being in perfect accord with each other, actually contradict each other'. And Fraenkel can also not accept the validity of Spinoza's argumentation as he believes Spinoza's theory of religion to be internally inconsistent.[32] The problem is that Spinoza integrates philosophy and theology as 'knowledge of God', while he, at the same time, separates the two. But this is only the case as long as one refuses to make certain necessary distinctions.

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[31] Ibid, p. 11-17.

[32] Strauss (1952), p. 170. Fraenkel (2012), p. 277-283: '(…) whereas the first line of argument les us to expect that Spinoza would portray the prophets as accomplished philosophers, the second line leads us to expect that Spinoza will dismiss biblical religion altogether and call for a replacement with a religion of reason (…) the integration of the philosophical reinterpretation of Christianity with the critique of religion in the TTP is clearly flawed. In the long run having it both ways proved impossible.'

Distinguishing Natural Theology From Revealed Theology

Alan Donagan has tried to solve the problem by making the important distinction between 'speculative theology' and 'practical theology', as well as between 'natural theology' and 'revealed theology'. Only if we do this, can we see that Spinoza is arguing in the *Treatise* that 'speculative theology' (or theoretical philosophy) plays no significant role in the revealed theology of the Bible (the Bible is not a work of science!), and that in this regard we need to distinguish philosophy from theology. But that Spinoza does not want to separate philosophy from theology in the field of natural theology (that is what I have called Spinoza's philosophical religion), because natural theology teaches both speculative as well as practical theology.[33]

In order to understand this, let's discuss the above-mentioned distinctions in the concept of theology a little bit more elaborately. Speculative theology is a part of metaphysics or theoretical philosophy, and as such it is concerned with the question of being. It asks questions such as: What kind of being is God? What is His nature? What is the specific nature of the relationship between God and the other things that exist? And what is the nature of the different things that exist, thanks to the power of God? Practical theology, on the other hand (just as the branches of practical philosophy, that is, ethics and politics) has to do with the question what the right thing is to do. It asks questions such as: How does God want us to live? What are the rules, prescribed by God, for living well? How can we find a lasting happiness? And how can we live together, as human beings? Medieval philosophers such as Thomas Aquinas thought that we could answer these questions partly by using the natural light of reason. By means of reason alone we can see that we should not kill each other or steal from each other or envy each other. Spinoza's religion, as described in the *Ethics*, is in its entirety a religion of reason or a natural theology.

Natural theology is then the result of what we can know about God and his relation to the world by means of the natural light. By means of reason, we can know certain practical things, but we can also arrive at theoretical truths. For instance, we can prove the existence of God by means of reason alone. Revealed theology, on the other hand, is the result of what we know about God thanks to revelation. In order to obtain this kind of knowledge we should not study 'the book of Nature', but we should study 'the book of Scripture'. Both the scholastics and nearly all Christians have believed that everything God has revealed in the Bible cannot be understood by means of the natural light alone. Some things must be accepted on faith alone. Faith is a higher understanding that God gives, because these things stand above our human understanding.

[33] Donagan (1996), p. 343-383.

Using these distinctions between speculative theology and practical theology, and between natural theology and revealed theology, we can say that Spinoza's *Ethics* is a book that contains many things that were classified as natural theology, and that the *Ethics* contains both a speculative as well as a practical theology. The book not only deals with the questions of what God is, and how all natural things relate to God, but it is also, as the title indicates, an ethics, which shows us what is the best way to live. The Medievals would call Spinoza's *Ethics* a natural theology.

The *Theological-Political Treatise*, conversely, is not chiefly a book about natural theology. Rather, the *Treatise* is a book that deals for a considerable part with revealed theology or the question what kind of lessons the Bible teaches us. Donagan makes clear how Spinoza in the *Treatise* defies the tradition. Spinoza denies that we must turn to the Bible for speculative theology. Natural theology answers questions on the nature of God, and on the different things we find in nature, which comes forth out of God. Although there are some teachings of a theoretical nature to be found in Scripture, the goal of the Bible is not to teach speculative theology, but to teach practical theology to a wide audience.

The separation between philosophy and theology that Spinoza wants to establish in his *Treatise* is therefore only a separation *within* revealed theology. Revealed theology does not teach us theoretical knowledge. The Bible, very different from the natural theology that we find in the *Ethics*, was not written in order to teach intellectual knowledge of God. The Bible was only meant to teach those things that we have to know of God in order that we can obey him by acts of justice and charity. The practical conclusion of the revealed theology that is being taught in the Bible is, however, not different from the conclusion of the *Ethics* arrived at by the natural theology. Both teach us that we have to love God and the neighbor.

Scripture Teaches Moral Knowledge (Not Intellectual Knowledge)

Fraenkel writes that Spinoza could not on the one hand state that the Bible endorses his philosophical religion, while he, on the other hand, separates philosophy from theology. But Spinoza still allows revealed faith to contain a pedagogical-political program for the education of the masses, as is the case in all philosophical religions. He, however, limited the teachings of the Bible to almost only contain moral lessons and not theoretical ones. The reason why he did this is clear: the philosophy that the tradition had seen in the teachings of Scripture had always been that of Plato and Aristotle. The new philosophy had shown that the teleological and dualist

nature of this philosophy was false. God or Nature is neither teleological nor dualist. The reason why philosophy had to be separated from theology is then at least partly philosophical.[34]

But this separation is not absolute. Just as Maimonides and others in the tradition, Spinoza does point to places in Scripture where his philosophical religion – and not the one of Plato or Aristotle – implicitly is endorsed. There are a few really wise persons in the Bible who understood things clearly and adequately. Still, they decided themselves to adapt these teachings to the level of the intellect of the common people. (In the case of the Prophets, it was God who adapted his teachings to the level of the intellect of specific prophets who were not philosophers, but belonged to the common people.) Christ seemed to have taught that God was someone who issued laws as if he were a law-giver and a prince, but 'one must see that he understood things truly and adequately. (…) To those who were capable of learning about the heavenly mysteries, he undoubtedly did teach things as eternal truths and not as commandments. (…) Paul too seems to indicate as much in certain passages, such as the Epistle to the Romans, 7.6 and 3.28, although he too prefers not to speak openly. Rather, as he puts it (3.5 and 6.19 of the same Epistles) he spoke "in human terms", expressly admitting this when he called God just' (TTP IV-10, p. 63-65). The wise Solomon is another example of someone who taught Spinozism as he wrote: 'Understanding is the fountain of life to him who is lord of it, and the punishment of the stupid is their stupidity' (Proverbs 16:22).[35]

Although the Bible, according to Spinoza, fully endorses Spinoza's philosophical religion, the Bible serves another purpose than teaching the truth. Scripture does not demand from us that we all become philosophers and scientists, but it teaches us that we obey this one rule: love God by loving your neighbor. Faith shows itself then in good works, not in true beliefs. Since it doesn't matter what inner convictions make it possible for us to obey this one rule, the Bible leaves the search to the truth (philosophy) completely free. It is in this way that Spinoza sought to protect his own philosophical religion against persecution.

4.4. Spinoza's Religious Circle of Friends

The historian and Spinoza-scholar Henri Krop has also made a case to understand Spinoza's group of friends, including radicals such as Van den Enden and the brothers Koerbagh, not as atheists, but as proponents of a philosophical religion. All these people - whether they were

[34] Partly it is also political in the sense that Spinoza also tries to prove that the Bible should not be used as a book of law. The laws described in the Bible do not have authority over the laws made by sovereign governments.

[35] Spinoza writes in the TTP (as well as in the *Ethics*) that 'the supreme reward of the divine law, is to know the law itself, that is, to know God and to love him in true liberty with whole and constant minds; the penalty is lack of these things and enslavement to the flesh, or an inconstant and wavering mind.' (TTP IV-6-4, p. 61 and 4-12, p. 65-66; see also: E-Vp42, p. 382).

Baptist merchants such as Jarig Jelles (1620-1683) and Pieter Balling (?- 1664), or were academics such as Lodewijk Meijer (1629-1681), Adriaan Koerbagh (1632-1669) and his brother Johannes Koerbagh (1634-1672) - they all 'shared in the ancient idea that philosophy will show us the way to a true happiness. Right at the center of their thought stood therefore the religion. The members of Spinoza's circle may all have been precursors of the Enlightenment, none of them was an atheist in the modern sense of the word. None of them denied the existence of God and knowledge of God to them was the one and only means to finding true happiness, which they referred to with a word from the religious tradition as salvation'.[36]

Collegiants

The circle of friends of Spinoza knew each other mostly from religious meetings. These religious meetings were called 'colleges', and the people participating in them 'collegiants'. The collegiants were what Leszek Kolakowski has called 'Christians without a church'. They did not believe in any ecclesiastical authority, be it the Roman Catholic Church or the Reformed Church. Instead they came together to study Scripture all by themselves, allowing for all different opinions. Simon Joosten de Vries (1633-1667), a merchant and friend of Spinoza who was so dedicated to the philosopher that he, according to the biographer Colerus, paid him a small yearly allowance , described in a letter sent to Spinoza in 1663 how the group of Collegiants were studying the texts of one of the earlier versions of Spinoza's Ethics: 'As for our group, our procedure is as follows. One member (each has his turn) does the reading, explains how he understands it, and goes on to complete demonstration, following the sequence and order of your propositions. Then if it should happen that we cannot satisfy each other, we have deemed it worthwhile to make a note of it and write to you so that, if possible, it should be made clear to us and we may, under your guidance, uphold truth against those who are religious and Christian in a superstitious way, and may stay firm against the onslaught of the whole world'. (Letter 8, p. 778)

As the letter testifies this group of people understood itself as being religious and Christians, but not in a superstitious way.

In what is to come I will only sketch the point of view of three of his friends: Pieter Balling, Jarig Jelles and Adriaan Koerbagh in order to underline Krop's point that these people can indeed not be called atheists in the modern sense of the word, but that these people are much better understood as religious searchers for knowledge of God and salvation. In the final paragraphs of this section I will treat the case of Spinoza's Latin teacher, Franciscus van den

[36] Krop (2014), Chapter 2.

Enden who also can be characterized as someone who endorsed a reasonable form of Christianity.

Pieter Balling

Balling translated Spinoza's work on Descartes from Latin to Dutch, and wrote The Light Upon the Candlestick [Het Ligt op den Kandelaar] in which he made clear that true salvation can be found by means of the light of reason, which he describes in religious terms: 'The case being thus, we see of how great concernment it is continually to exhort and excite men to turn in to the Light that is in them, that so they may go on to such a condition and measure therein, as to be fit to understand aright the Word, that is the Truth of God, because out of this there can be nothing understood and concluded from the words and writings given forth from the Light, but meer opinion & consequently errors. This Light, Christ, &c. is the truth & word of God, as hath been already said, and in every way appears by what we have hitherto laid down: For this is a living Word, and transmiteth man from death to life, is powerful, & enableth a man to bear witness of it self every where'.[37] Balling sought to transcend the dichotomy between the Christian faith on the one hand and the new rationalistic philosophy on the other hand. The light of reason is nothing else than the light of God or the spirit of Christ within us.

Jarig Jelles

The same idea we find in the writings of Jarig Jelles who not only wrote the preface to Spinoza's posthumously published works, but also a book called Confessions of the Common and Christian Faith [Belijdenisse des algemeenen en christyken geloofs] in1673 in which he defended himself as someone who could share the most important ideas of Spinoza and be a religious man at the same time [38]. Jelles makes clear in the preface to the *Opera Posthuma* that there is a large degree of agreement between the ethical teachings of Christ and the Apostles on the one hand, and the practical teachings of the *Ethics* on the other hand. Krop: 'The explanation for this agreement is that Christianity is a reasonable religion. (…) The text of Jelles' preface is almost completely dedicated to proving the proposition that Christianity is a reasonable religion and that it is therefore identical with Spinoza's philosophy'. Just as Balling and Spinoza Jelles believed that the light of reason is in fact the light of God in us. As Henri Krop writes, paraphrasing Jelles'

[37] Balling (1963), originally published in Dutch in 1662.
[38] See: Akkerman (1979) and Jelles (1927)

message: 'God's reason becomes, when we become aware of it, our intellect, and when this divine light shines upon us, we become one with Christ and our fellow Christians'.[39]

Adriaan Koerbagh

We will turn then to the third friend of Spinoza. Adriaan Koerbagh died in jail for the publication of two 'atheist' books, his Flowerbed [Bloemhof] and A Light Shining in dark places [Een Ligt schijnende in duystere plaatsen][40]. In Flowerbed Adriaan mocked conventional religious beliefs, he compared the Bible to books about fables, defined atheism as being the same as not knowing God, and concluded from this definition that the theologians were atheists. To finish it all, he stated that the members of the Reformed Church – the state church of the Republic – didn't deserve that name because they hadn't yet reformed their thoughts in any rational way.

The second book, A Light, went even further in making clear how ridiculous it was to believe in the Trinity, how bad it was to accept things on faith without understanding them with the mind, how absurd the idea is that God could have taken on a human form in Jesus Christ, how Holy Scripture was the work of men, which explained why it was so full of mistakes, and why the belief in a heaven and a hell where we would go after death was utter nonsense.

Although there are clear differences between Koerbaghs views and Spinoza's views – Spinoza does not think that faith without understanding is bad – there are many Spinozistic ideas to be found in those two books: Koerbagh defines God similar to Spinoza. He states – just like Spinoza - that there can only be one substance, that Moses is not the author of the Torah, and so forth. For writing all this openly and in plain Dutch, Adriaan Koerbagh was arrested and sent to jail, where he died after two months, being only 35 years old.

However, it would be wrong to view Koerbagh as an 'atheist' or 'secularist'. Krop writes: 'Koerbagh is not a secularist in the modern sense of the word and he also does not fight religion categorically. (…) Koerbagh judges that it is possible to have a religion without revelation that is based on reason alone (...) Through understanding one can know God, that is, the highest good, which needs to be 'honored and served', in order that we can reach our salvation. Koerbagh hence rejects Christianity, but not a reasonable religion'. [41]

Franciscus van den Enden

Now let us consider the depiction of Franciscus van den Enden as being 'the atheist mastermind' behind Spinoza and his circle: 'There can be little doubt', Frank Mertens writes, 'that throughout

[39] Krop (2014), p. 84.
[40] Koerbagh (1668) ans Koerbagh (2011)
[41] Krop (2014), p. 102.

his life he [Van den Enden] presented himself as a Roman Catholic'.[42] The first sign that Van den Enden was deviating from this Roman Catholic path was a report in which Van den Enden was described as belonging to the Amsterdam Cartesian atheists. In this report it is stated that Van den Enden 'denies all sacred things', and that his religion is 'nothing more than sound reason'. A few days later the same writer, however, 'moderated his claims, now stating that these 'atheists' are in fact 'no atheists', that they 'believe in God, however, in another manner than has so far been perceived, namely, that God is the nature of things".[43]

From the biographical evidence Mertens concludes that 'from the early 1660s onward Van den Enden harboured unorthodox religious views that at least resembled those of Spinoza and the Koerbaghs'. And from an analysis of the role of religion played in Van den Enden's political works – Brief Account (1662) and the Free Political Proposals (1665) – Mertens concludes that 'Van den Enden rejected the traditional Christianity that still permeated his [earlier work] Philedonius. Nevertheless, he did not reject Christianity altogether. The political plan of a Brief Account, for example, is aimed at a "Crist-burgelijke Societeit", a "Christian-Civil Society"'.

What Van den Enden meant with the true Religion of Christianity is, just as in Spinoza, deeply political, and at the same time it is reasonable. Van den Enden writes that we should 'after abolishing every outward gesture, try to serve and please our God, first of all by the strict pursuit of a Common interest (which also entirely envelops and contains love for our neighbor and without which not the slightest love for one's neighbor can be found or pursued)'. [44]

This true Christian faith at the same time is named as equivalent to reason. 'The true and soul-saving Christian faith' is, he states, 'utterly reasonable' as it 'solely consists out of a clear and distinct reasonable conviction of that which undoubtedly leads us to knowledge and love of God and one's neighbor'. [45]

In his final conclusion Mertens maintains that, as Van den Enden did not completely abandon the Trinitarian idea that Jesus Christ was the son of God, he must have been 'the least 'radical' of the Amsterdam freethinkers'. These freethinkers should, in their turn, also not be considered atheists. Although they 'clearly advocated a highly rationalistic view of religion, (…) they were also keen to position themselves within the Christian tradition'. [46]

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[42] Mertens (2017), p. 62.
[43] Ibid, p. 65
[44] Ibid, p. 79.
[45] Ibid.
[46] Ibid, p. 84.

Conclusion

In this section we have seen that some of Spinoza's closest friends embraced the idea of a philosophical religion in which reason is considered to be the divine light in us, and in which salvation is reached by means of the knowledge and the love of God. Franciscus van den Enden, Pieter Balling, and Jarig Jelles understood or at least presented this philosophical religion to be equivalent to true Christianity. Adriaan Koerbagh, in all his harsh criticism and mockery of the Christian dogmas of the churches, nevertheless remained faithful to the notion of a philosophical religion that can save us by means of obtaining knowledge of God.

Spinoza shared with his friends the idea of a reasonable religion and the hope that Christianity could be interpreted in a way which made it fully compatible to this reasonable or philosophical religion. However, as we have also seen in the first parts of this chapter, Spinoza differed from his circle of friends in the sense that he was more 'traditional' in believing that a non-philosophical reading of the Bible could function as a pedagogical-political program for the majority of men. In this sense he can be called 'the last of the Medievals': he belonged to the tradition of philosophical religions that stretches out from Plato to Spinoza.

5. Towards a Comprehensive and Coherent Spinozistic Theory of Religion

As described in the first chapter, there are two schools of interpretation in which the dominant view is that Spinoza was hiding his atheism. The allegation that Spinoza promoted 'atheism by stealth' has accompanied Spinoza's philosophy from the seventeenth century till the present time.[1] 'Typically those who sponsored the atheistical interpretation of Spinoza's teachings came to their judgment because they detected inconsistencies in Spinoza's writings. Based on them it was determined that Spinoza frequently did not mean what he said'.[2] This chapter argues that many of the 'contradictions' in the TTP that Strauss and others have detected can be solved by distinguishing between the three perspectives on religion outlined in 1.2, making the point that these three perspectives can coexist in Spinoza's comprehensive theory of religion.

The first section focuses on Spinoza's treatment of superstition (*superstitio*), and addresses the suspicion that Spinoza is secretly teaching that all faith is superstition.

The second section describes Spinoza's definition and explanation of faith (*fides*) and researches the allegation that Spinoza's concept of faith is internally inconsistent.

The third section turns to Spinoza's philosophical religion and researches the claim that religious faith and philosophical religion cannot coexist.

The fourth section answers the question to what extent Spinoza falsely pretended to agree with Christian dogma.

5.1. 'Between the Lines'?

If Spinoza was an atheist, he probably had to be dishonest about it, because it would have been very dangerous for him to admit openly that he did not believe in God. 'Spinoza knew (…) that he had to be careful and that his life could be in danger if the common people were stirred against him. He had not forgotten the case of Adriaan Koerbagh, who had published his ideas in plain Dutch. Therefore, he tried with all available means to forestall the publication of the Dutch translation of the *Theological-Political Treatise*'.[3] Spinoza had to deal with the kind of persecution which, according to Strauss, gives rise to 'a peculiar technique of writing, and therewith to a peculiar type of literature, in which the truth about all crucial things is presented exclusively between the lines'.[4]

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[1] Rosenthal (2001)
[2] Bagley (1999), p. 234
[33] Klever (1996B), p. 41
[4] Strauss (1952), p. 25

Strauss was certainly not the only one to believe that Spinoza engaged in esotericism. Bagley who also thinks that Spinoza made use of this special style of writing, names Van Velthuysen, Stouppe, Van Bredenburg, Hancock, Roberts, Watt, and Schmueli. They all shared the view that Spinoza concealed his true opinion [5]

A Hermeneutical Principle

The hypothesis of these commentators does create a problem for the study of (old) texts. For how do we know if writers tell the truth about politically sensitive issues when they lived in societies where freedom of expression is not protected and where stating your opinion might even result in your imprisonment and premature death? The answer is that we can never know for sure if somebody else is lying or not.[6]

However, I would say that in principle we should stick to the presupposition when listening to someone or when reading a text that the speaker or the author is not lying or insane or forced to write exactly these words by someone else, unless we have clear evidence that this is the case. One might compare this guiding hermeneutical principle with the guiding principle in legal matters that someone should be held innocent, until proven otherwise. As long as we do not possess 'proof beyond reasonable doubt' that Spinoza was lying when denying that he was an atheist, one should first go for the thesis that Spinoza might have something interesting to say in defense of himself *not* being an atheist.[7]

To say that we should presume that someone is not lying is not to say that people always speak the truth. I think that in most human communication people are not being completely honest, while they are at the same time also not completely lying. There are many statements that cannot be categorized in dichotomous terms of 'truth or lie'. For example, when a statement expresses irony. Or when a statement expresses something in a courteous way. Or when a statement is made in order that a certain listener/reader or a certain crowd of listeners/readers can understand it well.

All these ways of expressing oneself are important to distinguish in a text, also in Spinoza's texts. But it is especially this last meaning that can help us to solve some of the contradictions we come across in Spinoza's writings. Spinoza acknowledges this himself: 'It is also crucial to know

[5] Bagley (1999), p. 235-238: 'The list of those defending the sincerity of Spinoza's religious and theological views is equally impressive.' He accordingly names: De Lignac, Coleridge, Goethe, Schleiermacher, Freudenthal, Van Vloten, Schiller, Herder, Von Dahlberg, Heine and Schlegel.

[6] But why should it only be 'other people' that can lie to us? Are we sure that we are not continously lying to ourselves?

[7] That this is not obvious is proven by many examples in the secondary literature, but I will name here only a recent one. Frank & Waller (2016), p.98 state that Spinoza was not even a normal atheist, but a 'radical atheist'.

on what occasion, at what time and for what people or age the various texts were written so that we may not confuse eternal doctrines with those that are merely temporal or useful to a few people' (TTP VII-5, p. 101).

Is 'Accommodation' Lying?

The relevance of studying rhetoric[8] for the understanding of texts (including Spinoza's texts) is addressed by Spinoza when he writes about rules for living well. The first of these rules: 'To speak to the understanding of the multitude (…) For we can gain no little advantage from the multitude, provided that we *accommodate* ourselves as far as possible to their level of understanding'. (TIE 17, p. 6, *Italics* not in the original)

The need of accommodation in also discussed the TTP. If someone wants 'to teach a whole nation, not to speak of the entire human race, and wants to be understood by everybody, he must substantiate his points by experience alone and thoroughly adapt [*accomodari]* his arguments and the definitions of his teaching to the capacity of the common people (the majority of mankind) (…)' (TTP V-14, p. 76).

This theory of adaptation is both an epistemological and psychological theory as well as a didactical and political teaching. It is an epistemological and psychological theory in the sense that it gives an answer to the question what is mostly meant with 'understanding something'. Our most important frame of reference, according to Spinoza, is supplied by the imagination, that is by creatively making use of the things we have learned from experience and from hearsay and that we have memorized. These memories supply the mind with the material it can use to make all different kinds of connections, weaving stories about our own personal lives, about other people and about all kinds of things that we deal with in the world. The new will then be interpreted in the light of the old. It will be accommodated in the sense that it will be made to fit in a bigger story.

This psychological theory of adaptation is important for teachers, preachers and political leaders because they can use this theory also as a didactical or political strategy. Once you know that the mind of people works like this, you try to relate new forms of knowledge to the things that are already known to the people that need to learn. Strauss and Bagley think that to speak *ad captum vulgi* cannot be understood as an educational or didactic device because Moses, Paul, and Jesus, in Spinoza's account, did not actually want to teach the truth, but they instead chose to tell the common people lies about God being a prince, a lawgiver, and a judge.[9] But this hardly

[8] Cf Frankel (1999), Rosenthal (2003A) and Smith (1997), p. 41-44.
[9] Strauss (1952), p. 179. Bagley (1996), p. 404-405.

counts as a refutation since the things that Moses, Paul, and Jesus *wanted* to teach to the people were not things of a theoretical, but of a practical nature.[10] They wanted to teach the people how they can come to love and to stand by each other, and they believed that the best way to achieve that goal was to use the imagination as a tool for understanding.

Strauss stated that making use of the strategy of 'reading between the lines is strictly prohibited in all cases where it would be less exact than not doing so'. [11] I take this to mean that when one can make an author understandable *without making use of the hypothesis of 'the art of writing'* Ockham's razor should be applied. In other words, if the perceived contradictions in a text can be resolved by other means than by means of the hypothesis that the author is lying, one should not presume that the author is lying.

In order to know whether it is justified or not to read Spinoza between the lines, I will in what is to come explore the perceived contradictions in Spinoza's ideas on religion. As I will point out, these perceived contradictions often are the result of not clearly differentiating between the three perspectives on religion in Spinoza's work.[12] In other words, we have to understand what Spinoza meant with 'superstition' (5.2), 'faith' (5.3), and 'true religion' (5.4). In this way we also come closer to our stated goal: to describe Spinoza's comprehensive theory of religion. Next to this *theory of religion*, there are also the *historically existing religions*, Judaism and Christianity. There is evidence that Spinoza was not completely honest about his views on Christianity. But what were his motives to hide some of his opinions about Christianity? Did he hide them, because he was an atheist? This question will be researched in the chapter's final section. (5.5.).

5.2. Is Revealed Faith a Kind of Superstition?

We find, as stated already in 1.2, in Spinoza three different descriptions and evaluations of religion. Religion can be 'true and good'. This is when we arrive at the knowledge and the love of God and our neighbor through the natural light. Religion can secondly be 'untrue and good'. Spinoza calls this faith. This is when we arrive at the knowledge and the love of God through the prophetic imagination. And religion can thirdly be 'untrue and bad'. Spinoza calls this

[10] See for instance the title of chapter 13 of the TTP: 'Where it is shown that the teachings of Scripture are very simple, and aim only to promote obedience, and tell us nothing about the divine nature beyond what men may emulate by a certain manner of life.'
[11] Strauss (1952) p. 30.
[12] Sometimes the perceived contradictions are coming forth out of not making use of certain other distinctions. One has to be a very careful (*caute!*) reader. Spinoza makes many distinctions. In this process the same words can have different meanings. As Spinoza doesn't always point out which of the two meanings of a word he is discussing, this can easily result in confusion.

superstition. This is when our false idea of miraculous powers, standing apart from Nature, is born out of fear and an immoderate desire for uncertain things.

However, this would only be the case if faith is considered to be a real alternative to superstition, and not the very same thing. In this section I will explain why Spinoza did not view biblical faith as mere superstition, as Van Velthuysen has been one of the first to suggest (Letter 42, p. 869). This idea of Van Velthuysen that Spinoza actually thought that biblical faith amounts to nothing than mere superstition, also stands at the core of the Straussian approach.[13] What we, in other words, have to understand is how superstition can be different from faith. In order to do that, we need to be clear as to what 'superstition' actually is, according to Spinoza.

Spinoza discusses superstition at three places in his work: in the *Ethics*, in the *Theological-Political Treatise*, and in Letter 73 to Oldenburg. I will go through these three texts one by one, showing that none of them leads to the conclusion that faith amounts to some kind of superstition, but that these three sources can be much better interpreted in light of the distinction between superstition and faith.

Superstition in the Ethics

Paul Juffermans has analyzed Spinoza's step-by-step argument in the Appendix to the first part of the *Ethics*. Spinoza shows there how superstition is born.[14] The first step is that humans perceive or imagine themselves falsely as acting through free will. This is so, because they are aware of the things they aspire, but remain unaware of the causes that make them aspire these things. The second step is that they falsely come to see or imagine that the whole of nature is made for them – 'eyes for seeing, teeth for chewing, cereals and living creatures for food, the sun for giving light, the sea for breeding fish'. They arrive at this false idea because they project their own (human) nature – people always look out for what is useful or advantageous for themselves – onto the whole of nature. It is also this same process of projection that makes them arrive at the idea that there must be a Maker who has provided these things for them, because they themselves are making things to their own advantage.

The third and last step towards superstition is that they project their own nature onto the gods, the mighty producers of the things they desire. The gods they imagine to be just like them, 'they asser[t] that the gods direct everything for man's use so that they may bind them and be held in the highest honor by them'. So it is these three delusions – free will in humans, final causes in nature, and anthropomorphic gods – that make the birth of superstition possible.

[13] Strauss (1952), p. 184. Harris (1973), p. 207.
[14] Juffermans (2003), p. 73-77.

Spinoza writes at this point of the text: 'So it came about that everyone devised different methods of worshipping God to their own disposition in order that God should love them above others and the whole of Nature so as to serve their blind cupidity and insatiable greed. Thus it was this misconception that developed into superstition (…)'. Spinoza shows us in other words how one misconception leads to another[15], which causes man finally to come to live in a total delusional world of his own imagination.

In this world the ground is laid for preachers of superstition to enter the stage and rise to power. The effects of superstition are the opposite of the effects of true religion and the universal faith. The truly religious person wants to share the highest good, which is the knowledge and love of God, with as many people as possible. He envies no one, hates no one, and is not involved in any kind of competition with others. This is completely different for the superstitious person who desires that the gods love him over others. The superstitious person then doesn't learn: 1) 'wherein our greatest happiness lies or blessedness, namely in the knowledge of God alone'; 2) 'to expect and endure with patience both faces of fortune'; 3) 'to be content with what he has and that he should help his neighbour', and 4) 'the manner in which citizens should be governed and led, namely not as slaves, but as to do freely what is best (E-IIp49s, p. 274).

These four beneficial effects of Spinoza's philosophical religion are also the fruits of Spinoza's true faith:

1) The Bible teaches that our greatest happiness is found in the knowledge and love of God (TTP IV-12, p. 66).

2) True faith helps people to accept things as the will of God. (This is not directly stated by Spinoza, but follows indirectly from the dogmas of faith: since God is 'supremely just and merciful', and because God 'possesses supreme right and dominion over all things', we can trust completely in God's wisdom and God's almighty will).

3) The Bible teaches that we should love our neighbor and be content with ourselves, because 'the essence of the Law is to love God above all things and one's neighbor as oneself'. (TTP XII-10, p. 170).

4) The Bible also teaches indirectly that we should leave everybody 'the greatest liberty to think, so that they may think whatever they wish about any question without doing wrong' (TTP XIV-13, p. 184). This is then how both the philosophical religion as well as the true faith lead to emotional as well as political stability, whereas superstition does not.

[15] 'Inadequate and confused ideas follow by the same necessity as adequate, or clear and distinct, ideas' (E-IIp36), p. 264.

Superstition in the TTP

If we then, secondly, turn to the more elaborate discussion of superstition in the Preface to the *Treatise*, we find a very accurate and lucid description of the way human beings are moved by their emotions, echoing many of the propositions and scholia of the third part of the *Ethics*, which concerns itself with 'the origin and the nature of the emotions'. Most important for understanding what superstition is, according to Spinoza's analysis of it, is that it comes forth out of fear. 'When things are going well, most people, however ignorant they may be, are full of their own cleverness and are insulted to be offered advice. But when things go wrong they do not know where to turn and they seek guidance from anyone. No suggestion they hear is too unwise, ridiculous or absurd to follow. Moreover for the flimsiest of reasons they are conditioned one moment to expect everything to go better and the next to fear the worst. For when they are afraid, anything that reminds them of some good or bad thing in the past seems to prognosticate a happy or unhappy outcome, and so they call it a good or a bad omen, even though they have been disappointed a hundred times in the past'. (TTP, Preface 2, p. 3).

To be scared is to have an 'inconstant pain arising from the idea of a thing future or past, of whose outcome we are in some doubt' (E-III def. emotions 13, p. 313). A frightened person will not know for sure if the suffering that he expects, will in fact also take place. Therefore, his fear is always mixed with hope. Someone who is afraid, will search for signs of relief that deny the expected bad outcome that can replace the thing feared for with something that is hoped for. The same goes for the opposite of fear, hope, which is the 'inconstant pleasure arising from the idea of a thing future or past, of whose outcome we are in some doubt' (E-III def. emotions 12, p. 313). If we hope for the best, we at the same time unsure whether reality will meet our expected and desired outcome, and therefore we are at the same time afraid: 'there is no hope without fear and no fear without hope' (E-III. def. emotions 13e, p. 313).

This oscillating between hope and fear is the natural condition of the human being, who is tossed around by these emotions as a ship by the waves in a storm, and it is for this reason that everyone is naturally prone to superstition (TTP, Preface 5, p. 5). We are all prone to superstition, because we try to persevere in our being, and in doing so we will try to deny the idea of things that we believe to diminish our chances of survival and growth. At the same time we try to affirm the idea of the things we believe to increase our survival and growth (E-IIIp25, p. 291). This means that 'we are so constituted by nature that we are ready to believe what we hope and reluctant to believe what we fear, and that we overestimate and underestimate in such cases. This is the origin of superstition, to which all men are everywhere a prey'. (E-IIIp50s, p. 303)

Everyone will be looking for good and bad omens in a desperate attempt to control fate. The greater the desire for uncertain things, the more people will be oscillating between the hope that they will obtain what they desire for and the fear that they will not get what they want (and maybe instead will receive the thing they don't want at all).

When people cultivate reason and come to a more adequate understanding of God or Nature, they discover that many things are not under their control, and that therefore they have to accept that there is no guarantee in God or Nature that they will obtain the uncertain things they desire for. But as desire is the very essence of man (E-III def. emotions 1, p. 311), and as human beings are the slaves of their desires[16], they – so long as they don't desire to know and to love God as their highest good – will not accept these teachings of reason. Instead they will embrace some kind of supernatural, miraculous force which, in their imagination, will help them to get the things that they desire.

Ruled by selfish desires people close their eyes to God or Nature, and turn their back on reason, because God or Nature is ruled by its own laws and doesn't have our desires in mind, and because reason can't assure them that they will get what they want. Because reason will tell them that these things they desire are highly uncertain, they will come to cultivate a certain hatred for nature and the natural light. Others, who seek for themselves a position of power and influence in society or desire other uncertain things such as wealth and fame, will come to the fore, promising a miraculous cure for the fear that is being felt, and in this way they will gain a following.

Spinoza quotes Curtius approvingly, who wrote: 'nothing governs the multitude as effectively as superstition' (TTP, Preface 5, p.5).[17] As these preachers of superstition know that reason will unmask their ideas and solutions as phantasies and products of the imagination, they will aggravate the hatred of philosophy or science and everything that is taught by the natural light in general. As they and their following desire scarce goods – such as power, fame and recognition by others – certain passions such as ambition, envy, and rage will be strengthened. Thus, people will come to hate each other and destroy the harmony in the state. And, although superstition is a very effective means to rule the multitude, this will not lead to stability. At some point the multitude will get disappointed by the false promises of certain leaders in the past, leaders they at that moment adored as if they were gods, and then they will 'curse them and detest them as the universal scourge of mankind'. (TTP, Preface 5, p. 5).

[16] It is a mistake, according to Spinoza, to think that we desire something because it is good; we call it good, because we desire it (E-IIIp6, p7, p8, and p9).
[17] Curtius(1946), p. 255.

Superstition – as treated in the *Ethics* as well as in the *Treatise* – is a philosophical-theological-political problem. It is a philosophical problem in that superstition makes people hate nature and reason, because superstitious people turn to believe in things that are not understandable and are against nature; in other words, they start to believe in miracles. It is a theological problem, because it makes that people value the wrong kind of things. They desire the kind of things that make people enemies of each other, instead of the knowledge and love of God that unites people. It is a political problem, because superstition causes political instability. Because people desire uncertain things, they become each other's enemies. Also, they are dissatisfied with what they have, and therefore they will at some point start to rebel against the authorities.

Most intriguing is the very first sentence of the Preface: 'If men are always able to regulate their affairs with sure judgment or if fortune always smiled upon them, they would not get caught up in any superstition'. This first line of the Preface tells us that there is a cure for superstition. The cure is not to control fortune, which is in fact the remedy that the Modern world has come to believe in: the idea that we can control (by means of technology) all risks is an illusion, to Spinoza's way of thinking. [18] What we can do, is to live life according to a fixed plan that follows from the knowledge of God. Once we realize that everything flows with necessity from what humanly or biblically speaking can be called "the will of God", we come to accept life as it unfolds to us as something that is only to a limited degree within our control.

The remedy against superstition then is both philosophical as well as theological. Both reasonable natural theology (religion) as well as prophetically revealed theology (faith) help us to love God and our neighbor, that is, to embrace life and to help our fellow citizens. In this respect faith is clearly distinguished from superstition.

Superstition in the Correspondence

There is, finally, a fragment from the correspondence. In his letter to Henry Oldenburg Spinoza states: 'the chief distinction I make between religion and superstition is that the latter is founded on ignorance, the former on wisdom. And this I believe is why Christians are distinguished from other people, not by faith, nor charity, nor the other fruits of the Holy Spirit, but solely by an opinion they hold, namely, because, as they all do, they rest their case simply on miracles, that is, on ignorance, which is the source of all wickedness, and thus they turn their faith, true as it may be, into superstition'. (Letter 73, p. 942).

[18] This is not to say that he would eschew modern technology. Spinoza does not endorse some kind of fatalism, since some things are in our control. But just as we should not anthropomorphize God, we should just as well take care not to deify man.

Is the universal faith based on wisdom or on ignorance? At first sight it seems to be based on ignorance, since it requires that people imagine God as a king, a judge, and a lawgiver that has to be obeyed; which is an ignorant view of God. However, we can accept this universal faith of Scripture 'with sound judgement' as we see that this faith, based on untrue dogmas, 'is a source of great solace for those whose capacity to reason is limited, is of great value to the state, and may be believed unreservedly without danger or damage' (TTP XV-7, p. 193). To accept the teachings of the universal faith is therefore a rather wise thing to do, because we can clearly understand that '[S]cripture has brought great consolation to mortal men'. (TTP XV-10, p. 194).

One could think that any belief in untrue dogmas amounts to superstition. Many people, Spinoza writes, believe that superstition 'arises from men's having a confused idea of God'. However, this is something that Spinoza explicitly denies in the Preface to the *Treatise*: superstition does not come forth out of imagined ideas about God, but out of dread: 'Fear is the root from which superstition is born' (TTP, Preface 3, 4 and 5, p. 4 and 5).

The commentators who throughout the ages have claimed that Spinoza makes all religion look like superstition are wrong, because they misunderstand what Spinoza meant with 'superstition'. Superstitious people desperately seek the help of higher powers in the attainment of some uncertain good. People that are not in the grip of uncertainty and fear and that do not seek for good or bad omens, but simply put their unreserved faith in the righteousness of the almighty God, do not suffer from this kind of mental instability. Their 'faith' should therefore be distinguished from superstition.

5.3. The Consistency of Revealed Faith

Of the three perspectives on religion 'superstition' or the idea that religion can be both 'untrue and bad' is the easiest to understand. More difficult is the concept of 'faith'. For how can Spinoza seriously hold the position that something can be 'untrue' while being 'good' at the same time? Doesn't such a person immediately show that he is an atheist who thinks that it is alright to lie about things?

Faith, according to Spinoza is 'acknowledging certain things about God, ignorance of which makes obedience towards him impossible and which are necessarily found wherever obedience is met with' (TTP XIV-5, p. 180). Spinoza wants us to clearly distinguish between the knowledge of God that we need in order to become obedient and the knowledge of God that we need for understanding the truth. This is the separation of philosophy from theology which is the 'principal purpose' of the entire *Theological-Political Treatise* (TTP XIV-2, p. 174): 'For the aim of philosophy is nothing but truth, but the aim of faith is, as we have abundantly demonstrated,

nothing but obedience and piety' (TTP XIV-13, p. 84). The intellectual knowledge and the intellectual love of God, essential for the philosophical religion described in the *Ethics,* does not play a role in faith. It doesn't matter, Spinoza writes, how we understand God, 'whether he is fire or spirit or life or thought' is all 'irrelevant to faith' (TTP XIV-11, p. 183). The only thing that matters are the practical results of these beliefs, as they must result in acts of justice and charity which show that the faithful person obeys God.

Is faith untrue? Not necessarily, it seems, as obedience towards God is defined by Spinoza as consisting 'solely in justice and charity, or in love of one's neighbor' (TTP XIV-10-5, p. 183; see also: TTP XIII-3, p. 173). Since also the reasonable knowledge which leads to truth – the knowledge of Spinoza's philosophical religion - has as its result that we will love our neighbor and obey the laws of the state, the person who embraces Spinoza's philosophical religion would also be just and charitable, and therefore we, as we follow the definition, are also bound to call this person obedient. In that case true knowledge would have led this person to 'obedience' in the sense of acting justly and charitable. Understood in this way, there is actually no difference between religion and faith, because both lead to obedience. Faith would then – just as religion - be both 'true and good'.

But on the other hand, one can also say that only faith leads to obedience, whereas religion does not, because 'by the guidance of reason we can love God, but not obey him' (TTP, Annotation 34, p. 272). Only in faith is it possible to imagine God imperfectly as a lawgiver or a prince that we have to obey. This idea of God is untrue. Yet this untrue depiction of God is useful to us, and therefore it is good (E-IIId1, p. 322). In this sense faith is both 'untrue and good'.

But we have to be more specific: why does Spinoza think that faith is 'good'? He writes that there are three things that are really good for human beings in the sense that we can 'honestly desire' them: 1) 'to understand things through their primary causes; 2) to control the passions, that is to acquire the habit of virtue; 3) to live securely and in good health' (TTP III-5, p. 45). The imagined God can help people to control their passions and find individual peace of mind. They can control the passions because they train their minds in such a way that they consider everything that happens an expression of God's will, which they have to accept and be thankful for. And in a similar way they can train themselves to love their fellows as they have memorized and internalized the teachings of their model of righteousness, making these teachings appear for the mind's eye every time that something happens that reminds them of these teachings. This is helping them to live securely and in good health as man is, for his security and health, most in

need of other people. However, faith doesn't make us understand everything clearly. Although faith does seem to direct us to embrace our highest good which consists in the knowledge and love of God, this knowledge of God also is limited as it is the knowledge which comes forth out of the imagination.

Faith as Salvation of the Ignorant

Spinoza ends his *Ethics* by pointing out that the path to salvation which he has sketched is 'rarely discovered'. In the *Political Treatise* he adds that this path is in fact so difficult that 'those who believe that ordinary people or those who are busily engaged in public business can be persuaded to live solely at reason's behest are dreaming of the poets' golden age or of a fairy tale'. (E-Vp42s, p. 383 and TP 1-5, p. 682). In other words, Spinoza was convinced that no society will ever be able to live in a completely reasonable way. Most people will always be guided by the imagination. A society is in need of narratives or imagined accounts that enable people to live and to act collectively. This is why histories are important as educational devices: they not only give people a sense of a shared identity, but also a shared morality (TTP V-14 and 15, p. 76-77).[19]

Spinoza makes a distinction between products of the imagination that are harmful for our capacity to persists in our being and products of the imagination that are beneficial for reaching political stability, peace, and freedom. The last kind of products of the imagination can be called 'reasonable imaginations'. They can be completely untrue, yet very helpful in making people wholeheartedly believe in justice and charity.[20] This is the positive function of theology: to help people imagine a model of righteousness that they can obey, love, and emulate. Spinoza therefore explicitly states that the Bible is not only 'useful', but even 'necessary 'for ensuring the happiness of the majority of mankind (TTP XV-10, p. 194).

This also sheds light on the relationship between the philosophy of the *Ethics* and the theology of the TTP: Spinoza's philosophical religion that leads one on a path to salvation is only accessible for a few. Spinoza's TTP, his 'neglected masterpiece', just as well teaches this philosophical religion that is described in the *Ethics*, as Curley has been right to note [21], but the TTP does more than this, because this book is first and foremost about 'the salvation of the ignorant' by means of the Biblical religion.[22]

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[19] James (2010), p. 252, and James (2011) p. 181-199. See also: Gatens & Lloyd (1999).
[20] TTP XIV-8, p. 181: '(…) faith requires not so much true as pious dogmas, that is, such tenets as move the mind to obedience, even though many of these may not have a shadow of truth in them'.
[21] Curley (1990).
[22] Matheron (1971).

Differing from the *Ethics*, which starts with God or absolutely infinite substance, the TTP starts with the natural condition in which man finds himself in: a desperate situation in which man is continuously oscillating between gruesome fears and great hopes, ignorant of God, the world, and man's place in it. This is superstitious man, who needs to be clearly differentiated from man who lives under the sway of the imagination. Superstitious man necessarily lives under the sway of the imagination. But the man who lives under the imagination is not necessarily superstitious. It is in this world full of superstition that prophets have come with a special message from God adapted to their specific state of consciousness, a message that helped the people to arrive at the supreme good by means of imagining a perfect being, God, the exemplar of true life that can be emulated. The prophetic imagination helped the common people to fight against their impulses of envy, hatred, greed, and lust, and made people more obedient to the laws of their communities. The prophetic imagination is then of great value. It has benefited the well-being of mankind.

Dogma's of Universal Faith

Should one understand faith as something that is based upon a lie which is being told to the population in order to keep them calm? Spinoza does not refer to it in this way. Rather, he calls it an adaptation: 'God adapted his revelations to the understanding and opinions of the prophets'. (TTP II-19, p. 40). How should we understand this theory of faith as adaptation?

Spinoza writes that prophecy or revelation is not about 'natural or spiritual matters', but is solely concerned with 'the end or substance of revelation'. Revelation has as its end to teach 'that there exists a supreme being who loves justice and charity, and that, to be saved, all people must obey and venerate Him by practicing justice and charity towards their neighbor'. (TTP XIV-10, p. 182. See also: TTP V-15, p. 78). This leads Spinoza to formulate *seven dogma's of the universal faith*: '1) God, a Supreme Being exists, supremely just and merciful, the exemplar of true life; 2) God is one, there is nothing like Him; 3) God is omnipresent, and all things are known to Him; 4) God has supreme right and rules over all things; 5) Worship and obedience to God consist solely in justice and charity, or love to one's neighbor; 6) All who obey God by following this way of life, are saved; others who are under the sway of pleasures are lost; 7) God forgives those who repent their sins (TTP XIV-10, p. 282, 183).

These seven dogma's are considered by Spinoza to be the things that one needs to acknowledge in order to be obedient to the divine law. However, he stresses that it are not the opinions in themselves that make a person religious. What makes someone religious is when the opinions held by that person lead him to perform 'works of justice and charity'. (TTP XIV-11, p.

184. See also: E 4 -37s1, p. 339). The end of revelation is to make people love God above everything, and their neighbor as themselves.

Now that we know the *end* of revelation, we might ask the question: with what *means* is this end sought? The answer is that different people require different means to obtain this end. Humans have 'very different minds, and find themselves comfortable with very different beliefs; what moves one person to devotion provokes another to laughter'. This is why Spinoza concludes that 'everyone should be allowed the liberty (…) to interpret the fundamentals of faith according to their own minds; and that the piety or impiety of each person should be judged by their works alone' (Preface 12, p. 10).

To be more precise, the few who are capable of arriving at an intellectual understanding of God, will know and love God, not because they are dictated to do so, but because they will understand that this is in their true self-interest. They will interpret the dogma's of faith in another way. For example, where the common people might interpret the dogma that states that God is the exemplar of true life in a way in which in God is understood to have a 'just and merciful mind', the few will understand God to be so, because 'all things exist and act through Him and therefore we understand them through Him and see what is true, right and good through Him'. Where many will interpret the notion that God rules everything in the way that God rules 'like a prince'; the few will see his laws as 'eternal truths', etcetera.

'Indeed everyone (…) must adapt these doctrines of faith to his own understanding and to interpret them for himself in whatever way seems to make them easier for him to accept unreservedly and with full mental assent. For (…) faith was once revealed and written according to the understanding of the beliefs of the prophets and of the common people of that time, and in the same manner everyone in our day must adapt faith to their own views so that they may accept it without mental reservation or hesitation'. (TTP XIV-11, p. 183).

Adaptation is in other words not only a tool for the teachers of humanity, but also an obligation for the people themselves. It is their duty to interpret the dogma's of faith in such a way that they are able to obey the divine law.

Faith as 'Transcending the Limits of the Intellect'

According to Strauss Spinoza both states that revelation *transcends the limits of the intellect* and that *nothing can transcend the limits of the intellect*, a contradiction which gives host to a whole range of

other contradictions which have led Strauss to the conclusion that Spinoza has an esoteric teaching.[23]

'The primary premise upon which Strauss rests his case is the bewildering (or hieroglyphic) character of Spinoza's treatise consequent upon his numerous contradictions, and almost all of these depend upon the key question of whether or not, in Spinoza's view, supernatural knowledge is possible; for if it is not, he cannot consistently allow exceptions in the case of prophecy, the mind of Jesus, or the fundamental dogma of theology, nor should he allege that the Bible is hieroglyphical or surpassing the grasp of human reason. We must, therefore, consider first what Spinoza meant by *captum humanum superare*'.[24]

The intellect – as opposed to the imagination - can understand things *sub species aeternitatis*. This means that the imagination – as opposed to the intellect – can understand things as they change in time: things such as 'future events', 'signs that can predict the future' and the solutions to 'many practical problems'.[25] The imagination can for this reason help us on terrains in which the intellect is powerless: 'Since (…) the prophets perceived the things revealed by God though their imaginations, there is no doubt that they have grasped much beyond the limits of the intellect. For far more ideas can be formed from words and images than from the principles and concepts alone on which all our natural knowledge is built' (TTP I-28, p. 26).

By means of words and images one can arrive at 'matters that are incomprehensible and which we can only imagine'. For example, humans can come to understand things while having a dream or while they are freely associating from an image that they have seen or a word that they have heard. Harris thinks that Spinoza meant with 'exceeding the limits of the intellect' that extrasensory perception is possible 'through dreams, or visions, or other imaginative means'. That we cannot explain these imaginary ways of knowing things is no reason to say that they cannot provide us with real knowledge.[26]

Spinoza in other words does not deny the possibility of prophetic revelation.[27] He writes that 'the power of reason (…) cannot extend to ensuring that people may be happy by obedience alone and without understanding things, while theology tells us nothing other than this and decrees nothing but obedience' (TTP XV-6, p. 190). In other words: the prophetic imagination taught us something that we would never have learned from natural knowledge. This is why Biblical prophecy has been so extremely useful: 'For given that we cannot discern by the natural

[23] Strauss (1952), p. 169- 176.
[24] Harris (1995), p. 135.
[25] Harris (1995), p. 137, Juffermans (2003), p. 335, and Donagan (1996), p. 371.
[26] Harris (1995), p. 137
[27] Juffermans (2003), p. 333, Note 13..

light alone that simple obedience is the path to salvation, and revelation alone teaches us that it comes from a singular grace of God, which we cannot acquire by reason, it follows that Scripture has brought great consolation to mortal men' (TTP XV-10, p. 194).

What the expression 'exceeding the limits of the intellect' never means, however, is that – besides natural or rational knowledge – there is also supernatural or suprarational knowledge. Such a notion of supernatural or suprarational knowledge would go against one of the most important premises of Spinoza's philosophical system: that there is nothing besides nature, and that everything that is, is in nature and can be conceived through nature. Spinoza states as one of his first axioms 'that which cannot be conceived through another thing, must be conceived through itself' (E-I Axiom 2, p.217). In this way, he automatically excludes the possibility that there might also be things that the infinite intellect cannot conceive of, or that lie beyond the limits of the infinite intellect.

However, this is not to say that everything is adequately understood by *human beings* who only have *finite intellects*. Some things exceed the human intellect, because humans do not know by what natural causes they are brought about, or how they are themselves causes to particular effects. This is the case with regard to prophecy: the human mind does not know the natural causes leading to prophetic knowledge, nor does it understand the effects of prophetic knowledge. Spinoza writes 'that the fundamental dogma of theology cannot be discovered by the natural light, or at least that no one has yet proven it, and this is why revelation was absolutely indispensable' (TTP XV-7, p. 191). He means that the message of the prophets that we can be saved by means of obedience alone, could not have been discovered by means of reason, and that revelation, in this sense, exceeds the limits of the (human) intellect. However, Spinoza writes, now that the prophetic imagination has discovered it, we can use reason 'to accept it with at least moral certainty' (TTP I 5-7, p. 191).

Faith and Certainty

Spinoza addresses the matter how faith can provide us with certainty in chapter 2 of the TTP. There his answer is that 'all prophetic certainty (…) was grounded upon three things:

1) That the matters revealed were very vividly imagined, as we are affected by objects when we are awake,
2) upon a sign; and
3) most importantly, that the minds of the prophets were directed at what is right and good'. (TTP II-5, p. 29).

Why do these three give 'certain knowledge of something'? The vivid imagination does not make something that is perceived in a dream into certain knowledge. Signs which are miracles (or occurrences that seem extraordinary) and important, do not make something certain.[28] And having a character which shows a strong sense of justice and integrity in itself does not make the things, which you believe God says to you, become certain knowledge. In order to understand this, we have to wonder what Spinoza means with 'certain knowledge'. This will bring us to the distinction, used by Spinoza, between mathematical certainty and moral certainty.

Mathematical certainty is the certainty we get from deducing conclusions out of axioms and definitions, as Spinoza does in Euclidean fashion in his *Ethics*. To understand something because it is 'correctly demonstrated' is to have mathematical certainty; to hear something 'without surprise' is to have moral certainty. 'Everyone comprehends the propositions of Euclid before they are demonstrated. I would also say that accounts of things relating to the future and the past which are not beyond men's belief, as well as laws, practices and customs, are also intelligible and clear, even though they cannot be mathematically demonstrated. But sacred signs and stories that seem to exceed what is believable, I call unintelligible'. (TTP, Annotation 8).

In order to follow Spinoza's reasoning, we have to understand moral certainty as a kind of phenomenological, subjective kind of certainty: 'As therefore the certainty the prophets derived from signs was not mathematical certainty (that is, a certainty, which follows from the necessity of the perceptions of a thing that is perceived or seen) but only moral certainty, and the signs were given for nothing other than to convince the prophet, it follows that the signs were given according to the prophet's beliefs and understanding. Hence a sign that reassured one prophet as to his prophecy might not convince another imbued with different beliefs; and hence these signs varied from prophet to prophet' (TTP II-6, p. 30).

By means of this distinction between mathematical and moral certainty we can understand that revelations were morally or subjectively certain for the prophet who had the vivid imagination that God was speaking to him, and who had a clear sign to detect God's hand in all of it. We can also understand that this sign and the excellent character of the prophet involved, would convince the audience of the prophet in the sense that they would have moral certainty that this prophet was in fact a genuine prophet. But why would it still be certain in Spinoza's time? To this question Spinoza answers:

[28] Spinoza states, citing Deuteronomy 13, that a true prophet is distinguished from a false prophet by both teaching and miracles. False prophets also 'wrought true miracles'. However, since they spread false teachings they deserved to die (TTP XV-7, p. 192).

> 'Since we see that the prophets commend justice and charity above all things and plead for these alone, we deduce they were sincere and not deceitful in teaching that men are made happy by obedience and faith; and because they also confirmed them with signs, we are convinced they were not speaking wildly or madly when they prophesized. We are further persuaded of this when we note that they offered no moral teaching which is not in accord with reason. Nor is it coincidental that the word of God in the prophets agrees completely with the actual word of God speaking in us. (..) So, it is a sound judgment to accept this fundamental principle embracing the whole of theology and Scripture, even though it cannot be demonstrated by mathematical proof. For it is indeed ignorance to refuse to accept something just because it cannot be mathematically demonstrated when it is confirmed by the testimonies of so many prophets, is a source of great solace for those whose capacity to reason is limited, is of great value to the state, and may be believed without danger or damage. As if we should admit nothing as true, for the prudent conduct of our lives, which can be called into question by any method of doubt, or as if so many of our actions were not highly uncertain and full of risk!' (TTP, 15-7, p. 193).

It is to be noted that Spinoza here in this long, but rather crucial citation, makes clear that for living there are other important things than only mathematical or scientific truths. And it is in this sense that the *Treatise* teaches something that we cannot learn from the *Ethics*. The *Ethics* wants to prove with mathematical certainty how everything is in God, and how the clear and distinct idea of God can help us to understand ourselves better in order that we can live a good life in a well-ordered state. The *Treatise*, however, teaches that we can accept the truth of the prophetic messages in the Bible with moral certainty.

5.4. Faith and Philosophical Religion

Can Spinoza's seven fundamental dogmas of the universal faith and the salvation of the ignorant be reconciled with his philosophical religion and the blessedness achieved by means of the *amor intellectualis Dei*? If *fides* and *religio* are in fact mutually exclusive there is a contradiction in Spinoza's theory of religion. Then it might also be justified to believe that Spinoza engaged in esoteric writing. In order to decide whether the proponents of the theory that Spinoza was hiding his atheism have a point, this section describes the most puzzling of the three perspectives on religion in Spinoza's thought, his philosophical religion.

The philosophical religion of the *Ethics* does not lead to obedience, because it reveals to the mind that God is not a king or a lawgiver, but the underlying principle of the whole of reality. And in this sense God cannot be obeyed nor emulated. This creates a problem for Spinoza's stated ambition to prove that philosophy is no threat to the kind of piety that the Bible provides as a universal teaching, and which is the same as obedience to the moral law (TTP XIV-3, p.

179). Because if piety consists of obedience to God, and if philosophy or science makes it impossible for people to be obedient to God, how can Spinoza then still state that the freedom to philosophize is no threat to piety – one of the main goals of the entire work according to the subtitle? Philosophy should then be considered a major threat to piety, since it makes the faithful person realize that the dogmas of faith] are false.

However, anyone who willfully engages in acts of justice and charity can be called 'obedient'. This means that the faithful man of the TTP will, just as the religious man from the *Ethics*, be glad to do acts of justice and charity. The faithful man of the TTP will do this, because he wants to obey the all-powerful and just God. The religious man in the *Ethics* will do this because he understands that there is nothing more to his advantage than to contribute to a society where people live together in harmony. In a certain sense only the first can be called 'obedient', because he literally obeys a God who he imagines to be a prince, a lawgiver and a judge, while the second one cannot 'obey' God in this sense, because he has arrived at an adequate understanding of God. On the other hand, since both are acting in conformity with what the Bible names as the only right way to show your obedience to God, namely by willfully acting just and charitably, also the religious man of the *Ethics* can be called obedient. As Spinoza writes: 'we can only make the judgement whether someone is faithful or unfaithful from his works. If his works are good, he is one of the 'faithful', even if he differs from the other 'faithful' in matters of belief' (TTP XIV-7, p. 181). The religious man of the *Ethics* will then simply pass the test by means of doing good works, and therefore he will have to be considered obedient from the point of view of Biblical faith.

In other words, the theological-political consequences of the philosophical religion are exactly the same as those of the biblical faith. Just as the man of faith in the *Treatise* will the religious man in the *Ethics* believe that God is almighty and that everything depends on God, and that we need to love God and return hatred with love. This is Spinoza's point in the *Treatise*: it doesn't matter if you have an intellectual understanding of God or if you imagine him as a king or a lawgiver. If people act with the intention to give everyone his due according to law (justice), and with the intention to stand together and help and stand by the poor and the less fortunate (charity), they are pious. In the case where they do not behave in conformity to the demands of justice and charity, they are not pious.

Piety, then, always has to be seen in relation to someone's acts. This is essential both to Spinoza's defense against the charge of atheism and for his defense of the freedom to philosophize in the *Treatise*. He pleads for a society ruled by 'laws that proscribe only wrongful

deeds, but leave thoughts free' (TTP, Preface 8, p. 62). Spinoza writes: 'We should certainly not accept, therefore, that beliefs considered as such, in isolation and without regard to action, entail anything of piety or impiety at all. We must rather assert that a person believes something piously or impiously only in so far as they are moved to obedience by their beliefs, or, as a result of them, deem themselves free to offend or rebel. Hence, if anyone is rendered disobedient by believing the truth, he truly has an impious faith; in so far, on the other hand, as he becomes obedient through believing what is false, he has truly a pious faith'. (TTP XIV-8, p. 181). Spinoza uses the term 'obedience' here not so much as something that exists in an inner state, but as something that shows itself in the external acts of people. And although he in chapter 17 of the *Treatise* writes that 'obedience is less a question of an external than an internal action of the mind' and that therefore 'he is most under the dominion of another who resolves to obey every order of another wholeheartedly' (TTP XVII-2, p. 209), this doesn't change the observation that, looked at it from the outside, the religious person from the *Ethics* just as wholeheartedly engages in acts of justice and charity, and in this way is to be considered just as obedient as the man who acts out of biblically-revealed faith. Obedience is, namely, described by Spinoza as believing those things 'that confirm the mind in love towards our neighbor, by means of which each person is in God (to use John's language) and God is in each person'. (TTP XIV-8, p. 181). The exact nature of the things that must be believed in order to arrive at this goal is something that all men can decide for themselves. In this sense they are free to philosophize, because neither the state, nor the church, should inquire into the inner beliefs of man. When people act piously, one must conclude, they have pious beliefs.

One of the questions that have plagued many commentators on the TTP is whether the man who "believes" in the philosophical religion of the *Ethics* really can be expected to accept the seven dogmas of faith.[29] On first sight, it seems clear that the religious man of the *Ethics*, i.e., Spinoza himself, did not believe in all of these seven dogmas, as he did not believe that God can be conceived as a judge we can obey (dogma 1), or as a person that can forgive (dogma 7). However, Spinoza writes that it does not matter how people interpret these dogmas. In the end it is not about the content of beliefs, but about their effects (TTP XII- 5, p. 165). Spinoza writes that everybody can interpret these dogmas as they wish. People may believe, such as Spinoza himself does, that God does not 'issue edicts like a prince', but instead 'teaches them as eternal truths'. It also doesn't matter if one believes that 'the reward of the good and the punishment of wrongdoers takes place naturally or supernaturally'.

[29] See for instance: Matheron (1971); Hunter (2005), p. 143; Laursen (2012), p. 39-65.

Are the Two Paths to Salvation Compatible?

We can move then to the next problem: Spinoza's *Treatise* indicates that there are two paths to (and hence two meanings of) salvation. The philosophical path which is described in the *Ethics* is one way in which we are able to accept the good and the bad things that faith has installed for us and to return hatred with love. The theological path that is laid out in the Bible, which leads to the same practical results, is the other way.[30] In the *Ethics*, which is solely concerned with finding the philosophical path to salvation, Spinoza writes: 'From this we clearly understand in what our salvation or blessedness or freedom consists, namely, in the constant and eternal love towards God, that is in God's love towards men'. (E-Vp36s, p. 378). Spinoza links this notion of salvation or blessedness with the intuitive or third kind of knowledge. We find the same teaching in chapter 4 of the *Treatise* where Spinoza explains 'that man is necessarily most perfect and most participates in the highest happiness who most loves and enjoys, above all other things, the intellectual knowledge of God, who is the most perfect being'. (TTP IV-4, p. 59). This suggests that salvation can only be reached by a few, as also the ending of the *Ethics* testifies: 'For if salvation were ready to hand and could be discovered without great toil, how could it be that it is almost universally neglected?' (E-Vp42s, p. 383).

That not everybody will reach this philosophical kind of salvation is confirmed in chapter 12, where Spinoza states that this 'intellectual or precise knowledge of God, is not a gift generally given to all the faithful, in the way that obedience is'. (TTP XIII-4, p. 174). In chapter 5, Spinoza states that the philosophical path to salvation is superior to the theological path, as he writes that 'someone who is ignorant of them [the biblical narratives] but who does know, by the natural light of reason, that there is a God, and so forth, as we have expressed it above, and who also possesses a true code for living, he is entirely happy, and happier than the common people, because, besides true opinions, he possessed a clear and distinct understanding of them' (TTP V-16, p. 77). This doesn't mean, however, that for the common people no theological path to salvation exists. This is stated multiple times, for instance in chapter 7 of the *Treatise* where Spinoza writes: 'For the teachings of true piety are expressed in the most everyday language, since they are very common and extremely simple to understand. And since true salvation and happiness consists in our intellect's genuine acquiescence [to what is true] and we truly acquiescence only in what we understand clearly, it most evidently follows that we can securely grasp the meaning of Scripture in matters necessary for salvation and happiness'. (TTP VII-17, p. 116).

[30] De Dijn (2009), p. 117-136.

The common people can 'clearly grasp' the simple teaching that the all-powerful God is an extremely just and loving person, who looks after each and every one who acts out of love for the neighbor. This is then also how the common people are saved without grasping God's attributes.

In his article 'Did Spinoza Lie to His Landlady?'[31] J. Thomas Cook has argued that Spinoza was insincere in stating that there were in fact two ways to salvation. As Cook writes: 'while Spinoza may be correct in claiming that the prophets proclaim "with one voice" that salvation can be reached through obedience alone, if we take "salvation" in Spinoza's own favored sense, he has not given us any reason to believe that what the prophets thereby proclaim is *true*'.[32] It is for this reason that Cook concludes that Spinoza lied to his landlady when he, in the account of his biographer, Colerus, affirmatively replied to her question whether he believed that she could be saved in her religion, provided that she applied herself to piety and a peaceable and quiet life.

Now, salvation, for Spinoza, means both salvation in this present life, as well as eternal salvation. As discussed above, Spinoza did not consider eternal salvation to be the most important of the two. This is stated clearly in the last two propositions of the *Ethics*: 'Even if we did not know that our mind is eternal, we should still regard as being of prime importance piety and religion (…)' (E-Vp14); and 'Blessedness is not the reward of virtue, but virtue itself. We do not enjoy blessedness because we keep our lusts in check. On the contrary, it is because we enjoy blessedness that we are able to keep our lusts in check'. (E-Vp42, p. 382). Real salvation or blessedness is to understand that in the knowledge and love of God consists our highest good. This alone will bring us peace of mind, and will make us virtuous as we are in peace with ourselves and our neighbors.

The only thing that is lacking from the salvation of the ignorant is the intellectual understanding of God. Cook believes that Spinoza meant with salvation only the intellectual understanding of God and the love that is a result of it. Spinoza himself makes clear that the common people also can arrive at a lesser kind of salvation possible from knowing only God's 'divine justice and charity' (TTP XIII-9, p. 177). But these people stay in the dark with regard to the knowledge of 'God's attributes; this is a particular gift bestowed only on certain of the faithful'. (TTP XIII-5, p. 175). The term 'salvation', Cook himself acknowledges, has many

[31] Cook (1999), p. 209-231.

[32] Cook (1999), p. 229. Spinoza does give a reason to believe that what the prophets proclaim is true, and that is namely that we know from experience that biblical faith inspires many people to lead a life of justice and charity. This might also be the case with Spinoza's landlady herself.

different meanings.[33] However, Cook does not look for the different meanings that the term gets in Spinoza's writings.

Cook denies that the salvation of the majority can be the same as controlling the passions to which we are enslaved. His argument is that the salvation of the ignorant is described by Spinoza as something that cannot be understood by reason alone. If 'it *can* be demonstrated that mevrouw van der Spyck [Spinoza's landlady] can achieve a certain peace of mind through piety and a peaceable life, then the peace of mind cannot be the salvation that Spinoza is addressing in the *TTP*'.[34] But Cook doesn't seem to grasp Spinoza's point here. Spinoza is not saying that we don't understand how love and piety lead to peace of mind. What we, according to Spinoza, don't understand by means of reason alone is how simple obedience to an imagined idea of God can lead to the same kind of love and piety that true knowledge of God can lead us to. We can, however, accept this most agreeable effect with moral certainty, and one of the reasons that we can accept it with moral certainty is that we know from experience that there are many simple religious people who have an admirable way of dealing with the hardships of life, and are also admirable in how they succeed in remaining humane and kind towards their fellow human beings, while possessing no intellectual knowledge at all.

5.5. Did Spinoza Pretend to be a Christian?

The previous sections of this chapter researched whether Spinoza's *theory of religion* is consistent. What was found was that the three perspectives on religion do not have to be thought of as contradicting each other. Many seemingly contradictions can be solved by carefully distinguishing between Spinoza's accounts of superstition, faith and the philosophical religion, and by making use of other distinctions that Spinoza has encouraged us to make. Because the seemingly contradictions disappear when we make these distinctions, there is no need to assume that Spinoza had a hidden teaching which he expressed only to those readers who were capable of 'reading between the lines'.

In other words: my aim in this chapter so far has been to see whether it is possible to present Spinoza's theory of religion as a coherent whole. However, two aspects of Spinoza's theory of religion have not yet been discussed. These are: 1) Spinoza's *treatment of the historical religions* of especially Judaism and Christianity, and 2) the distinction he makes in the TTP between the *internal religion* and the *external religion*.[35]

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[33] Cook (1999), p. 215.
[34] Cook (1999), p. 228-229.
[35] Internal religion has to do with how people *think about God*. External religion with the way in which religion materializes in churches, ceremonies and sermons. Spinoza in the TTP defends the freedom of each individual to

The final section of this chapter focuses solely on Spinoza's treatment of Judaism and Christianity as Spinoza's distinction between the internal and the external religion will be discussed later.[36] How does Spinoza evaluate both religions? Why does he seem so much more critical of Judaism than of Christianity? Is this purely out of strategic reasons – out of fear of persecution and out of the need to make alliances with the Christians in the Republic? Or did Spinoza think that Christianity came closest to the philosophical religion he himself believed in, and which could be interpreted as a different, heterodox kind of Christianity which he shared with his circle of friends?

What I will do here in the final section of this chapter is first describe the tensions or possible contradictions in Spinoza's works in the way Spinoza writes about Christianity. These tensions might be taken as a proof of the view that Spinoza was an atheist who simply was dishonest about his Christian affiliations in order to avoid persecution and in order to win support among his Christian readers. However, it is also possible that Christianity, according to Spinoza normative theory of religion, approached more than any other historical religions his ideal of what true religion should look like.

Spinoza's Treatment of Judaism and Christianity

Some Jewish commentators have expressed shock and dismay over the way in which Spinoza writes in the most dismissive tones about Judaism, while praising and glorifying Christianity. [37] Accordingly, the question has been asked whether Spinoza was sincere in this or whether it was mere hypocrisy and flattery to the Christians in the Dutch Republic.

Hermann Cohen has been one of the fiercest critics as he 'shows first of all that in the Theological-Political Treatise Spinoza speaks from a Christian point of view and accordingly accepts the entire Christian critique of Judaism, but goes much beyond even that Christian critique in his own critique (…) Cohen shows next that the Christianity in the light of which

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internal religion, but at the same time defends the right of the state in having absolute control over the *external religion*. Spinoza's treatment of historical Judaism and Christianity and Spinoza's treatment of the distinction between internal and external religion also partly overlap each other: Spinoza presents Moses as an exemplar of how to deal with *external* religion and he describes Jesus and Paul as teachers of an *internal* religion. This is the case, because Spinoza makes Biblical figures in the TTP represent an aspect of his theory of religion. Not only does Moses represent political, *external* religion and Jesus ethical *internal* religion but Spinoza also has John represent *fides* or faith as John makes clear that faith is shown from works and therefore has nothing to do with philosophy. (TTP XIV-6 and 7, p. 180-181). Christ and Paul on the other hand are presented as the teachers of *religio* or the philosophical religion. (TTP IV-10, p. 63 till 65). True religion in Christ and Paul is not separated from philosophy: both men advocate the natural light of reason and the natural divine law. (TTP IV-12, p. 67)

[36] The distinction between internal and external religion will be treated extensively in the next part which deals with the relation between the theological and the political.

[37] Cohen (2015); Kal (2000); See also Morgan (2017) in general, and p. 595-600 for Emmanuel Levinas's critique on Spinoza.

Spinoza condemns Judaism is not historical or actual Christianity but an idealized Christianity, and hence while idealizing Christianity, he denigrates Judaism'.[38] According to Strauss 'Spinoza, attempting to achieve the liberation of philosophy in a book addressed to Christians, cannot but appeal to the Christian prejudices; appealing to the Christian prejudice against Judaism. (…) Generally speaking, he makes the Old testament against his better knowledge the scapegoat for what he actually found objectionable in actual Christianity'. [39]

Spinoza takes a 'Christian perspective' in his interpretation of the Bible as he detects a certain progression in God's revelations: in the beginning God approached the people (the Jews) as if they were infants, but gradually people become more adult, more reasonable, more able to think for themselves. Although Moses gets credits for being a great statesman, he still is painted by Spinoza as quite an ignoramus when compared to Jesus (called 'Christ' by Spinoza) who is praised as a teacher of universal ethics. The law of Moses is temporal, and directs itself to physical well-being. The teachings of Christ are eternal and have to do with real salvation and blessedness. Whereas Moses, as 'the supreme prophet' was the only one to speak to God face-to-face, 'Christ' (who reached 'a degree of perfection above others') 'communicated with God from mind to mind'. (TTP I-18 and 19, p. 19). Moses 'imagined God as ruler, legislator, king, merciful, just, etc., despite the fact that all the latter are merely attributes of human nature and far removed from the divine nature' (TTP IV-9, p. 63). Christ, on the other hand, 'understood revealed things truly and adequately. Hence, if he sometimes prescribed them as laws, he did so because of the ignorance and obstinacy of the people. In this matter, therefore, he took God's place and adapted himself to the character of the people'. (TTP IV-10, p. 64).

Although Moses is the supreme prophet, the divine law that the other prophets grasped can be called in a way to be more in accordance with reason than the divine law of Moses. The other prophets namely did not present the divine law as the law of a particular state, but as a universal moral law, 'divinely inscribed upon the hearts of men, that is, upon the human mind' (TTP XII-1, p. 163). Nevertheless, the prophets still presented this law as God's orders to mankind. The Apostles on the other hand, as they had to preach to all nations, made use of reasonable arguments. '[T]he apostles' modes of discourse and discussion in their Epistles reveal very plainly that they did not write them on the basis of divine command and revelation, but simply on that of their own natural judgment'. (TTP XI-4, p. 157). And 'none of the Apostles engaged with philosophy more than Paul who was summoned to preach to the gentiles while the others, who

[38] Strauss (1965), p.18
[39] Strauss (1965), p. 20

preached to the Jews, the despisers of philosophy, likewise adapted themselves to their minds'. (TTP XI-9, p. 162).

Did Spinoza Conceal His True opinion About Christ's Divinity?

However, Spinoza did not affirm central Christian beliefs. Maybe most importantly, he did not believe that Jesus was God, who had taken on human form. To Oldenburg he wrote: 'Indeed, to tell the truth, they [the ones spreading the teaching of certain Churches that God took on a human form] seem to me to speak no less absurdly than one who might tell me that a circle has taken on the nature of a square'. (Letter 73, p. 943).[40]

Spinoza does not flat out deny the divinity of Jesus. On the contrary, he states that:

> 'for a person to know things which are not contained in the first foundations of our knowledge and cannot be deduced from them, his mind would be vastly superior, far surpassing the human mind. I do not believe that anyone has reached such a degree of perfection above others except Christ, to whom the decrees of God which guide men to salvation were revealed not by words or visions but directly; and that is why God revealed himself to the Apostles through the mind of Christ, as he did, formerly, to Moses by means of a heavenly voice. Therefore the voice of Christ may be called the voice of God, like the voice which Moses heard. In this sense we may also say that the wisdom of God, that is, the wisdom which is above human wisdom took on a human nature in Christ, and that Christ was the way to salvation'. (TTP I-18, p. 19).

This passage has been one of the stumbling blocks for many commentators, especially because it seems to go against something that Spinoza writes at the beginning of the first chapter, namely that the idea that 'the prophets did not have human minds, though they had human bodies, and that their sensations and consciousness therefore were of a quite different nature than ours' is 'a nonsensical suggestion' (TTP I-2, p. p. 14)[41]. This idea that there are not 'different species of men', but that all people share in the same nature (TP VII-27, p. 720), seems to exclude the possibility of someone having a 'vastly superior mind, far surpassing the human mind'. Is this then a proof of Spinoza's esotericism?

What does Spinoza mean when he writes that the teaching of Christ was 'not contained in the first foundations of our knowledge'? The teaching of Christ is not different from the teachings of the prophets. They all taught that we can be saved by means of obedience alone. God requires from us that we worship Him by means of acts of justice and charity. Christ, just as the prophets, states that we obey God when we love our neighbor. Christ, however, was different from all the prophets in that he didn't arrive at this dogma of the universal faith through the imagination, that

[40] Melamed (2012) is an example of such a commentator.
[41] Strauss (1952), p. 171, Frankel (2001), Melamed (2012), Huenemann (2014), p. 18

is by means of 'words and images'. Instead, he understood them directly. This is what Spinoza means while writing that this teaching is not 'contained in the first foundations of our knowledge': we don't know it directly as an axiom or as a definition of the sort that we find in the *Ethics*. Nor can we know the dogmas of the universal faith that were taught by Jesus and the prophets by deducing them from axioms and definitions.

How this is possible, is not explained by Spinoza. Revelation or prophecy – that is, the teachings of the prophets and those of Jesus – 'exceed the limits of natural knowledge' (TTP I-5, p. 14). They 'exceed the limits of our understanding'. (TTP I-6, p.15). We are 'unable to prove by means of reason alone whether the fundamental principle of theology – that men are saved by obedience alone – is true or false' (TTP XV-7, p. 191.)' Spinoza therefore holds 'categorically that the fundamental dogma of theology cannot be discovered with the natural light, or at least that no one has yet proven it, and that is why revelation was absolutely indispensable' (TTP XV-7, p. 191).

What Spinoza is saying in the cited passage is that the mind of Jesus was unique in the sense that he grasped the teachings of the universal faith without making use of the imagination. The prophets received the same teachings when they heard God's voice speak to them. But Jesus did not hear God's voice, he understood the teachings directly. In this sense he can be called 'the mouth of God'. In this sense also it can be said that divine wisdom took on a human form.

Now, let's go back to the question. I cannot deny that, when taken literally, Spinoza contradicts himself when he states that it is nonsensical to believe that people can have human bodies, but superhuman minds, while he also states that Jesus (who had a human body) had a mind that was 'vastly superior, far surpassing the human mind'.

But does this mean that Spinoza's expressed admiration of Christ is nothing but a lie? Maybe it is. But it is also possible that we find here an example of Spinoza using the theory of adaptation to teach his contemporaries that their belief that Jesus was God, taken on a human form can be reinterpreted in a way which is more in line with the teachings of reason.

Did Spinoza Conceal His True Opinion About Christ's Resurrection?

Spinoza likewise did not share in this other central belief of Christianity, the idea that Jesus rose from the dead. Chapter 6 of the TTP explicitly states that there can be no miracles that go against the laws of nature, but Spinoza stays silence about what this means for the belief in the miraculous resurrection of Jesus Christ. No wonder then also that Henry Oldenburg wrote him that Christians 'say that you conceal your opinion with regard to Jesus Christ, redeemer of the World, sole Meditator of mankind, and of his Incarnation and Atonement'. (Letter 71, p. 940).

In a later letter to Oldenburg, Spinoza would remove all uncertainty with regard to his opinion of the resurrection:

> 'Christ's resurrection from the dead was of a spiritual kind and was revealed to the faithful according to their understanding, indicating that Christ was endowed with eternity and rose from the dead (I here understand 'the dead' in the sense in which Christ said 'Let the dead bury their dead'), and also by his life and death he provided an example of surpassing holiness, and that he raises his disciples from the dead insofar as they follow the example of his own life and death'. (Letter 75, p. 946).

When Spinoza writes here that he understands Jesus rising from the dead in a likewise way as Jesus intended his saying, recorded in Matthew 8-22 and Luke 9-60, the word 'dead' is to be read in the sense of being devoid of any kind of spiritual existence, that is, it is a description of persons who live without knowing that their highest good consists in the knowledge and love of God. Spinoza, consistent with what he teaches in chapter 6 of the Treatise denies all miracles: 'The passion, death and burial of Christ I accept literally, but his resurrection I understand in an allegorical sense'. (Letter 78, p. 953). Oldenburg replies: 'your assertion that Christ's passion, death and burial is to be taken literally, but his resurrection allegorically, is not supported by any argument that I can see. In the gospels Christ's resurrection seems to be narrated as literally as the rest. And on the article of resurrection stands the whole Christian religion and its truth, and with its removal the mission of Christ Jesus and his heavenly teaching collapse. You cannot be unaware how urgently, when he was raised from the dead, Christ labored to convince his disciples of the truth of the resurrection properly so called. To seek to turn this into allegory is the same as if one were to set about destroying the entire truth of the Gospel history'. (Letter 79, p. 954).

As far as we know, Spinoza never replied to this final letter of Oldenburg, sent to him a year before his death. But was Oldenburg right? Did Spinoza seek to destroy Christianity? According to some scholars this exactly was his goal. But maybe this was not his intent at all. He presented Christianity as the most reasonable religion, that is, it is a religion that can be reinterpreted or adapted in such a way to confirm the central teachings of Spinoza's philosophy. Spinoza does not think he does anything against the spirit of religion in reinterpreting Christianity in this way. Prophecy or revelation has always been adapted to the level of the intellect of the common people.

Conclusion to the First Part

This concludes our investigation into the relationship between the philosophical and the theological in Spinoza's thought. This part has explained:

1. how the three perspectives on religion can coexist,
2. why it is mostly unnecessary to interpret Spinoza as someone who had to hide his true opinions,
3. why Spinoza, if we understand him as he understood himself, cannot be called an atheist, and why he, according to his own perspective, should be called a religious man,
4. why Spinoza thought Scripture was important,
5. why Spinoza belongs in a tradition as well as in a circle of intellectuals who believe that the opposition between reason and revelation, Athens and Jerusalem can be overcome in the idea of a *philosophical religion*.

Spinoza was not an atheist in his philosophy, because his philosophy is in fact a religion. And he was not an atheist in his theology, because he understood the Bible as a book that has provided mankind with a non-philosophical path to salvation for the majority of mankind. We have seen that the accusation that this religious dimension of Spinoza's thought is in fact some kind of pious lie is unjustified. It is therefore that we can finally move on to investigate the relationship between the theological and the political. That is, the relationship between the philosophical religion and revealed faith on the one hand, and society and the state on the other hand.

Part II. The Relation Between Theology and Politics

A Brief Introduction to Part II

Just as the relation between philosophy and theology needs to be understood against the background of the arrival of the *nova philosophia*, so does one need to understand the relation between theology and politics in the context of the Reformation and the Counter-Reformation, and the religious wars that resulted. As Europe was politically divided along religious lines, the theological-political problem became: How to retain 'the centripetal force of religion' (which allows people in society to live together in peace, because they share the same vision of God and nature) without invoking 'the centrifugal force of religion', which divides the nation as it brings us to fundamentalist hatred, religious persecution and civil war?

Spinoza's solution to the theological-political problem is again neither traditional nor modern. It is not traditional in a theological sense, because Spinoza redefines the Christian faith as one that brings people to embrace the well-being of their societies as 'the highest piety that anyone can show' (TTP XX-10, p. 242). And it is not traditional in a political sense, because Spinoza turns against monarchy and embraces a kind of 'democratic republicanism' as the best kind of regime. However, it is also not 'modern' in that Church and State are not separated, but integrated into a theological-political unity in which religion is necessary for a stable state, and a stable state is necessary for true religion.

6. Religion and Politics

What does Spinoza's positive evaluation of religion – in its philosophical as well as its non-philosophical guise (that is, Biblically revealed) – mean for his political thought? In this chapter I argue against a reading of Spinoza in which he appears as someone who understood religion merely as a possible threat to peace and freedom. Instead, I argue that Spinoza considers religion indispensable to maintain the peace in society and thus, for the state. This is also how the theological and the political are deeply intertwined in Spinoza's thought: religion is necessary for politics; and to be a good citizen is to be a good religious man. Or, in other words, Spinoza's state is a church, and true piety shows itself in love of the fatherland.

The first section treats the distinction between internal and external religion, crucial for understanding the TTP as a whole.

The second section analyzes the first three chapters of the TTP's political part and shows what the rights are of sovereign powers and of citizens.

The third section describes the way in which Spinoza defends the single authority thesis: the state should have absolute power over the external religion.

The fourth section describes the theological problem which needs to be solved by political means.

The fifth section describes the political problem, which in its turn must be solved by theological means.

The sixth concludes the chapter by explaining how we can understand Spinoza's comprehensive theological-political teaching in the TTP as one in which religion and politics are intrinsically linked.

6.1. The Two Parts of the *Theological-Political Treatise*

To discuss the relationship between theology and politis is to investigate how the two parts of the TTP are related. Now, it is not immediately obvious how the theological part of the TTP, its first fifteen chapters, can be united with its political part, its final five. The main argument of the first part is 'the separation thesis', or the idea that theology needs to be kept apart from philosophy, leaving room in this way for the freedom to philosophize, which includes the freedom to think about God as you like. But the main argument of the second part is 'the single authority thesis', or the idea that the state should have absolute authority over the church.[1] How can these two

[1] Steinberg (2013).

arguments be reconciled? The two parts seem to argue for two opposite values: the first one for individual religious freedom, the second one for a religious-political order.[2]

The comprehensive theological-political argument that the TTP wants to make is to explain what the state can and what the state cannot do in giving the universal divine law, prescribed both by reason as well as by revelation, the power of law. Spinoza argues in favor of the freedom to philosophize. What Spinoza is arguing against is the idea that God's divine laws rule directly over political communities, instead of indirectly, through the mediation of the sovereign powers.[3]

The TTP can then be said to contain two main theological-political teachings: the separation thesis and the single-authority thesis. The first allows everybody the freedom of internal religion, the second grants the state absolute and undivided authority over the external religion. The distinction between internal and external religion is, in other words, necessary for understanding the comprehensive theological-political argument in the TTP.[4]

Internal Religion

The first time that Spinoza discusses internal religion is in the theological part of the TTP, at the end of chapter VII, paragraph 22, p. 116. Religion, Spinoza writes there, does not consist in 'external actions', but in 'simplicity and truth of mind'. These things – *animi simplicitate et veracitate*, which can perhaps be better translated as 'purity and integrity' – are not part of external, but part of internal religion. They cannot be instilled in people by 'the power of laws or by public authority'.

Laws function by means of threats of punishment, and 'no one can be compelled to be happy by force of law'. This doesn't mean that nothing can be done to help people to arrive at a state of mind in which they experience this purity and integrity. One can provide people with advice, good examples, and other things needed for 'a proper upbringing'. But, most important, is to

[2] Verbeek (2012): '(…) one of the central questions could be to what extent the book [the TTP] is a whole, given the fact that Spinoza presents the book as a collection of 'some treatises' (aliquot dissertationes'). Verbeek (2003) p. 1: 'Every reader of Spinoza's *Theological-Political Treatise* (1670) will know that it is a difficult book but will also realize that its difficulties are not like those of, say, the *Critique of Pure Reason* or the *Phenomenology of the Mind*. Its vocabulary is not technical at all; nor is its reasoning complicated or its logic extraordinary. If it is difficult it is not because of particular phrases, paragraphs, concepts, but because one fails to see how things combine; how particular arguments fit into a comprehensive argument; how a single chapter or couple of chapters relate to the book as a whole and how the book relates to Spinoza's other work; indeed it is not clear most of the time what it is all about even if now and then one stumbles across something familiar and recognizable'.

[3] Fukuoka (2018), p. 14.

[4] Etienne Balibar writes with regard to Spinoza's two claims that 1) religion is something that pertains absolutely to the freedom of the individual (TTP, end of chapter 7) and 2) that religion is something that pertains absolutely to the authority of the state (TTP, chapter XIX) that 'even with the best will of the world one cannot remove a feeling of an underlying contradiction.' This contradiction according to Balibar cannot be removed by making a distinction between internal and external religion, because 'the main issue at stake in both texts is that of *deeds* (that is to say, "works"or "pious actions towards one's fellows man") and this issue belongs at once to both domains.' Balibar (2008), p. 43-44.

allow people 'free judgement'. Spinoza seems to point then to certain domains where the state has to accept the limits of its power in making people happy, in so far as the state is conceived as an entity which acts by means of laws alone.

Spinoza writes that 'every individual will also possess the supreme right and authority to judge freely about religion and to explain and to interpret it for himself'. This all seems in accordance with our current, liberal understanding of these things. Spinoza even seems to introduce the public-private distinction in this part of the TTP: 'The reason why the supreme authority in interpreting the laws and the supreme judgement on public questions lie with the magistrate is simply because they are matters of public right. For the same reason the authority to interpret religion and make judgements about it, will lie with each individual man, because it is a question of individual right'. Still, as I will argue, there is, according to Spinoza, an organization which can and should help people to arrive at the right inner state of purity and integrity which makes people able wholeheartedly to obey the law of God, and that is the church. The church, however, needs to be under the control of the state.

The State Has Authority Over External Religion

The title of chapter XIX states that 'the authority in sacred matters' (*jus circa sacra*) belongs solely to the sovereign powers, and that 'the external cult of religion' (*religionis cultum externum*) should always serve the 'stability of the state'. Spinoza calls all these things 'sacred' that 'promote the practice of piety and religion' (TTP XII-5, p. 165), that is, everything that helps people to arrive at the love of God and the love of the neighbor. To the external religion, which needs to serve the peace of the state, belong 'pious conduct and formal religious worship' and not 'private worship of God or the means by which the mind is internally directed wholeheartedly to revere God' (TTP XIX-3, p. 239). That is to say: the state can punish people for the way in which they behave (externally), but the state cannot punish people for the things that they believe (internally).

The state then also has the authority to decide what 'pious conduct' is, making clear exactly what acts are considered to be 'just and charitable' and what not. '(TTP XIX-10, p. 242). The state furthermore has the right to decide on the ways in which God is revered in religious ceremonies and rites. Here the state gets an absolute authority over religion, which totally contradicts the central tenets of modern liberalism, since the freedom of religion is not accepted. To allow the churches the freedom to decide themselves what they consider to be just and unjust, pious and impious, is to divide sovereignty and to allow for a state within the state. 'Therefore, any body which attempts to remove this authority from the sovereign power, is attempting to

divide the government (…) and is, in effect, preparing a road to power for himself' (TTP XIX-16, p. 245).

Frank and Waller explain the difference between the internal religion and the external religion in the following way: 'The Bible is essentially teaching us how to act, not what to believe (…) However, in order to act in these appropriate ways, one must undergird those actions with certain minimal beliefs. These beliefs, which are necessary for the public practices commanded by Scripture, Spinoza defines as faith. (…) The public *faith* which comprises those beliefs required for acting justly and charitably must be promoted by the state and publicly endorsed by all citizens. But the public faith is not the same things as one's private opinions'.[5] In other words: acts of justice and charity fall under the jurisdiction of the state and are proscribed by law, just as the religious beliefs that are necessary in order for people behave justly and charitably are prescribed by the state's laws. This is all part of the 'external religion', which always needs to be adapted to the interests of the state. But the way in which civilians interpret these dogmas, or the way in which the civilians understand God – intellectually or through the imagination – is not a matter of the state at all. This is the 'internal religion' in which individual people are completely free to adapt the knowledge of God to their particular level of understanding.

6.2. The Rights of Sovereign Powers and the Rights of Citizens

How did Spinoza defend the single-authority thesis[6], or the idea that the state has absolute authority over the way in which external religion is practiced? In order to investigate Spinoza's theological as well as philosophical arguments for this thesis, I will focus on the text of chapter 19 of the TTP, in which Spinoza shows 'that authority in sacred matters belongs wholly to the sovereign powers and that the external cult of religion must be consistent with the stability of the state if we wish to obey God rightly'. (TTP XX, title, p. 238). The argument in chapter 19 is, however, already made in the previous chapters of the political part of the TTP, that is chapter 16 through 18. In order to understand the argumentation in chapter 19, I will have to give some attention to what Spinoza writes in these previous chapters.

Arguments For a State-Church

Chapter XVI, 'on the foundations of the state, on the natural and civil right of each person, and on the authority of sovereign powers' (TTP XVI Title, p. 194), is one of the two chapters in the TTP that almost does not contain any Bible citations, signifying that this chapter unfolds a

[5] Frank & Waller (2016), p. 95.
[6] See 10.1 for the argumentation with which Spinoza defended the separation thesis.

philosophical argument, based on reason alone, and not a theological argument, based on Scripture. Let's now take a look at how Spinoza defines the four things mentioned in the title of the chapter, and see what this means for the relationship between the divine law and the law of the state.

The state, according to Spinoza's account of it in chapter 16, seems to be founded in Hobbesian fashion by means of a social contract[7] in which each person 'transfers all the power they possesses to society; and society alone retains the supreme natural right over all things, i.e., supreme power, which all must obey, either of their own free will or through fear of the ultimate punishment' (TTP XVI-8, p. 200).[8] The natural right of each person is the same as the right of each natural thing, which means 'that each individual thing has the sovereign right to do everything it can do, or the right of each thing extends so far as its determined power extends' (TTP XVI-2, p. 195). This natural right is what Spinoza in the *Ethics* and in the *Political Treatise* calls 'the power of God' and the 'conatus': all things are determined to strive for self-persistence. The civil right then is 'the freedom of each person to conserve themselves in their own condition, which is determined by the edicts of the sovereign power and protected by its authority alone'. (TTP XVI-13, p. 202).

So we see how Spinoza in this chapter starts with a state of nature in which everybody strives to persist in its own being. In this state of nature, everyone judges for himself what he considers to be good or bad. Civil society is then founded the moment that all give up their individual right to decide what is right and wrong. Instead, they give the sovereign the absolute right to decide what rights the citizens should have. The authority of sovereign powers is absolute: 'No offense can be committed against subjects by sovereigns, since they are of right permitted to do all things'. (TTP XVI-14, p. 203).

But what about the divine law then? Is the law of God – to love thy neighbor – not by definition above the law of state? To answer this, Spinoza first points out that the state of nature

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[7] Spinoza speaks of a contract or agreement in TTP XVI-5 -11, p. 197-202. He also discusses it in the TP: The contract or laws whereby a people transfers its right to one council or one man should undoubtedly be broken when this in the interest of the general welfare. But the right to judge whether or not this is in the general interest to do so cannot rest with any private person, but only with the ruler of the state. So by civil right the ruler of the state remains the sole interpreter of these laws.' (TP 5-6, p. 700)

[8] Compare what Spinoza writes with Hobbes (1968), p. 226: The only way to erect such a Common Power (…) is, to conferre all their power and strength upon one Man, or upon one Assembly of men, that may reduce all their Wills, by plurality of voices, unto one Will (…)' Den Uyl (1983), p. 64 however writes that 'social contract' in Spinoza 'should not be seen an as event where men have, through reason, recognized their plight and sought to alleviate their condition by formally agreeing upon certain courses of action. Spinoza rather presents the picture of institutions that emerge instead of being founded of created. He cannot, therefore, be seen as falling within the British tradition of social contract theorists'. Malcolm (2002), p. 554, on the other hand, writes that Spinoza's account of the transfer of natural rights to the sovereign 'through a contract is reminiscent of De Cive'.

is prior to the state of religion. Revelation was necessary, because men obviously were unaware of the fact that they should obey God. The divine law only becomes binding once people 'promised to obey God in an explicit agreement. With this agreement they surrendered their natural liberty, so to speak, transferring their right to God, and this (…) occurred in the civil state' (TTP XVI-19, p. 205).

Secondly, Spinoza argues that the sovereign powers that rule the state are bound by the divine law in the same way as the people in the state of nature were bound by the divine law. That is to say, they had the right, i.e. the power, to not be just and charitable, but in acting this way they would act against their own best interest. Therefore: 'Should the sovereign refuse to obey God in his revealed law, he may do so, but at his own peril and his own loss. No civil or natural law forbids him' (TTP XVI-20, p. 206).

Thirdly, Spinoza argues that if citizens are allowed to disobey the laws of the state, because they think that they go 'against religion and the obedience we have promised to God', this will generate 'serious conflict', as 'people are very prone to go astray in religion and make dubious claims that result from the diversity of their understanding' (TTP XVI-21, p. 206). In other words, again a very Hobbesian argument: the alternative for not trusting the sovereign in his defense and interpretation of the divine law is chaos and civil war which is worse than an unreligious government.

Spinoza in the next chapter does two things with the argumentation that he has set up in chapter 16. The first thing he does, is to make clear in what way he differs from Hobbes's idea of a social contract.[9] Although it is true in theory that a state functions only if all the citizens obey the commands of the sovereign power, in reality the sovereign power does not have the right, that is, the power, to make all the citizens obey him absolutely in everything he decrees. People cannot really give up their natural right, as they are still determined by nature to do the things that they consider best for their self-persistence. And if they think that obeying the laws of the state is not helping them in persisting in their own being, they will break the contract, disobey the laws, and rebel against the sovereign. This is also what experience teaches. For, never have people 'succeeded in devising a form of government that was not in greater danger from its own citizens than from foreign foes' (TTP XVII-4, p. 211). In this way, Spinoza also strongly relativizes the power of sovereigns to go against the divine law, because if a sovereign would force people to

[9] Spinoza does not explicitly distance himself in this chapter, but only implictly. But what he does here is described in his letter to Jarig Jelles: 'With regard to political theory, the difference between Hobbes and myself (…) consists in this, that I always preserve the natural right in its entirety, and I hold the sovereign power in a State has right over a subject only in proportion to the excess of its power over that of a subject.' (Letter 50, p. 891-892)

hate each other or to act unjustly and uncharitably to each other, he will surely face rebellions and uprisings (TTP XVII-1, p. 208-209). This is what Spinoza meant when he wrote that sovereigns run a risk if they go against divine law.

The second thing that Spinoza does, is to provide backing for his single-authority thesis by means of theological arguments derived from Scripture. What Spinoza shows in this chapter is that religion in the Hebrew state under Moses only acquired the power of law because of *a political decision*. The Hebrews made a social contract with God. After the Hebrews escaped slavery in Egypt, they were again in the state of nature in which there was no consensus over what needs to be called right or wrong or piety or sin. But then 'they resolved, on the advice of Moses in whom they had the greatest trust, to transfer their right to no mortal man but rather to God alone. Without hesitation, all equally with one shout promised to obey God absolutely in all his commands, and to recognize no other laws but that which He himself conferred as law by prophetic revelation. This undertaking or transfer of right to God was made in the same way that we conceived above it is made in an ordinary society, whenever men make up their minds to surrender their natural right' (TTP XVII-7, p. 213).

Religion only received the force of law because of a decree of the sovereign power, which in the Hebrew state was the entire people. Spinoza calls this state in its initial face, that is, before the power to consult God was delegated to Moses alone, a 'democracy' (TTP XVII-9, p. 214).

Internal Religion Important For Political Stability

Relevant for a better understanding of the distinction between internal and external is what Spinoza writes in chapter XVII about obedience, because there he states that 'obedience is less a question of an external than an internal action of the mind. Hence he is most under the dominion of another who resolves to obey every order of another wholeheartedly' (TTP XVII-2, p. 209). This is important, because it most clearly shows that internal religion is in fact extremely important for the stability of the state. This was already indicated by Spinoza in chapter 4, where he wrote that Christ did teach to those capable of understanding that the divine law should be understood as an eternal decree and not as a command, and 'Hence, he freed them from the slavery of the law and yet in this way also confirmed and stabilized the law, inscribing it deeply in their hearts' (TTP IV-10, p. 64). In other words, Christianity freed the people from 'the slavery of the law' in that it teaches them that religion is not an affair of the state, but of the heart and the mind. Yet, in this way, it only strengthens the state and its laws, as people come wholeheartedly to desire the love of God and the neighbor, which is best served in a well-organized state.

Spinoza Repeats the Main Political Teachings in Chapter XVIII

The political lessons of the Hebrew state are rehearsed by Spinoza so that nobody misses his main point, which is the single authority thesis. The absolute authority 'to decide what is religiously right or not [should be assigned] to the sovereign power alone' (TTP XVIII-6-3, p. 234). But also, the teachings of the first theological part are repeated. The state should 'regard piety and the practice of religion as a question of works alone, that is, as simply the practice of charity and justice' (TTP XVIII-6-2, p. 234). The state should refrain from making in the domain of religion 'laws about opinions which man can or do dispute' (TTP XVIII-6-2, p. 234). This was already stated by Spinoza in chapter 14, where he wrote that the dogmas of faith that everybody needs to know for practicing charity and justice should be so formulated that they cannot cause conflict 'among honest people' (TTP XIV-9, p. 182).

6.3. Spinoza's Defense of the Single Authority Thesis

Let's turn then to the argumentation in chapter 19. Spinoza there want to prove two things: 1) that the authority in sacred matters belongs wholly to the sovereign powers; 2) that the external cult of religion must be accommodated to peace of the commonwealth, if we want to obey God rightly. The first of these two propositions is defended by means of both philosophical as well as theological arguments, largely derived from the previous chapters.

The State Has a Religious Function: Providing For Justice

The philosophical argument begins by restating that justice can only exist in a state where everybody has given up its natural right to judge about right and wrong, and has given this right to decide what should be called just and unjust, pious or sinful, to the sovereign power. Justice does not have any force of law in a state of nature where everyone decides for himself what is right and wrong, because this leads to a situation where nothing is forbidden: 'strife or hatred or anger or fraud or anything at all that appetite foments' (TTP XVI-4, p. 197). Now, since 'sacred things' pertain to all things that can be of help in promoting justice, and for justice obedience to the sovereign power is necessary, we need to absolutely obey the sovereign powers if we desire the justice which God commands (TTP XX-4 and 5, p. 239-240).

This is also supported by means of a theological argument: the Bible also testifies that the Hebrews all had to give up their natural right in order that revealed religion received its status as a law that can be enforced on people. 'On the same grounds, revealed religion, no longer possessed the force of law after the destruction of the Hebrew state. For there can be no doubt that as soon

as the Hebrews transferred their right to the king of Babylon, the kingdom of God and the divine law immediately ceased to be effective' (TTP XX-6, p. 240-241).

That 'religion, whether revealed by the natural light of reason or by prophetic light, receives the force of commandment solely from the decree of the those who have authority to govern' (TTP XX-7, p. 241), is furthermore proved by the fact that God cannot be adequately conceived as a legislator, a king, or a judge, which is 'confirmed by experience itself. For we find no traces of divine justice except where just men rule' (TTP XX-8, p. 241-242).

In the same fashion, Spinoza defends the second thesis: that external religion, which consists in acts of justice and charity, must be consistent with the stability of the state. For, if everybody (just like in the state of nature) should decide what is to be called just and pious, then justice and piety can have no force of law. For example, if someone helps a criminal, who is pursued by the state, this cannot count as a just and pious act (TTP XX-10, 11 and 12, p. 242-244). It is for this reason that the sovereign powers are the interpreters of religion.

Arguments Against the Separation of Church and State

Spinoza wants the state to have absolute jurisdiction over the churches. This goes very far. In the end, it is the state which decides what is being taught or preached or done in the churches, and the churches may never do anything which goes against the authority of the state. 'No one has the right and power without their authority [that is, the authority of the sovereign powers] to administer sacred matters or choose ministers, or decide and establish the foundations and doctrines of a church, nor may they give judgments about morality and observance of piety, or excommunicate or receive anyone into the church, or care for the poor'. (TTP XX-15, p. 245).

How would Spinoza have judged the idea of a separation of Church and State? The way in which this famous notion often is defined, for example, by Locke in his *Letter Concerning Toleration* (1689), is that the state should have jurisdiction over matters that pertain to the protection of the body, but that the churches have the right to decide on the ways in which people can find salvation. Locke writes, 'the care of souls is not committed to the civil magistrate, any more than to other men'.[10] Spinoza, however, clearly argues against such a division of power. 'I will not waste time on the arguments of my opponents where they strive to separate sacred law from civil law and to maintain that only the latter belongs to the sovereign authorities, while the former adheres to the universal church. Their arguments are so flimsy that these do not deserve to be refuted' (TTP XX-14, p. 244). Since Spinoza already has made the case that God does not hold any sovereignty over men, except through those who are in charge of the government of the

[10] Locke (2013) p. 49.

state, and since he has proved this to be so according to reason as well as according to revelation, he does not judge it necessary to investigate this alternative position of his opponents.

One thing he wants to mention, however, and this is that his opponents are wrong in maintaining that high priests such as Phinehas got their authority directly from God. 'For the high priests received this right from Moses who (…) alone retained the sovereign power' (TTP IX-14, p. 244). As Moses had authority to 'make and to repeal laws, to decide about war and peace, send ambassadors, appoint judges, choose a successor, *and carry out all the functions of a supreme power*' (TTP XVII-10, p. 215, Italics added). These rights were given to him by the Hebrews, not by God. It was not the law of God that ordered Phinehas to kill the Israelite and the Midianite woman (Numbers 25-7), but the law of the state (TTP XX-14, p. 244).

Spinoza's opponents who argue that the church is a separate power with rights of its own are in fact conspiring against the sovereign power as they try to divide it and claim power for themselves. Since religion 'has the greatest control over people's minds', it is a very serious offense to attempt 'to remove this authority from the sovereign power'. (TTP XX-16, p. 245).

Separation and Single Authority

Spinoza's defense of the freedom of the individual can be reconciled with the absolute authority that Spinoza grants the state in deciding what religion is. It is with regard to 'internal religion' that everybody enjoys the freedom to philosophize, which includes the individual freedom to think about God as one wants. But it is with regard to the 'external religion' that the state has absolute authority over the way in which religion is expressed. Spinoza writes, 'everyone, wherever he may be, can worship God with true piety and mind his own affairs, as is the duty of a private individual. But the burden of propagating religion should be left to God or to the sovereign, on whom alone devolves the care of public affairs'. (TP 3-10, p. 693).

The internal religion has to do with the way in which we come to understand God. It doesn't matter, Spinoza holds in the TTP, in what way people have come to understand God, because as he has pointed out, also the prophets differed among each other in the way they have described God, and it is also for this theological reason that people are free to think about God as they please, as long as this depiction of God leads them to the love of their neighbor. The external religion has to do with the ways in which religion is being taught to the people. The state church does this by means of instilling in the population the seven dogmas of the universal faith that are necessary for obedience. The public faith of the republic should have no more than the seven religious dogmas, and should clearly separate philosophy from theology (TTP XX-22, p. 249).

Why did Spinoza not want to end all religion, Frank and Waller – who consider Spinoza to have been a 'radical atheist' – ask. They answer in these three ways: 1) it was (and still is) practically impossible to rid all people of religion; 2) societies need a common ground that religion provides; and 3) religion is necessary for the cultivation of certain virtues such as obedience and tolerance.[11] 'The challenge, as Spinoza sees it', Frank and Waller write, 'is to convince the existing religious institutions to cultivate the necessary civic virtues without thereby dividing the republic'.[12] By separating external and internal religion, Spinoza allows different people the freedom to have different ideas of God as part of the internal religion, while he simultaneous makes sure that there is an external religion in which all can unite and that can instruct the people with certain virtues necessary for peacefully living together.[13]

6.4. Spinoza's 'Theological-Political Problem'

The idea that Spinoza in the TTP tried to solve 'the theological-political problem' we find expressed in many (mostly American) books and articles on the subject.[14] But what exactly is the theological-political problem according to Spinoza? As Frankel makes clear, Spinoza never explicitly states that he is dealing with a 'theological-political problem'. But Frankel thinks that one way to grasp Spinoza's take on it is by first researching the theological and then the political problem in Spinoza's thought. We will follow this procedure, but with one big difference: in discussing theology we will keep in mind how Spinoza differentiates between three different perspectives on religion as he separates the philosophical religion from Biblical faith and both of them from superstition.

Solving the Theological Problem

Theology, literally meaning 'knowledge of God' – as discussed so far - can be the intellectual knowledge of God in the philosophical religion of Spinoza and his friends, or it can be the knowledge of God that plays a role in Biblical faith in which the knowledge of God is adapted to the level of understanding of the common people. In order to live well people need this knowledge of God – either in its pure philosophical guise or in its mediated and adapted form as Biblical faith. Knowledge of God leads to harmony – both in the human soul as well as in society

[11] Frank & Waller (2016), p. 93-94.
[12] Ibid, p. 94.
[13] In making this distinction between internal and external religion Spinoza was by no means original. He simply followed an existing practice. See: Hobbes (1968), p. 399. See also: Lavaert (2017), p. 158
[14] Meier (2006), Chapter 1: The theological-political problem is the central problem in Leo Strauss's thought. See also: Janssen (2002), p. 19-21. This notion of a 'theological-political problem' has been later picked up by both Straussian as well as non-Straussian Spinoza-scholars. See, among others, Smith (1997), Chapter 1; Nadler (2011), Chapter 2; Frankel (1999), p. 897-924.

at large. This is why knowledge of God can save us. Most people lack intellectual knowledge of God, but they can be saved by using the prophetic imagination in which God appears as a prince, a judge and a lawmaker and in which He commands all people to love God and their neighbor and to be just and charitable.

All people need the philosophical religion or its adapted form in Biblical faith, because else they will be in the grip of superstition. All men are by nature prone to superstition (TTP, Preface 5, p. 5). Superstition is different from both religion and faith in that it doesn't acknowledge that our supreme good consists in the knowledge and love of God. Superstition therefore divides men, making men into each other's enemies. Superstitious people, driven by fear and the immoderate desire for uncertain things, will hope that their imagined God will chose them over all the others. In this way superstition leads to religious hatred and war, while religion and faith lead to love and peace.

We see then that theology provides us with a problem. The theological problem is that we need to fight superstition, and that we need to promote universal faith in the common people in order that they obey God by acting just and charitably, while we also need to protect the philosophical religion. How to solve this theological problem? This we can only do by means of politics. Therefore we have to understand the political to which we now will turn.

Solving the Political Problem

Politics can be defined as the art that makes it possible that people live together in peace over a longer period of time. That politics is an art is not immediately clear. People are programmed by nature with the desire to persist in their own being. Yet people cannot survive on their own. Therefore nature will force human beings to live together in societies. (People who will not unite and conform to a set of rules that enables them to live and work together, will die; and this is simply the way in which God or Nature has organized the world.) In this sense no special 'art' for living together is needed. We see that 'all men, barbarian or civilized, enter into relationships with one another and set up some kind of civil order'. Therefore, 'one should not look for the causes and natural foundations of the state in the teachings of reason, but deduce them from the nature and condition of men in general' (TP 1-7, p. 682).

But although all humans will be forced to live together with other people or die, this will not always result in stable societies. Societies, brought together by the forces of God or Nature, would be stable if God or Nature would act with the best interest of the human being in mind. If this would be the case God or Nature would have made the human beings fully rational. But this

Spinoza stresses, over and over again, is not the case.[15] The nature of the human beings is not such that they will let themselves be led by reason alone. Instead they are driven by their passions and their appetites. Envy, pride, anger and the desire to revenge are only some examples of passions that drive human beings away from each other in different directions. Reason, Spinoza also stresses again and again, on the other hand, prescribes to us how we best can survive by uniting with our fellow human beings in a state ruled by common laws.[16] But since most human beings are more led by their appetites than by reason, living together becomes a problem.

The political problem – simply put - is therefore the problem how states or human societies, united and ruled by a common law, can persist in their own being. The greatest threat for the persistence of states or human societies, united and ruled by common law, does not come from outside, but from inside. People have devised many strategies, but 'they have never succeeded in devising a government that was not in greater danger of its own citizens than from foreign foes, and which was not more fearful of the former than of the latter' (TTP XVII-4, p. 211; See also TP 5-2, p. 699). The greatest threat for the persistence of states is a lack of unity that arises when people, driven by their passions, chose their private interests over the interests of society as a whole. 'To (…) construct a state that affords no opportunity for trouble-making, to organize everything in such a way that each person, of whatever character, prefers public right to private advantage, this is the real task, this is the arduous work' (TTP XVII-4, p. 211). When rulers prefer their private interests over the interests of the whole of society they will become tyrants. When citizens chose their private interests over the interests of the whole of society they will become rebels. Therefore the political problem is to devise a state in which the ones that rule don't become tyrannical and the ones that are being ruled not rebellious (TTP XVII-16, p. 220). The political problem is then how to make men more reasonable in order that they will see that their true interest lies in uniting with their fellows under common laws in such a way that the state can persist in its own being.

How do we obtain peace and harmony? The answer to this question is religion. It is religion that can provide us with the kind of rational conduct needed to achieve unity. This political problem is in other words in need of a theological solution.

Spinoza's Theological-Political Solution

Why does the theological problem need a political solution? This is so because religion in itself, as an idea or a conviction people have in their minds, is powerless. The conviction of religion that

[15] E-I Appendix, p. 243; E-4p37s2, p. 340; TTP V-8,p. 72; TTP XVI-7, p. 199; TP II-5, p. 683; TP VI-3, p. 701.
[16] E 4p18s, p. 331; TTP III-5, p. 46; TTP XVI-5, p. 197, TP II-16, p. 687, and TP II-21, p. 688.

we should love our neighbors as ourselves is 'of little avail against the passions. It is effective, no doubt, at death's door, that is, when sickness has subdued the passions and a man lies helpless; or again in places of worship where men have no dealings with one another; but is has no weight in law-court or palace where it would be needed most of all'. (TP 1-5, p. 682) Convictions of what we should do, that are, normative laws or categorical imperatives, can do nothing to carve the passions. We can only stop the desires that make men into enemies of each other by having laws that threaten to punish people.

Religion which demands that every man loves God above all things, and his neighbor as himself is extremely important, yes, even a necessary condition, for securing the state (TTP XII-10, p. 170). The doctrine that true faith consists in performing acts of justice and charity is 'necessary' in a society 'if we wish people to live in concord and peace with each other' (TTP XIV-11, p. 184). Religion is a necessary condition for peace in the state, but it is not a sufficient condition, because the divine law that prescribes justice and charity does not have any authority in the state of nature. God or Nature does – as we know – not act with man's best interest in mind. Therefore we find in the state of nature that everything is allowed, including among other wrongdoings, murder, theft and rape. Nothing is forbidden by natural right, except those things that 'no one desires and no one can do' (TTP XVI-4, p. 197). If we want people to not harm others, to treat others in the same way they themselves want to be treated and if we want people to defend other's people's rights as their own, we need a state ruled by law (TTP 16-5, p. 198).[17] Only in the state can religion truly become something that is commanded to us: 'We conclude therefore that religion, whether revealed by the natural light of reason or by prophetic light, receives the force of commandment solely from the decree of those who have authority to govern, and that God has no special kingship over men except through those who hold power' (TTP XX-7, p. 241). This is why the theological problem is in need of a political solution. The Church needs to become a State, because the fruits of true religion, justice and charity, can only exist in a state ruled by law.

Why the Political problem is in Need of a Theological Solution

But why is the political problem then in need of a theological solution? Can't we just curb the passions and let reason rule by means of laws, threatening people who act otherwise with fearful punishments? Can the political problem, in other words, not be solved by means of the same political solution that can solve the theological problem? The answer is: no, because fear of the

[17] This is a position that we also find described in E-IIIp39, E-IVp7 and that we find repeated in E IVp37s2 as it is stated that laws are necessary to establish society.

laws is not enough to secure political peace and stability over a longer period of time. '[H]uman nature does not allow itself to be absolutely compelled, and as the tragedian Seneca says, no one has maintained a violent regime for long; it is moderate regimes that endure. For while men are acting out of fear alone, they are doing what they do not at all want to do; they have no reason of interest or necessity for doing what they do; they seek merely to avoid punishment or even execution'. (TTP V-8, p. 73) The most important factor in winning the love of the people in order that they unite 'are those that are concerned with religion and piety (…) Harmony is also commonly produced by fear, but then it is untrustworthy' (E-IV Appendix 15 and 16, p. 360). The State therefore must also be made into a Church, because only in the church do citizens wholeheartedly obey.

Religion and faith produce unity as we have already discussed. Men who live under the guidance of reason are always necessarily in agreement with one another (E 4-35, p. 337). Also, 'the true universal and general faith pertain[s] no dogmas capable of giving rise to controversy amongst honest people' (TTP XIV-9, p. 182). This is why the political problem is also in need of a theological solution, because threatening laws in themselves are not enough to create harmony. It is in the combination of the religious law (to love God above all things and your neighbor as yourself) and the secular law, which forbids unjust behavior by means of threats, that individuals as well as societies can succeed to persist in their own being over a longer period of time.

The theological and the political are intertwined. The theological problem (how to fight superstition, promote faith and protect religion) is also a political problem (how can the state persist in its own being?), and the political problem (how can the state persist in its own being by preventing rebellion and tyranny and securing unity?) is at the same time a theological problem (how to bring people to unifying faith and religion, instead of divisive superstition?)

Institutional Arrangements For Solving the Theological-Political Problem

How is the theological-political problem solved? Laws should proscribe only wrongful deeds, but they should leave thoughts free (TTP Preface 7, p. 6). Society should be organized in such a way that the state rules over the church (TTP, title of chapter 19, p. 328). These two measures – the separation thesis which secures the freedom to philosophize on the one hand, and the single authority thesis on the other hand - help to fight superstition, promote faith and protect religion, and help societies in this way to persevere in in their own being.

The reason that religion deteriorated from something that has as its fruits 'love, joy, peace, moderation and good will to all men' into superstition that merely breeds 'extraordinary animosity' and 'the bitterest mutual hatred' is that religion is pursued by some as a 'worldly

career', trying 'to win a reputation for themselves while denigrating those who disagreed with them'. But if the state would rule over the church, and pastors and theologians would be civil servants that have to obey the laws of the state, they cannot teach 'new and controversial doctrines designed to seize the attention of the common people', generating in this way 'a great deal of conflict, rivalry and resentment' (TTP, Preface 9, p. 7). If these pastors were serving the state they would only care for what makes people obedient to the religious law which is to love God above all things and one's neighbor as oneself by performing acts of justice and charity. In this way the pastors will promote the universal faith.

Since justice and charity are dependent on the state, and the state cannot exist without obedience to its laws, this means that pastors and theologians have to promote obedience to the state's laws. As these laws proscribe only wrongful deeds and leave thoughts free, hatred towards people who have other ideas of God cannot be spread. The law demands a certain degree of toleration of other religious views. Everybody has the right to adapt the true religion to his own level of understanding, as the Bible itself testifies. This ensures that the true philosophical religion is protected: people are free to philosophize, and this includes the freedom of each person 'to worship God according to his own mind' (TTP Preface 8, p. 6).[18] We can understand then why in this society - where the church stands under the state and where the laws forbid certain acts, but leave the people the freedom to think as they please - the theological and the political problems are solved: state laws guard society against superstition and protect the philosophical religion, whereas the state church and its civil servants ensure that the universal faith is instilled in all men.

[18] See also: TTP VII-22.

7. Spinoza and Secularism

In the previous chapter Spinoza's theological-political teaching has been presented as one in which religion and politics are intertwined, but this goes against the dominant reading of Spinoza as a secularist. This chapter deals with the idea of Spinoza as a secularist, adding arguments why it should be corrected in the light of arguments of a contextualist as well as a textualist nature.

The first section tries to make some distinctions within the concept of 'secularism'

The second section treats with the teleological depiction of Spinoza as a secularist as found, among others, in Steven Nadler's book on the TTP and criticizes it;

The third section turns to the historical context of the Dutch Republic in the seventeenth century and explains why people in this period would have judged modern secularism to be a very bad idea;

The fourth section investigates how Spinoza might have wanted the state-church in the Republic to teach the people the public faith needed for a stable society.

The fifth section turns to Spinoza's "political Christianity": the Christian faith is treated as a civil religion and as an argument against theocracy

7.1. Defining Secularism

A distinction can be made between political secularism and moral secularism.[1] Political secularism is the normative idea that religion should be confined to the private sphere, and that religion should play no role in the public sphere. Spinoza, I argue, is not a political secularist, because 'authority in sacred matters' according to him, 'belongs wholly to the sovereign powers'. (TTP chapter XIX, title). Spinoza can be described as a proponent of the state-church, but not as a proponent of the religiously neutral state.[2] A moral secularist is someone who believes that we can lead a good life without the directives of revealed religion. Cliteur for this reason believes that although we cannot call Spinoza a *political secularist*, we can and should call him a *moral secularist*.

But can Spinoza rightfully be called a 'moral secularist'?[3] The notion of moral secularism depends on the Kantian distinction between moral autonomy and moral heteronomy. The person who uses his own power of reason to decide or determine what is right and wrong, is behaving in

[1] Cliteur uses this distinction made by Floris van den Berg. Cliteur (2010), p. 173
[2] See the distinction made by Cliteur (2012).
[3] Even if one were to concede that Spinoza thought philosophers could reach wisdom on moral matters through reason alone, without the aid of revelation or Scripture, he certainly did not think that this was the case for the majority of the population.

a morally *autonomous* way. The person who lets God, His prophets or His representatives on earth dictate to him how he should live his life, behaves in a morally *heteronomous* way.

This distinction between moral autonomy and moral heteronomy, however, cannot be meaningfully used to describe Spinoza's position, because Spinoza denies that man is or ever can be fully autonomous. Human beings do not have a free will. They are not the masters over their own thoughts. The human mind is part of the infinite intellect of God. Descartes was wrong in saying '*cogito',* because 'when we say that the human mind perceives this or that, we are saying nothing else but this: that God (…) has this or that idea' (E-IIp11c, p. 250). It is, in other words, not 'I think', but it is God or Nature who thinks in and through me.

One cannot say that making use of your own reasoning capacities is *autonomous*, while obeying God is *heteronomous*, because Spinoza's religion is a reasonable religion. The natural light is God's light as it shines in us. From Spinoza's definition of revelation or prophecy as: 'certain knowledge about something revealed to men by God', it follows that 'the word "prophecy" can be applied to natural knowledge. For what we know by the natural light of reason depends on knowledge of God and his eternal decrees alone. (…) natural knowledge has as much right to be called divine as any other knowledge, since it is the nature of God, so far as we share in it, and God's decrees, that may be said to dictate it to us' (TTP I-1 and 2, p. 13-14).

Spinoza does not share the distinctions which underlie the worldview of the moral secularist, but neither does he share the motivation of the moral secularist. Moral secularism is important, according to Cliteur, because of the danger inherent in 'the divine command theory of ethics': good is whatever God commands us to do, even if this command is to kill your own son (in the case of Abraham). Spinoza, however, does not want to criticize or abolish 'divine command theory'. He does not challenge theology as such, which demands obedience to the revealed divine law. Spinoza calls this idea that people can be saved by means of obedience alone useful and even necessary for the salvation of the majority of mankind. (TTP XV-10, p. 194) The problem for Spinoza is not that we have to obey God. The problem is rather understanding the content of this obligation. For Spinoza it is important to understand that the Bible commands from us that we love God above all else and our neighbor as ourselves. We can obey God by means of performing acts of justice and charity. Since it are the sovereign (state) powers that decide what counts as 'just' and 'charitable', God demands that we obey the laws of the sovereign powers.

Spinoza's concern is not obedience, but to make sure that we have a correct understanding of the divine law to which we have to obey. In order to understand what God wants from us, Spinoza engages in a theological argumentation, whereas moral secularists such as

Cliteur want us to all speak 'moral Esperanto', that is, to use a language which does not refer to Holy Books such as the Bible.[4]

How far removed Spinoza's intentions are from what Cliteur calls 'the secular outlook' also becomes clear when we compare how both of them interpret the story of Phinehas in the Bible (Numbers 25: 1-18). For Cliteur this story is exemplary of 'Biblical terrorism'. When Phinehas executed an Israelite and the Midianite woman this Israelite had taken into his tent, he, according to Cliteur, 'defied Moses' authority and took the law into his own hands'.[5] This example, according to Cliteur, shows that the Bible can be used as a reason to turn against the authority of the state. According to Spinoza however, the story of Phinehas cannot be cited as a theological argument in favor of the idea that sacred law should be obeyed over the law of the state. Phinehas was one of the high priests who had received the legal right to execute state laws. These high priests were the 'evident substitutes for Moses, that is the sovereign power. (…) Therefore, the right of the priesthood always rested upon the edict of the sovereign power, and the priests never held it except in conjunction with [their own] control of the government'. (TTP XX-14, p. 244-245)

Whereas Cliteur's study of the Bible leads him to the conclusion that this book is dangerous because it legitimizes illegal acts, such as terrorism, Spinoza's study of the Bible leads him to the conclusion that Scripture not in any way conflicts with the teachings of reason. (TTP Preface 10, p. 9) Whereas Cliteur's secular approach turns to reason in order to deny the validity of theological arguments, Spinoza's theological-political approach is meant to show that reason and theology teach the same things.[6] And one very important thing that both reason as well as the Bible teaches is that we should always adhere to the laws of the state (E-IVp73p, p. 357; TTP XVI-21, p. 200).

7.2. The Depiction of Spinoza as a Secularist

Steven Nadler in *A Book Forged in Hell: Spinoza's Scandalous Treatise and the Birth of the Secular Age* has pointed out that it is 'often assumed that he [i.e., Spinoza] was a strong early proponent of the separation of church and state, and that he, along with John Stuart Mill, laid the foundations for later programs of religious toleration. One commentator even writes that "the spirit of

[4] Cliteur (2007), p. 12.
[5] Cliteur (2010), p. 106.
[6] They differ only in the manner in which they teach it. Philosophy or reason teaches people by showing them the truth. Theology teaches people by means of stories and images that make them willing to obey.

Spinoza lives on in the opening words of the First Amendment of the U.S. Constitution, the phrase referred to as the establishment clause."[7] Nothing could be further from the truth'.

Nadler should be praised for rightfully correcting this erroneous view. Spinoza did not want to separate church and state. Instead he defended the single authority thesis: the state has the right over sacred things [*ius circa sacra*] and is responsible for the external religion. But as can be deduced from the subtitle of Nadler's book, Nadler does think that Spinoza was responsible for 'the birth of the secular age'. He understands Spinoza's theological-political argument namely as one that is driven by one single motive: 'his position is based on the fear that, without such singular and secular control over religious matters, there is a real danger to the well-being of the common-wealth'.[8] To a certain extent this is absolutely true: Spinoza, did want to have state-control over all sacred matters, because he feared that otherwise the clergy will use their powers in order to rebel against the state's authority.

However, as was argued in the previous chapter, Spinoza also had a positive reason to have the state control the church: religion creates harmony. As people come to endorse the knowledge and love of God as their supreme good, they will stop hating and fighting each other. The desire for uncertain things creates hate and strive between people, but the knowledge and love of God makes that people unite. Instead of envying, hating and fighting one another, they will try to have others share in the supreme good. This positive reason to install a church under the state is not mentioned by Nadler.

'Conduct that brings about harmony', Spinoza writes in the *Ethics*, ' is that which is related to justice, equity, and honorable dealing. For apart from resenting injustice and unfairness, men also resent what is held to be base, or contempt for the accepted customs of the state. But for winning their love the most important factors are those that are concerned with religion and piety'. (E-IV, Appendix 15,p. 360) In other words, in order that people come together in mutual love, and form, as it were, one body in the state, they need religion. It doesn't matter whether this religion comes forth out of the prophetic imagination (*fides*) or whether this religion comes forth out of adequate knowledge of God (*religio*), since both forms of religion can help in maintaining a peaceful and free state.

No one is forced to believe in this religion, Nadler writes.[9] And again to a certain extent this is true. Spinoza did not want to install an Inquisition in his ideal Republic, nor did he want to oblige people to attend the church. However, people in Spinoza's description of the state in the

[7] Goldstein.(2006) p. 11
[8] Nadler (2011), p. 205
[9] Nadler (2011), p. 204-205.

TTP are in a way 'forced' to be religious, since everybody has to believe in the seven dogmas of the universal faith, because these seven dogmas are considered necessary conditions for piety. What the state cannot enforce is the way in which the dogmas are interpreted. This is, as has been explained in 6.1, part of the 'inner religion' that cannot be controlled by the state, leaving room to the freedom to philosophize. But the ' external religion' can be enforced by the state.

Nadler is right in stating that increasing the rationality and freedom of the citizens are important goals for Spinoza, but he forgets to point out that these goals cannot be separated from the goal to instill social harmony in the state. Peace, according to Spinoza, does not consist 'in the mere absence of war, but in the union or harmony of minds' (TP 6-4, p. 701). Increasing rationality and freedom is also nothing but the realization that 'nothing is more advantageous to man than man. Men, I repeat, can wish for nothing more excellent for preserving their own being than that they all be in such harmony in all respects that their minds and bodies should compose, as it were, one mind and one body, and that all together they should aim at the common advantage of all' (E-IVp18s). Nadler's reading of Spinoza emphasizes those parts in Spinoza's philosophy in which he seems to endorse individualism and individual rights, but he neglects the parts that emphasize the need of social harmony, and the crucial role that religion plays in creating it.

Not entirely surprisingly Spinoza's positive remarks about religion in the TTP are likewise ignored, for instance his insistence that he holds 'the usefulness and necessity of Holy Scripture or revelation (…) to be very great' (TTP XV-10, p. 194) and his remark that the Biblical religion ' is of great value to the state' (TTP XV-7, p. 193). This is why Nadler's reading of Spinoza is only partially, but not completely true. For instance, maybe it is true that Spinoza doesn't want to have a state religion *with* compulsory church attendance and religious observance. However, Nadler does not mention that Spinoza does not have a problem with a state religion *without* compulsory church attendance and religious observance. This is also why Spinoza in the *Political Treatise* emphasized the need 'that churches dedicated to the *national religion* should be large and costly' (TP 8-46, p. 740, Italics are not in the original text).

Also, what Spinoza writes about religious dogma, is slightly different from Nadler's account of it, for he ends chapter 19 by stating that 'sovereigns today (..) have and always will retain this authority [over sacred matters] absolutely (…) provided they do not allow religious dogmas to proliferate or become confused with knowledge' (TTP XX-22). Spinoza, in stating that the sovereign has absolute authority over sacred matters, also grants the civil government the right 'to dictate religious dogma'. The civil authority just has to make sure that these dogmas will not

be more than the seven that Spinoza has laid out, and that these dogmas are not taken to be of a philosophical nature, but of a theological one, meaning that they are solely meant to instill obedience in the people.

According to Nadler Spinoza 'was an eloquent proponent of a secular, democratic society, and was the strongest advocate for freedom and tolerance in the early modern period'.[10] How Spinoza can be called a proponent of a secular society, while he, at the same time, also according to Nadler, was against the separation of church and state, now is clear. It is because Spinoza in Nadler's (but also in Jonathan Israel's) eyes simply wanted to have the clergy out of a position of power. The notion that religion has a positive function to play in society - because without the idea that we should know and love God as our supreme good, people will not unite, but, instead, they will become each other's enemies, as they are driven by their desires to uncertain things -, is either not noticed or denied by these authors.

Notwithstanding the neglect of some of the major components of Spinoza's philosophy in general, and his *Treatise* in particular, this reading of Spinoza's *Treatise* as a work promoting secularism has become so widespread and dominant that in 2012 Boris van der Ham, member of the Dutch parliament for the left-wing liberal party Democrats 66 gave Spinoza's *Treatise* as a farewell gift to, in his words, stand in Parliament, next to the Bible and the Quran, as 'a source of inspiration for the secular politician'.[11] How far removed this idea of Spinoza as a staunch defender of secularism is of historical reality we will research next as we will go once again to the situation in the Dutch republic of the 1660's.

7.3. The Public Church of the Dutch Republic

Spinoza lived in a time where there existed no such thing as a separation of Church and State. Although the Dutch Republic is often considered to be a very progressive state, the Republic was in fact 'a federation of states in which the government committed itself to the cause of reformed religion'.[12] The debates in the Republic at the time were about what the state-religion should be, and how many dogma's this religion should have.

In his article "Fundamental Doctrines of the Faith, Fundamental Doctrines of Society" professor in philosophy, Manfred Svensson takes issue with a 'common reading of Western thought' that takes the seventeenth century to be an age in which the decisive steps were being taken in order to provide for a liberal society. In this common reading it is believed that during

[10] Nadler, writing in the *New York Times* (February 5, 2012).
[11] Volkskrant (July 5, 2012).
[12] Krop (2012), p. 69.

the seventeenth century religion was made into something that belongs exclusively in the private sphere, and not in the public sphere. Svensson wants to challenge this view. According to him it was way more common in the seventeenth century to pursue quite a different strategy in the dealing with religious strife and intolerance, namely 'to reduce the things necessary to believe (...). If we think of the founders of modern political thought in these terms, what comes to light is the degree to which they too believed that political society needed a shared doctrine'. [13]

This 'shared doctrine' is what the philosopher Charles Taylor has called "a common ground", a basic set of beliefs that unite a people and enable them to live together. Taylor describes this 'common ground' strategy as follows: 'The aim was to establish a certain ethic of peaceful coexistence and political order, a set of grounds for obedience, which while still theistic, even Christian, was based on those doctrines which were common to all Christian sects, or even to all theists'.[14] The goal was not to free society from religion by making religion a strictly private affair, nor was the goal to limit the power of one particular religion by allowing many different religions. Doctrinal minimalism served an ecumenical goal of uniting the different sects in order that everybody could live together in peace and harmony.

This political motivation – to strive for peace - at the very same time could also be described as a religious duty, and hence as a theological motivation. It is the duty of every Christian to search for peace. The best way to end the conflicts among Christians seemed to be by means of formulating the core or the essence of the Christian faith in such a way that everybody can agree with it, which means that this essence should not consist of too many articles of faith.

There is also a philosophical motivation. For the new philosophers doctrinal minimalism had the advantage of providing room for philosophizing outside the few articles of faith that everybody needed to believe in. It is therefore not surprising that we find this kind of doctrinal minimalism being defended, not only in Arminianism and Socianism, but also in the works of philosophers such as Erasmus, Grotius, Hobbes and Locke.[15]

Cuius Regio, eius Religio

For Modern and liberal people, living in the multicultural societies of the 21st Century doctrinal minimalism might sound intolerant and oppressive, but to appreciate the novelty of it at the time, we first have to realize how different things were perceived in the seventeenth century. To understand it we might well take a look at the reigning ideas on religion and politics in Europe of

[13] Svensson (2014), p. 161-162.
[14] Taylor (1998), p. 33
[15] Svensson (2014), p. 164. However, Fukuoka (2018), p. 170, denies that Hobbes promoted doctrinal minimalism, but she affirms that this is the strategy of Spinoza in which 'he went further than anyone else'.

the sixteenth century. The Dutch historian A. Th. Van Deursen has described 'the dominant position held at the time'. This position entailed that 'tolerance was incompatible with the national interest. Who allowed two faiths divided the nation. A subject could not be loyal to a king whose faith was not shared by him'.[16]

Van Deursen continues the cited fragment above by citing the Peace of Augsburg of 1555 as one of the revolutionary theological-political innovations of the sixteenth century, because this law allowed Germans to leave the country if they didn't share the faith of their rulers. Every sovereign would have to choose the religion of his region. *Cuius regio, eius religio.* This view that there cannot be a political unity without the nation sharing the most important articles of faith was also the principle endorsed at the peace of Westfalen of 1648. It remained the dominant view in the seventeenth century.

Spinoza Accepted the Necessity of a Public Church

A convincing case that most, if not all, people in the 1660's – the time when Spinoza was writing the *Treatise* - embraced the idea of a shared faith has been made by Krop. He has described how all parties in the debate on the articles of faith and the freedom to philosophize – Orthodox reformed, as well as the Orthodox Cartesians, as well as the heretic Cartesians or Spinozists - 'spoke the same theological-political language', that is to say, they all subscribed to the idea that the Republic had to protect a society where people enjoyed freedom of conscience as well as a true religion upheld by a public church.[17]

The debate between Spinoza and his Orthodox Reformed adversaries should therefore, at least, according to Krop, not be understood as a debate between the proponents of freedom on the one hand and the proponents of religion on the other. All parties agreed that in the Dutch Republic there should be a public church, and that there should be freedom of conscience (and all parties also agreed that there should not be freedom of religion).

Krop describes how this freedom of thought or conscience was carved out historically by article 13 of the Union of Utrecht of 1579, stating that 'every individual may stay in his religion and because of his religion nobody will be submitted to investigation and inquiry'. But this same article also encouraged every province to do as the Peace of Augsburg had prescribed, and to choose a religion that could function as its public church. The main difference between the orthodox Reformed Voetius and Spinoza is on the number of articles of the true faith and on the content of the dogmas of faith, but they both share the pre-modern assumption that a shared

[16] Van Deursen (2013), p. 41-42. Translation is mine.
[17] Krop (2012), p. 70 and p. 87.

religion and a public church are necessary for a peaceful society. 'All theologians and philosophers of the Dutch republic (…) accepted the existence of a public church with its officially established creed, a guarantee of stability and peace in society on the one hand and a basic need for political (philosophical) and religious liberties on the other hand'. Krop argues that it is therefore anachronistic to speak of Spinoza as a secularist, because Spinoza and his contemporaries lived in a time in which the paradigmatic way of thinking was in terms of a public church, which was considered necessary in order to maintain peace and stability. [18]

7.4. The Educational Tasks of the State-Church

How exactly does the state-religion make the citizens unite and more virtuous? On this subject Spinoza remains a little vague.[19] However, maybe the TTP does give some clues to what the public church should do. Spinoza stresses therein namely political consequences of four different aspects of religion: divine law, Biblical narratives, the dogmas of faith and religious ceremonies. How these four aspects of religion could be used by the public church to instill unity and virtue in the populace I will sketch in what is to come.

Teaching the Divine Law

The first element of the state-religion is that it teaches the universal divine law that states that our highest good consists in the knowledge and love of God (TTP IV-3, 4, 5). The divine law unites the people, whereas the people get divided if they think their highest good to consist in sex, money or status. The divine law is distinguished in a natural divine law (discussed in TTP, chapter 4) and a revealed divine law (discussed in TTP, chapters 12, 13, 14). The law of Moses is treated separately by Spinoza in TTP, chapters 3, 5 and 17, because this law should be considered a revealed divine law, but still was 'not universal, but adapted solely to the temperament and preservation of one people [the Hebrews]' (TTP IV-5, p. 60). Both the natural divine law as well as the revealed divine law lead to the love of God and the neighbor. Spinoza's philosophical religion as well as Biblical faith both lead to good works. Both religion (as prescribed by the natural divine law) as faith (as prescribed by the revealed divine law) are extremely useful and even necessary to the state, since they make that people can live together in peace, freedom and harmony.

[18] Ibid, p. 86-87.
[19] Frank & Waller (2016), p. 97.

Teaching Biblical Narratives

The second thing that is of importance for the state-church are biblical narratives (discussed by Spinoza in TTP V-14, 15, 16, 17, 18). One cannot directly teach the common people rational truths about the best way to live, because their minds focus on spectacular events that they consider to be 'miracles' – events that arouse strong emotions in them. Most people lose interest if they are asked to follow the way in which a rational argument proceeds. It is hard for them to understand someone who is explaining definitions and principles, and then accordingly to follow his reasoning as he deduces certain true propositions that have to lead in their turn to other true propositions, and so forth and so on. If one wants to teach a larger group of people how they best can live together in peace and harmony, you have to do it in another way. You have to tell them certain spectacular stories that will arouse their interest. Only in this way will you make them contemplate on the things that are truly important in order that man can live together in stable societies.

Of course, not everybody needs to know these stories. Knowledge of the Biblical stories is only necessary for the common people who cannot arrive at the intellectual knowledge of God, but have to settle with the imaginary knowledge of God. They need to imagine God as supremely just and charitable, character traits that they can imitate.

That Spinoza does not want to get rid of the church or of the ecclesiastical class, but that he merely wants the pastors and priests to become civil servants serving the civil religion of the state-church, becomes nowhere clearer than when Spinoza discusses how necessary it is that the common people know the Biblical narratives. For on this subject he writes that the common people 'are required to know only those histories that move their hearts to obedience and devotion. [They do not necessarily have to know all the stories in the Bible, YS.] But the people themselves are not sufficiently skilled to make judgments about them, since they get more pleasure from stories and from strange and unexpected events than from the actual doctrine of the histories. This is why, in addition to reading the histories, they also need pastors or church ministers to explain these to tem, owing to the weakness of their understanding'. (TTP V-18, p. 78) In order to have a united people with shared norms and values people need to have (hi)stories in common, but they do not only need to hear those stories, but they also need religious teachers to explain the moral of these stories to them.

Teaching the Dogma's of Faith

Then thirdly the dogmas of faith. Spinoza embraced doctrinal minimalism or the belief that the peace in a society is best served by finding a common ground. It is to be noted that the way in

which Spinoza, who strives in his philosophy to reduce things to an absolute minimum (for instance, by making Descartes' substance dualism into a substance monism, or by making Descartes' six basic passions into three basic passions) needs way more doctrines of the universal faith than Hobbes did. For Hobbes only one article of faith sufficed: 'The unum necessarium, only article of faith, which the Scripture maketh simply necessary to salvation is this, that Jesus is the Christ'.[20] Spinoza needs seven articles of faith, maybe in order to hide the fact that this very simple Hobbesian (or rather: Christian) article of faith is missing. The only reference to Christ is at the end of the seventh dogma when Spinoza writes: 'But anyone who firmly believes that God forgives men's sins with the mercy and grace which he directs all things and is more fully inspired with the love of God for this reason, truly knows Christ according to the spirit, and Christ is within him'. (TTP XIV-10, p. 182) As Spinoza states in letter 42 to Jacob Ostens, reacting to the criticism of Van Velthuysen, the Muslims too can possess the spirit of Christ and be saved when they worship God 'by the exercise of justice and by love of their neighbor'. Spinoza's articles of faith are therefore meant to include also other religions. Whereas Hobbes only thinks of establishing unity within Christendom, Spinoza wants to extend the unity in the state to people of other religious persuasions, provided they accept the seven articles of faith, something they can show by acts of justice and charity, acts which are defined by the state and its laws.

The Relevance of Religious Ceremonies

Singled out as the fourth and last element of the state church are its religious ceremonies. Spinoza's discussion of them has not been treated yet. Spinoza can be easily misread as judging religious ceremonies to be totally irrelevant. The ceremonies of the Old Testament were installed with the purpose that the Hebrews would do everything – eating, working, celebrating, etcetera - out of a sense of religious obligation to which they were commanded by God, imagined as a king and a legislator. These ceremonies 'and indeed the entire Law of Moses, related to nothing but the Hebrew state and consequently nothing other than material benefit'. (TTP V-12, p. 75) Ceremonies have nothing to do with 'blessedness' as they don't help us to come to know and love God, but they can contribute in living securely in a state, which is one of the three things that men can honorably desire. (TTP III-5, p. 45) The Christian ceremonies likewise should not be considered as being necessary for salvation or blessedness. They were installed to create a sense of community, the idea of a universal church. (TTP V-13, p. 75) For Spinoza ceremonies are not unimportant. He thought that they could contribute to experiencing a sense of unity among people.

[20] Hobbes (1968), p. 615.

7.5. Political Christianity

That Spinoza thought that ceremonies had a political, rather than a religious function, also becomes clear from Spinoza's endorsement of Paul's Christianity. Jesus and Paul were not interested in politics, that is, in teaching laws for the state. What they taught was the natural divine law, adapted to the level of the intellect of the multitude. Thus they told people that they should desire knowledge and love of God above anything else, and that one has to practice justice and charity, and that in order to have justice and charity one has to obey the laws of the state. In this way Christianity gives room for individual states to devise their own particular laws. There is in Spinoza's interpretation of Christianity not a law above the state law.

'Christ (…) was not sent to conserve a commonwealth and institute laws, but to teach the universal law alone. Hence, we readily understand that Christ did not abolish the law of Moses at all. His overriding concern was to offer moral teaching, and to distinguish it from the laws of the state, and this he did chiefly due to the ignorance of the Pharisees who supposed that man lived well by defending the laws of the state, or the Law of Moses, despite the fact that this law, as we have said, related only to the state and sought to compel rather than instruct the Hebrews' (TTP V-3, p. 69).

Since people want to follow Christ's example wholeheartedly, and as Christ's example shows us to be pious, and as the highest kind of piety consists out of 'piety towards one's country', we all have to wholeheartedly obey the laws of the state (TTP XX-10, p. 242). Although the internal religion cannot be enforced by law, it is in fact the most powerful tool in making people obey the laws. It is also not true that the state cannot do anything to make people internally believe the things they need to believe: 'And while it is impossible, of course, to control people's minds to the same extent as their tongues, still minds too are to some degree subject to the sovereign's power, which has various ways to ensure that a large part of the people believes, loves, hates, etc. what the sovereign wants them to. (..) Thus, without any logical contradiction, we can conceive of men who believe, love, hate, despise, or exhibit any passion whatever, owing to the power of the state alone' (TTP XX-2, p. 238). This is a task of the churches that stand under the control of the state. Ceremonies can play a role in that they help to create a sense of unity among the people. A rational goal is in this way served by non-rational means.

According to Spinoza the Bible itself testifies that the state has the absolute authority over the external religion, including religious ceremonies. The Jewish people got the laws of Moses as part of a covenant, that is, a social contract between the people on the one hand and the sovereign (God in this case) on the other hand, in which the people pledged loyalty to the laws of the

sovereign in exchange for protection of this sovereign. The Bible therefore most clearly testifies that 'divine law, or the law of religion, arises from a covenant, and without a covenant there is no law but the law of nature' (TTP XVII-31, p. 229). This again is used by Spinoza as an argument that, also according to the Bible, God does not directly rule over men, but only when men consent to this rule.

In other words, only when people agree to have their societies directly led and governed by God himself, would theocracy be a solution. However, Christians can no longer have such a theocracy, since the New Testament testifies that God's 'covenant is no longer written in ink or on stone tablets but rather on the heart by the spirit of God' (2 Corinthians 3-3; TTP XVIII-1). But with regard to the Jews Spinoza would not be surprised if they courageously would 'reestablish their state (…) and then God will choose them again'. (TTP III-12, p. 55) As long as Jews live in the diaspora, they, however have to adapt to the laws of the state where they live. This is also stated in the Bible by the prophet Jeremiah where the Jews that were prisoners in Babylon are told to 'strive for the well-being of the country into which they were held captive' (TTP XX-12, p. 243). With regard to Christian ceremonies, Spinoza writes that they are not necessary for true religion, but there is no reason to think that he would somehow want to get rid of 'baptism, the Lord's supper, feast-days, public prayers, and any others that are and always have been common to the whole of Christianity' (TTP V-13, p. 75). Much more likely is that he considered them to be part of any Christian state, being one of the means to create unity between the people of that state.

The state can decide what laws it has, also what kind of (religious) ceremonies it wants to have. Every state can become a church, and have its own external cult of religion, meant to unite the people and to make them obedient to the laws of the state. The way in which they think about God is, however, part of the internal religion. The state can and should influence this internal religion by means of the state church. People should know what the divine law is, they should know the Biblical stories, the fundamental dogma's of the universal faith and they should join the ceremonies that the state church prescribes. However, in the end people are free to think about God as they desire, since the piety of the people shows itself in their acts, and not in their thoughts.

Conclusion to the Second Part

Spinoza wrote a 'theological-political' work, also because he was of the opinion that religion and politics are intrinsically linked. Societies cannot function without religion, because people need to

obey wholeheartedly and not only out of fear. Religion cannot really function without the state, because the divine law is completely powerless in a state of nature.

The theological-political challenge is how to devise a civil religion that is able to unite the people, while leaving room for the philosophical religion. That this philosophical religion should be left free is not argued, because of the intrinsic value of individual freedom itself, but rather, because allowing this philosophical religion does not pose any threat to piety and peace in the state, while forbidding this philosophical religion would cause a threat to piety and peace, as the TTP's subtitle testifies.

The two main theses that Spinoza wants to defend in the TTP – the separation thesis stating that philosophy and theology should be held apart and the single authority thesis stating that the state should have absolute authority over the church - are being defended as both being *instrumental to piety and peace*. This already shows that piety and peace are the primary objectives, and that the separation of philosophy and theology and the subordination of the church under the state are derivative. The question whether the theological should rule the political or the political the theological is therefore not the primary question. The primary question is rather about the kind of society that does justice to both the demands of religious piety, as well as to the demands of worldly peace. In other words, Spinoza argues that people need a civil religion in order to live together in peace and they need to live together in peace in order to be truly religious. Piety and peace are necessary for human beings – individually as well as collectively in the form of the state -, because they help us to persist in our own being.

Spinoza's main theological concern is to establish salvation for everybody (or the greatest amount of people) and his main political concern is to establish unity in the state, and these two concerns amount to the same theological-political solution, which consists in building a State-Church with a Civil Religion that is reasonable. In this concern he was not alone. There was widespread consensus in the Republic of the seventeenth century that there needed to be freedom of conscience as well as a state-controlled church which would guard over public religion.

Part III. The Relation Between Politics and Philosophy

A Brief Introduction to Part III

After having examined the relationship between the philosophical and the theological, and after having discussed the relationship between the theological and the political, it is now time to research the final relationship of the three: the one between the political and the philosophical. This means that it will be researched what exactly Spinoza's political philosophy is. It will be argued in this part that this political philosophy cannot be well understood as one of liberalism, but as a specific kind of republicanism. Spinozist republicanism and modern liberalism differ substantially in their definition of what 'freedom' actually is.

Actually, that Spinoza cannot be adequately understood as a liberal was already clear from the previous part. Spinoza seeks 'the empowerment of religion (…) for the sake of advanced citizenship'.[1] He therefore is not in favor of liberalism, because that is 'the rejection of the idea of empowering religion even for the sake of enhancing good citizenship'.[2] Spinoza turns against the separation of church and state, because Spinoza was – just like almost everybody in the seventeenth century - a proponent of a state-sponsored shared religion for the nation.

In this chapter other reasons for not calling Spinoza a liberal will be described, reasons which are not so much of a 'theological-political', but of a 'political-philosophical' nature, since they have to do with Spinoza's conception of 'freedom'.

The entire theological-political order of Europe in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries was shaken on its grounds, because of the Reformation which was accompanied by the introduction of new philosophical and theological ideas. Given the fact that ideas could have such an impact (also because of the relatively new invention of the printing press by Johannes Gutenberg in about 1439, which, not unlike the invention of the internet, made it easier to spread ideas on a larger scale to a wider audience), gave rise to the question how much liberty should be given to the citizens to freely think about philosophical and religious issues?

The Dutch Republic was proud to be 'a free state'. Spinoza wrote the TTP under the regime of 'the true freedom' of Johann de Witt. But everybody also agreed that this freedom should not be allowed to undermine the piety and the peace in the state. Some felt that there was a threat coming from some of the new ideas, and demanded censorship. Spinoza wanted to argue against this point of view. The TTP's defense of the 'freedom to philosophize' is meant to convince people that reason as well as the Bible prescribes us to allow people to entertain different

[1] Beiner (2010), p. 2
[2] Ibid

thoughts about the nature of God. Isn't this enough proof that Spinoza promoted a modern, liberal kind of freedom? Or does he in the end seek another kind of freedom, namely the freedom to rule over yourself, and not to be a slave to the passions?

The question 'what is freedom?' in Spinoza is of a political as well as a philosophical nature. What is to be investigated is whether we have to understand political freedom to be different from philosophical freedom or whether the two amount to the same thing.

8. Spinoza's Republican Freedom

In this introductory chapter I will argue that the liberal idea of freedom needs to be differentiated from the older, republican idea of freedom, and that Spinoza's idea of freedom is better understood as republican than as liberal.

The first section sketches the interpretation of Spinoza as a liberal idea.

The second section treats the republican idea of 'liberty before liberalism' that Quentin Skinner has described, showing that Spinoza's notion of political freedom is republican rather than liberal.

8.1. Spinoza as a Liberal

Spinoza's philosophy carves out a path to freedom. After having described 'human slavery, or the power of the passions' in the fourth part, the *Ethics* deals in the fifth and final part with 'the power of the intellect or of human *freedom*'. Spinoza's entire philosophy – and this includes also his political works - culminates in freedom. It is said to be 'the goal of the state' in the TTP, and the TP, according to its subtitle, is written in order to safeguard the freedom of citizens.

Since freedom is such a pertinent theme in Spinoza's philosophy it doesn't surprise that there is a long list of commentators who have thought that Spinoza was one of the first to ground modern liberalism.[1] According to Jonathan Israel, Spinoza, more than Locke, was important in making a tradition of toleration possible in completely secular terms. 'In the democratic republic of the radicals it is not therefore the aspiration of individuals for spiritual redemption which drives the push for toleration, as in Locke and the mainstream Enlightenment, but rather the quest for individual liberty, freedom of thought, and freedom to publish ideas which may be 'philosophical' in the new sense coined by Spinoza (…)'.[2] Israel, as we saw before, considers Spinoza to be the founding father of a Radical Enlightenment which endorses a host of values that are typical of liberalism.

The debate on the exact definition of liberalism is a long and complicated one.[3] In this chapter I will largely follow the way in which the concept has been defined by Klosko as a

[1] This applies for the Anglo-American tradition of Spinoza scholarship. The French tradition of scholarship has been more inclined to follow the line of Althusser in claiming Spinoza as someone who was already criticizing liberalism, before it even came into existence, and that Spinoza therefore can be understood as a proto-Marxist or proto-postmodernist. The present study will not present the reader with an analysis of this French/Italian school of thought as the focus lies on the Anglo-American and the Dutch scholarship on Spinoza. Warren Montag is one of the few English authors who share in this French-Italian post–Marxist Spinozism. See for an English overview of the French literature on Spinoza: Vinciguerra (2009)

[2] Israel (2001), p. 267-268

[3] See: Bell (2014), p. 682.

modern political movement, centering around the notion that individual human beings have certain rights, and that governments are there to protect these rights.[4] Liberalism in this sense did not yet exist in Spinoza's time, and therefore the 'use of the term to describe Spinoza's politics might be thought of, then, as deceptively anachronistic', Steven B. Smith writes. He continues: 'But if to be a liberal means to have a lively sense of the autonomy and dignity of the individual, to defend the values of freedom of speech and opinion, to prefer a diverse and tolerant commercial society, and to entertain a belief in the benefits derived from the progress of the arts and the sciences, then Spinoza can be held as a liberal'.[5] This is how it is being defended that Spinoza was a liberal: just like you judge a tree from its fruits, you judge a liberal by his commitment to certain liberal goods.

That Spinoza uses the language of classical republicanism, does not scare the scholars away who want to claim him for the liberal camp: 'The title of the crowning chapter of the *Theologico-Political Treatise* is taken as literally as possible from Tacitus. But just as his theoretical philosophy is more than a restatement of classical doctrines and is in fact a synthesis of classical and modern speculation, is political philosophy is more than a restatement of classical republicanism. The republic which he favors is a liberal democracy'.[6] Strauss does have a point that Spinoza's political philosophy does not in its entirety fit into the tradition of republicanism. But this is not to be explained by the idea that Spinoza was ahead of his time, busily engaged in making our modern world possible. It can be better explained, so it has been argued throughout the book and so it will also be argued in this chapter, by Spinoza's philosophical system which is in a sense independent and functioning on its own. In claiming Spinoza to be consciously starting the project of modern liberalism, Strauss is, in fact, endorsing the teleological position, because Strauss here reasons in the following way: because prosperity has credited Spinoza for being a source of inspiration for liberalism, it is safe to say that he already desired such an outcome.

When Lewis Feuer, however, wanted to present Spinoza's philosophy as one of the first expressions of modern liberalism, he failed in this endeavor. Feuer understood Spinoza as inclining towards liberalism, because he grew up in the Dutch republic where 'the rise of liberalism' was taking place. In this context Feuer understood Spinoza's embrace and defense of democracy as the best regime. But Feuer does not find Spinoza to be consistent in his liberalism.[7] He explains this as a consequence of the 'birth pangs of liberalism: it has not yet found its

[4] Klosko (2013), p. 107-109
[5] Smith (1997), p. xvi
[6] Strauss (1965), p. 17
[7] Feuer (1966), p. 254

vocabulary'. [8] Spinoza, according to Feuer, is contradicting himself if he – as a democrat, devoted to the liberty of the people - holds that citizens have to absolutely obey the sovereign powers in everything they decree[9], when he doesn't want to separate church and state[10], when he 'masochistically' believes that all people are 'slaves of God'[11], and on several other accounts. Feuer concludes therefore that Spinoza did not succeed in formulating the essential features of the modern liberalism that would later come to dominate Europe and the United States.

Douglas den Uyl has tried to save Spinoza from Feuer's verdict: 'There is no real principle of liberty in Spinoza's politics, for all matters become an issue of the effective use of power. And perhaps it is the absence of such a principle of liberty that bothers men as Feuer. Yet, in a practical sense Spinoza's politics is as liberal as John Locke's, even though the substance of their justification is rather different. For if the purpose of the *civitas* is peace rather than the shaping of virtuous men, men will be left to find virtue on their own'. [12] Here we find one of the most important arguments in defense of Spinoza's liberalism: Spinoza did not want to prescribe a form of positive liberty to the citizens, leaving them the negative liberty to live the good life of their own free choice.

Did Spinoza in his political philosophy favor negative liberty over positive liberty? We find in Spinoza's works a positive conception of liberty (especially in the *Ethics)*, as well as a negative conception of liberty (especially in the TTP).[13] But what kind of political freedom did he defend? Did he mean 'the freedom of the moderns'?[14] Or did he mean 'the freedom of the ancients'?[15]

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[8] Ibid, p. 107
[9] Ibid, p. 97
[10] Ibid, p. 98
[11] Ibid, p. 241.
[12] Den Uyl, (1983) p. 128
[13] Berlin (1969, p. 118-172) defines negative liberty as 'liberty from; absence of interference beyond the shifting, but always recognizable frontier.' Berlin cites John Stuart Mill, calling him 'the most celebrated of its [i.e., negative liberty's] champions': 'The only freedom which deserves the name is that of pursuing our own good in our own way' (Mill, 2010, p. 21) Berlin defines positive liberty as 'not freedom from, but freedom to- lead one prescribed form of life – which the adherents of the 'negative' notion represent as being, at times, no better than a specious disguise for brutal tyranny.' Berlin accordingly places Spinoza under the thinkers that have argued for 'positive liberty'. See for a defense of Spinoza's conception of positive liberty as not being tyrannical: West (1993), p. 284-296.
[14] In this famous lecture in which Constant compared the liberty of the ancients unfavorably to the liberty of the moderns, a lecture that Constant gave to the Athénée Royal of Paris in 1819, 'the freedom of the moderns' is described in terms of having certain rights of the kind that we now would call 'human rights', such as 'the right not to be arrested, imprisoned, put to death or maltreated in any way (…), the right of each person to express his opinion, choose a profession and practice it, dispose of his own property and even to misuse it; the right to come and go without permission, and without explaining what one is doing or why; the right of each person to associate with other individuals (…); and each person's right to have some influence on the administration of the government.' Constant (1819, p. 6)
[15] 'The freedom of the ancients' is being presented by Constant in this same lecture as not the individual right, but as the *collective* right of all citizens to 'discuss and make decisions about war and peace; form alliances with foreign governments; vote on new laws; pronounce judgments; examine the accounts, acts, and stewardship of the

Quentin Skinner defines the liberal notion of freedom in the following way: 'To be free as a member of a civil association (…) is simply to be unimpeded from exercising your capacities in pursuit of your desired ends. One of the prime duties of the state is to prevent you from invading the rights of action of your fellow-citizens, a duty it discharges by imposing the coercive force of law on everyone equally. But where law ends, liberty begins'. [16] If this was the kind of freedom that Spinoza looked for, he surely can be called a liberal. However, Skinners depiction of the kind of liberty that was known 'before liberalism', seems to actually resemble Spinoza's political philosophy more closely.

8.2. Spinoza & 'Liberty Before Liberalism'

Skinner describes a way of thinking that became quite popular in the England of the seventeenth century, a way of thinking he refers to as 'the neo-Roman theory of free states'. As this name already indicates, freedom in this view was considered to be a property of the state, rather than that of an individual. Spinoza refers in the title of chapter 20 to a 'free state'. Could this not be a sign that Spinoza belonged, or, at least, was strongly influenced by this neo-Roman theory? Skinner explains the theory of the free state as follows: 'Just as individual human bodies are free (…) if and only if they are able to act or forbear from acting at will, so the bodies of nations and states are likewise free if and only if they are similarly unconstrained from using their powers according to their own will in pursuit of desired ends. Free states, just like free persons, are thus defined by their capacity for self-government'.[17] Now compare this to what Spinoza writes in chapter 16 of the TTP. After he has explained how people can form a state by exchanging their private right for submission to the decisions of the sovereign he writes that this kind of state 'approaches most closely the freedom nature bestows on every person', because 'no one transfers his right to another in such a way that that they are not thereafter consulted'. (TTP XVI-11, p. 202) A free state, in other words, is also in Spinoza one in which the freedom of the state as a whole is compared to the freedom of the individual.

The freedom of the state was also typically described, according to Skinner, as being the opposite of slavery, and the same we also find in Spinoza: in the TTP he makes the distinction between a slave, a child and a subject, making clear that the subject and the child – even if they are forced to obey the authority of respectively their parents or the sovereign – are not unfree if this obedience serves their own interest. (TTP XVI-10, p. 201)

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magistrates; call the magistrates to appear in front of the assembled people; accuse the magistrates and then condemn or acquit them' (Ibid).

[16] Skinner (1998), p. 5

[17] Ibid, p.25, 26.

Skinner explains that slaves were, according to Roman theory, not unfree, because they were coerced or threatened with violence to act in a specific way, but because they were by right 'subject to the jurisdiction of someone else, and were consequently within "the power of another person"'.[18] The opposite of a slave, a free person, would be someone who was *sui iuris*, someone who had the right to make independent decisions, different from for example a child.

Now this expression *sui iuris* is a central one in Spinoza's philosophy.[19] Someone is under his own right (*sui iuris*), Spinoza writes, 'to the extent that he can repel all force, take whatever vengeance he pleases for injury done to him, and, in general, live as he chooses to live' (TP 2-9, p. 685). Since no individual man is capable of doing these things on his own, and these things are only possible in a state, people are only *sui iuris* if they are citizens of a state. 'We therefore conclude that the natural right specific to the human beings can scarcely be conceived except where men have their rights in common and can together successfully defend their territories which they can inhabit and cultivate, protect themselves, repel all force, and live according to the judgement of the entire community' (TTP II-15, p. 687). Compare this to what Skinner writes about how the state makes people more *sui iuris* according to the neo-Roman theory of the free state: 'You must live, in other words, under a system in which the sole power of making laws remains with the people of their accredited representatives, and in which all the individual members of the body-politic – rulers and citizens alike – remain equally subject to whatever laws they choose to impose upon themselves'.[20]

Skinner writes about the spread and popularity of this very controversial neo-roman theory of the free state in early modern Britain. But we find that the same ideas are to a large extent recognizable in Spinoza's philosophy, that is, in early modern Dutch intellectual history. Jonathan Israel has, however, stressed the differences between the English republican tradition, on the one hand, and the Dutch republican tradition, with writers such as Johan and Pieter de la Court, Adriaan Koerbagh and Franciscus van den Enden, on the other hand. According to Israel, Dutch republicanism probably has been more influential in shaping modern democratic political theory than its English counterpart [21] as Dutch republicanism – different from English republicanism - wasn't formulated by the landed gentry, was, because of this fact, more dedicated to universal equality, which found its most outspoken expression in Van den Enden's *Vrije Politieke Stellingen* (1665), in which he spoke of the 'universal rationality and fundamental equality of all men', and it

[18] Ibid, p. 41.
[19] Campos (2012), p. 160-175
[20] Skinner (1998), p. 74.
[21] Raia Prokhovnik has, on the other hand, argued that at least Spinoza's variant of Dutch republicanism is quite different from the modern conception of politics. Prokhovnik (2009), p. 413-429

was philosophically more systematic.[22] Israel portrays Dutch republicanism as egalitarian, advocating personal freedom, hostile to ecclesiastical authority and anti-monarchist.[23] Israel also states that 'this kind of republicanism' is 'fundamentally incompatible with Christianity and all forms of revealed religion'.[24] Spinoza himself, however, thought otherwise, as we have already seen. He thought that his philosophical religion was compatible with 'all forms of revealed religion'. And although egalitarianism and optimism with regard to 'popular enlightenment' can be called a feature of Van den Enden's *Vrije Politieke Stellingen*, Spinoza didn't share this idea that all people are equal, not the optimism with regard to popular Enlightenment.[25] To the author the neo-Roman theory of free states seem to describe Dutch republicanism as it has taken form in Spinoza's philosophy quite well.

What makes Skinner's description of this theory so interesting is that it seems to be able to defend 'positive liberty' or 'the freedom of the ancients' against the accusation of liberal thinkers, such as Constant and Berlin, that any other kind of liberty than the liberal freedom (which is a modern freedom and a negative liberty), would be dangerous in that they could enable tyrants to, in the name of the collective good, infringe fundamental human rights. To this reproach the proponents of the neo-roman theory of the free state would have answered that free states also need to 'secure and promote the liberties of their own citizens'.[26] According to Michael Rosenthal this is also how Spinoza defended religious toleration: 'Because persecution, that is, the attempt to compel beliefs directly, makes such participation [of the citizens in governing themselves, as is required in the republicanism] impossible, precisely because the attempt to compel belief cannot succeed and only leads to resistance, then it ought to limit its sphere of enforcement to actions'.[27]

The free-state theorists in this way argued for the individual freedom of citizens: they needed this freedom in order that these citizens were better in collective self-rule. For example, in order to be able to decide collectively on what the best laws are, it was considered necessary that all citizens were allowed to speak their minds openly. 'The specific freedom these citizens need to be able to exercise above all is that of speaking and acting as conscience dictates in the name of the common good'.[28] It is exactly this same linkage between the freedom of the citizen and the

[22] Israel (2004), p. 9 – 10.
[23] Ibid, p. 14.
[24] Israel (2004), p. 14.
[25] Ibid, p.15. However, the extent to which Van den Enden can indeed be considered 'Spinoza's atheistic schoolmaster' is a matter of debate. Mertens (2017), p. 84 writes that Koerbagh, Meijer and Van den Enden have always 'been keen to position themselves within the Christian tradition.' Van den Enden, who always called himself a Roman Catholic, when it came to religion, 'was probably the least 'radical' of the Amsterdam freethinkers.'
[26] Skinner,(1998), p. 65.
[27] Rosenthal (2003), p. 320, 321.
[28] Ibid, p. 87

freedom of the state that plays a role in Spinoza's philosophy: people become more free in a free state that rules over itself (which it does when it is guided by reason), but the state can only be free if the decisions of the state are made by people who are to some extent independent or *sui iuris*, that is, they are not being enslaved by their passions, but are guided by reason.[29]

Skinner's depiction of the neo-roman theory of the free state not only seems to counter the objections of Berlin, this theory also deals with the one great concern Berlin has with regard to negative liberty, and that is that negative liberty 'is not incompatible with some kinds of autocracy, or at any rate with the absence of self-government', and that it is a mistaken belief to think that there is any 'necessary connection between individual liberty and democratic rule.[30] Negative liberty can, according to Berlin, go hand in hand in hand with societies were people are dependent, are not able to govern themselves, and are not *sui iuris*. In other words, if one only values negative liberty that country would also be called free where citizens were encouraged to be nothing but the passive consumers of addictive goods, while a small elite of technocrats would make all the important decisions. If the individual rights of the citizens are not infringed, and if all the individuals are allowed to freely exchange goods on the marketplace, have freedom of religion, speech, the right of fair trial, and the like, this would not be a problem. In the theory of the free state this of course would be a problem, and so it would be likewise considered a problem in Spinoza's thought.

8.3. Limitations to Understanding Spinoza's Notion of Freedom as Republican

Although Spinoza's views on freedom share many of the features of neo-classical republicanism, it would be wrong to deny that it – in other respects – is quite far removed from it. This especially pertains to Spinoza's idea that true freedom is the same as to be guided by reason, which seems in some respects to be a kind of freedom that is not connected to the way society is organized politically. To name an example: after Spinoza made a typical republican statement, connecting individual freedom to the freedom of the state: 'The freest state, therefore, is that whose laws are founded on sound reason; for there each man can be free whenever he wishes' (TTP XVI-10, p. 201). He supplemented the following note: 'A man can be free in any kind of state, for a man is free, of course, to the extent that he is guided by reason', making man's freedom independent of politics (TTP supplementary note 33, p. 271-272). That individual

[29] '(…) just as in a state of Nature (…) the man who is guided by reason is most powerful, and most in control of his own right; similarly the common wealth that is based on reason and directed by reason is most powerful and most in control of its own right. For the right of a commonwealth is determined by the power of a people that is guided as though by a single mind. But this union of minds could in no way be conceived unless the chief aim of the commonwealth is identical with that which sound reason teaches us is good for all men.' (TP III-7, p. 692)

[30] Berlin (1969), p. 14

freedom is also not completely independent of political freedom is shown by the way in which Spinoza continues the supplementary note, as he makes clear that to be individually free means that one is guided by reason, which means that one resolutely upholds the laws of the state. However, freedom as being guided by reason, seems to be not completely the same as the republican idea of liberty.

Spinoza might also differ from Skinner's description of republicanism in its emphasis, *pace* Israel, on the importance of religion for freedom: 'As far as religion is concerned, it is quite certain that the more a man loves God and worships him with all his heart, the more he is free and the more completely obedient to his own self' (TP 2-22, p. 689). The importance of religion and 'the love of God' for becoming truly free is elaborately described by Spinoza in the fifth part of the *Ethics* which deals with freedom in terms of eternal salvation and blessedness. It is this metaphysical-religious description of freedom that has convinced scholars such as Den Uyl that Spinoza's metaphysics should be kept apart from his political philosophy. Spinoza's political philosophy, according to Den Uyl, is a proto-liberal one, in which 'ethical '(or metaphysical) freedom is separated from 'political freedom'. In order to see to what extent this is true, the next chapter analyzes the account of freedom given in the *Ethics* and in the two political works.

9. Freedom – Metaphysical and Political

In this chapter I argue that Spinoza's concept of freedom as it comes to the fore in this *Ethics* as well in his two political works is to be understood as a gradual kind of positive liberty. To become more free is to become more socially involved, more reasonable, and more powerful. Freedom in other words is empowerment.

The first section discusses Spinoza's conception of freedom in the *Ethics*.

The second section discusses Spinoza's conception of freedom in the political works.

9.1. Spinoza's Conception of Freedom in the *Ethics*

It is has become customary in modern liberalism to distinguish metaphysical or (meta-)ethical freedom from political freedom.[1] The very first sentence of John Stuart Mill's liberal classic *On Liberty* already makes this point: 'The subject of this Essay is not the so-called Liberty of the Will, so unfortunately opposed to the doctrine of Philosophical Necessity, but Civil, or Social Liberty: the nature and limits of the power which can be legitimately exercised by society over the individual'.[2] Does Spinoza belong to this liberal tradition that separates metaphysical freedom from political freedom? Or is the answer to the philosophical problem: "Does free will exist?"; intrinsically connected to the political matter: 'How much individual freedom should society allow the individual to have?' In order to answer these questions, we will first research how Spinoza describes 'freedom' in the *Ethics*.

The Definition of Freedom in the Ethics

In the *Ethics* freedom is formally defined in the following way: 'That thing is said to be free (*liber*) which exists solely from the necessity of its own nature, and is determined to action by itself alone. A thing is said to be necessary (*necessarius*) or rather, constrained (*coactus*), if it is determined by another thing to exist and to act in a definite and determinate way'. (E-Id7, p. 217) According to this definition of freedom a thing is completely and perfectly free if it does not depend for its existence on any other thing. Seemingly then nothing is free, because it seems impossible to think of a thing that does not depend for its existence on something else. The existence of things depends on a host of conditions that lie outside the nature of these things themselves. (Water, for example, can only exist on planets with a certain atmospheric pressure.) In order to be truly free a thing needs to be a cause of itself (*causa sui*), completely independent of things outside itself. Such

[1] Steinberg (2009), p. 35.
[2] Mill (2010), p. 5.

a thing also should not be constrained by any other thing; nothing could hinder it in existing and acting, nothing could possibly destroy it. In other words, a completely and perfectly free thing is all powerful. But there are no all-powerful things *in* Nature.

There is then nothing *in* God or Nature that is perfectly and absolutely free. Still, there is something that does meet these criteria: God or Nature itself: '(…) God alone is a free cause. For God alone exists solely from the necessity of its own nature (…) and acts solely from the necessity of its own nature'. (E-I7c2) That only God is a free cause does not mean that God is not determined to exist and to act in a certain way. God is determined by his own nature to exist and to act. 'God acts solely from the laws of his own nature, constrained by none'. (E-Ip17, p. 329)

The Denial of Free Will

If only God can be free, humans can never become free, because humans clearly should be distinguished from God or Nature. Humans are not all-powerful, but only have very limited power. They are necessarily the playthings of divine or natural forces, and of an infinity of other finite things that affect them. These forces that are out of their control make that they exists or not exist, and these forces make them act the way they do. This all happens necessarily. Since a human being is not a cause of itself (*causa sui*), but caused by other things, there is no independent 'free will' that provides the ultimate ground for the decisions a human being makes.

'In the mind there is no absolute, or free, will. The mind is determined to this or that volition by a cause, which is likewise determined by another cause, and this again by another, and so ad infinitum'. (E-IIp48, p. 272) Still, 'men believe they are free, precisely because they are conscious of their volitions and desires, yet concerning the causes that have determined them to desire and will they do not think, not even dream about, because they are ignorant of them'. (E 1, Appendix, p. 239)

Human freedom does also not consist in the ability to choose between alternative possibilities. Everything that happens, happens necessarily, and could not have happened otherwise. Not even God has the possibility to make things happen differently from what necessarily follows from the nature of God (E-Ip17c2s, p. 228) It seems then that human freedom is dismissed by Spinoza as being no more than an illusion. How is it then possible that Spinoza does speak about human freedom *(libertas humana*)?

Gradual Human Freedom

As is clear from the above, human freedom cannot be absolute and perfect, because humans do not exist and act solely from their own nature alone. However, humans, according to Spinoza, become *more free* when they *act* from their own nature, and they become *less free* (and more of a slave) when they merely *re*act passively to things that do not belong to their own nature. What is, according to Spinoza, the nature of man? This is – just like the nature or essence of each particular thing – the *conatus* or the power of a thing which allows it to persist in its own being. (E-IIIp7, p. 283)[3] Whatever empowers a thing, makes this thing less dependent on other things. The freedom that humans can have, is in other words a gradual empowerment and a relative independence. This 'human freedom, for Spinoza, is equivalent to the general notion of autonomy, the property of agents in virtue of which they guide or direct themselves'.[4]

To become more free, more powerful and more independent means that humans have to cultivate reason: (…)insofar as he [man] is determined to an action from the fact that he understands, to that extent he is active (…); that is (…), he does something that is perceived solely from his own essence, that is (…) which follows adequately from his own virtue'. (E-IVp23, p. 333) When the mind becomes more reasonable it comes to understand that every effect can be adequately understood by knowing what causes it. [5] When we become more rational we become more free, not in the sense that we have a free will that can make us chose this or that course of action, but in the sense that adequate ideas come to determine our minds. Our minds, for example, cannot choose that 2 plus 2 equals 4, reason dictates this that this is so, and we are forced to accept it. But to know and understand this, does 'empower' us. When one becomes more reasonable the mind is no longer determined by external sensory incentives, which make someone associatively think one thing at one moment, the other thing at the next moment as the sensory input is immediately coupled to a memory of a random experience from the past. Instead, the mind is determined internally, as it learns to understand that things happen according to the laws of nature, which to a certain extent can be described in the language of mathematics and of logic. Even though nature itself is not mathematical or logical, the description of natural things in a mathematical way helps us to arrive at a more adequate understanding of them.

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[3] James (1996), p. 213.
[4] Kisner (2011), p. 70. See also: Pitts (1986), p. 31.
[5] 'The knowledge of an effect, depends on, and involves, the knowledge of the cause.' (E-I Axiom 4, p. 218) This means that, in order for humans to know something, they must understand that thing from the cause that necessitated it. This understanding of causes and their effects is the only thing that can truly be called good: 'We know nothing to be certainly good or evil except what is really conductive to understanding or what can hinder understanding' (E-IVp27, p. 334).

By becoming more rational, we become more free, because: 1) we become better in understanding what is conducive to the goal of persisting in our own being (E-IVp19 till E-IVp28, p. 331- 334); 2) we become better in keeping our emotions in check (E-IVp3, p. 324 and E-IVp6, p. 325); 3) we become better in accepting fate as something that necessarily follows from the laws of God (E-IVp47s, p. 346); iv) we become better at understanding the importance of social harmony and avoiding strife (E-IVp18s, p. 330) and v) we become better in understanding how the state should be organized (E-IVp37s2p. 340, 341).

Ultimate Human Freedom

At the end of the fourth part Spinoza ventures a number of propositions about the 'free man'. The 'free man' represents an ideal of human freedom, an exemplar or a model of human nature that we can try to approach as closely as possible (E-IV, Preface, p. 322). 'The free man', who understands by means of reason how he can best preserve in his being, 'thinks of death least of all things, and his wisdom is a meditation of life, not of death' (E-IVp67, p. 355). How might a man achieve such a state? There appears to be a contradiction. Spinoza argues that freedom stems from the rational knowledge that enables us to persist in our being, but reason also informs us that all finite things will perish. Spinoza provides the answer at the end of the fifth part of the book, where he argues that 'The human mind cannot be absolutely destroyed along with body, but something of it remains, which is eternal' (E-Vp23, p. 374).

To conceptualize freedom as a state of eternal salvation or blessedness means that it lies beyond politics. In chapters 3, 4, and 5 of the TTP, Spinoza argues that the laws of Moses had nothing to do with 'real blessedness'. The laws of Moses were only meant to preserve the Hebrew state in that particular time. The universal divine law, which teaches that our supreme good consists in the love of God, on the other hand, is timeless. This freedom by means of knowledge and the love of God is the highest kind of freedom that any man can obtain. This freedom – that is not a freedom *from* religion, but a freedom reached *by means of* religion - cannot be enforced by state-laws, because it is a freedom that has to do with the internal worship of God and the honesty and sincerity of heart of each person [*in animi simplicitate et veracitate*] (TTP VII-22, p. 116). It is for this reason that Spinoza thinks it is a blessing to live in a state where every man is left free – in the sense of negative liberty - to worship God according to his own mind (TTP Preface 8, p. 6). When it comes to this ultimate freedom, Den Uyl is right that the state cannot perfect its citizens. That the state is not capable of giving people the final push towards freedom, does, however, not mean that the state cannot do much to bring its citizens up to this

point at which they themselves have to make the final step. The state can do much to make people more free, but to reach the summit of freedom is up to the individuals themselves.

'The man who is guided by reason is more free in a state where he lives under a system of law than in solitude where [he] only obeys himself' (E-IVp73, p. 357). Spinoza proves this proposition by stating that the free man 'desires to take account of the life and the good of the community' (E-IVp73s, p. 357-358), and because he desires the good he seeks for himself also for the rest of mankind (E-IVp37, p. 339). Freedom is then very far removed from the liberal idea that man is free to the extent that he is not forced (to make an effort to perfect his fellow men). A free man clearly has an obligation, prescribed both by reason as well as religion, to contribute to the establishment of a state where he and other people are more free than without the state. A free man that is being guided by reason can be free in any kind of state, but this does clearly not mean that he is not more free in a society, ruled by laws which he has to obey, than without one. And to this we might add that the free man is also more free in a free state, guided by reason and true religion than in a despotic state that is guided by superstitious beliefs. The free man and the free state are therefore mutually reinforcing one another: the free man wants to contribute to a free state, and a free state wants to contribute to the liberation (which is the perfection) of men, to the extent that this is possible.

The ultimate form of human freedom that gives man the highest contentment, blessedness or salvation (E-Vp36s, p. 378-379), is treated by Spinoza in the *Ethics'* fifth and final part. When human minds are ruled by the awareness of the way in which their bodies are being affected by other finite modifications, their minds, that are ideas of their bodies, react to all the sensory input with passions such as love or hate, or hope or fear. It is then that human beings become tossed around by their strong emotional reactions to random events. But when humans understand something adequately[6], they do not understand that thing as a fleeting moment in time, being in a continuous flux, but understand that thing as a necessary and eternal truth. In this way human beings can also understand themselves as beings that have always been connected to something ever-present, and can come to the realization that 'we feel and experience that we are eternal' (E-Vp23 Proof, p. 374).

[6] In order to become more active and free, we need to exchange our inadequate ideas for adequate ones, and we do this as our minds are less determined by external events, but more by the internal use of reason. 'I say expressly that the mind does not have an adequate knowledge, but only a confused and fragmentary knowledge, of itself, its own body, and external bodies whenever it perceives things from the common order of nature, that is, whenever it is determined externally – namely, by the fortuitous run of circumstance – to regard this or that, and not when it is determined internally, through its regarding several things at the same time, to understand their agreement, their differences, and their opposition. For whenever it is conditioned internally in this or in another way, then it sees things clearly and distinctly' (E-IIp29s, p. 262).

Political Freedom Instrumental For Ultimate Human Freedom

Spinoza concludes the *Ethics* by explicating that the kind of freedom that he has discussed is not to be confused with what the common people believe to be freedom, that is 'to indulge in their lusts'. The majority of people also mistakenly hold the view 'that they are giving up their rights to the extent that they are required to live under the commandments of the divine law'. They think that they need some external reward for living a life under the guidance of reason, and a punishment for not letting themselves be controlled by the powers of fortune. All these attitudes are 'absurd', Spinoza writes (E-Vp41s, p. 382). Real freedom is then not opposed to the idea of duty: the philosophical religion as well as the revealed religion demand something from us: that we love God and our neighbor. But this obligation is in no way a limitation to our freedom. On the contrary: in this love we become more powerful and happy, and hence more free.

We can conclude this section then: Spinoza's conception of metaphysical freedom in the *Ethics* as existing and acting out of one's own nature leads to an idea of human freedom as relative independence and gradual power. This in its turn leads to the embrace of establishing political communities ruled by law as means to enlarge our freedom. The zenith of human freedom is apolitical, as it consists in the eternal love of God, and the realization that we are eternal. However, that does not mean that the state is unimportant and has no role. Since freedom is to be understood as gradual rather than absolute, it is certainly possible to be *more* free in the right kind of state. In the next paragraph we will research whether these conclusions are shared or denied in Spinoza's political writings.

9.2. Spinoza's Conception of Freedom in the Political Works

We have seen so far that human freedom in the *Ethics* is described as an ideal way of life that we can approach by becoming more independent and powerful. Humans become more independent and powerful as they train their minds to become more reasonable. In this way it is even possible that people reach the third kind of knowledge, which would give them the experience of ultimate freedom. Most people, however, will not arrive at that destination. 'All things excellent are as difficult as they are rare'. (E-Vp42s, p. 382) However, this doesn't mean that humans cannot become more free. Spinoza's conception of human freedom as something gradual makes it possible that freedom comes in degrees. One important step in becoming more free is to live together harmoniously with other people in a state ruled by laws. The metaphysical freedom described in the *Ethics* is connected to political freedom, because there is nothing that empowers people more than the mutual assistance and help of other people.

Natural Right and Freedom

Both the political works start with a discussion of what natural right is. Apparently Spinoza thought that any thinking about politics should begin with an exposition of natural right. Natural right is freedom in its ultimate form, it is the freedom or power of God or Nature, which expresses itself in the freedom or power of every finite mode.[7] Now, God or Nature 'prohibits nothing but what no one desires or no one can do' (TTP XVI-4, p. 197). This means that by the right of nature everything is allowed: also murder, theft or rape. The freedom of Nature (which is the same as the freedom of God) does not know any distinctions between good and bad, just and unjust, virtue and sin.

This should of course not let one to think that people were 'free' in a state of nature. The freedom that God or Nature grants is not the same as human freedom. This is because Spinoza uses the same definition of human freedom in his political works that he uses in the *Ethics*: 'The only [genuinely] free person is one who lives with his entire mind (*integro animi*) guided by reason. Acting on command, that is, from obedience does take away liberty in some sense, but it is not acting in command itself that makes someone a slave, but rather the reason for so acting'. (TTP XVI-10, p. 201) In other words, someone is not free if he is able to act on all his inclinations, but he is only free to the extent that he acts guided by reason with a view to his own true interest, which is self-preservation.

This idea of freedom we also find in the *Political Treatise*: 'Freedom, in fact, is virtue and perfection; so anything that signifies weakness in man cannot be referred to his freedom. Therefore a man can certainly not be called free on the grounds he is able not to exist, or that he is able not to use his reason; he can be called free only insofar as he has the power to exist and to act accordance with the laws of human nature' (TP 2-7, p. 685). It is because of this positive definition of freedom that 'nobody can doubt how much more beneficial it is for men to live according to laws and the certain dictates of reason, which as I have said aim at nothing but men's true interest' (TTP XVI-5, p. 197). For without a society there is not only no physical protection from harm, but there is also no economy possible, and hence people live there in the most extreme anxiety and poverty (TTP XVI-5, p. 197 and TTP V-8, p. 200).

After Spinoza has written in the TP that 'he is in control of his own right (*sui iuris*) to the extent that he can repel all force, take whatever vengeance he pleases for injury done to him, and

[7] 'So from the fact that the power of natural things by which they exist and act is the very power of God, we can readily understand what is the right of Nature. Since God has right over all things, and God's right is nothing other than God's power insofar as he is considered as absolutely free, it follows that every natural thing has as much right from nature as it has power to exist and act. For the power of every natural thing by which it exists and acts is nothing other than the power of God, which is absolutely free' (TP II-3, p. 683).

in general live as he chooses' (TP 2-9, p. 685), he concludes 'that the natural right specific to human beings can scarcely be conceived except where men have their rights in common and can together successfully defend the territories they can inhabit and cultivate, protect themselves, repel all force, and live in accordance with the judgement of the entire community (TP 2-15, p. 687). The state of nature where people live solitary – with no law and no order – is, in other words, not to be conceived as a state of freedom, but as one of total bondage, because individual people, who lack mutual aid, have almost no power to persist in their own being and they are in the constant grip of fear.

Humans become more powerful as they 'come together and join forces' (TP 2-13, p. 686; see also E-IVp18s, p. 331), and as people unite in the state as if they were one body, ruled by one mind, they become more free. This is not changed by the fact that the people in the state are forced 'to carry out absolutely all the commands of the sovereign powers, however absurd they may be', because reason prescribes us to choose 'the lesser of two evils' (TTP XVI-8, p. 200), that is, we understand clearly that it is better to live in an imperfect society governed by very imperfect laws than to live in a state of nature. This conclusion is fully endorsed in the *Political Treatise* where Spinoza writes: 'We see, then, that the individual citizen is not in control of his own right, but is subject to the right of the commonwealth, whose every command he is bound to carry out, and he does not have any right to decide what is fair or unfair, what is righteous or unrighteous. (...) Thus, although a subject may consider the decrees of the commonwealth to be unfair, he is nevertheless bound to carry them out' (TP 3-4, p. 691).

The sovereign powers decide what is to be called pious or impious, just or unjust, because if individual people are allowed to decide these things on their own, this would destroy the state. 'If all the members of one society choose to disregard the laws, by that very fact they will dissolve that society and destroy the laws' (TTP III-6, p. 30). People have exchanged their natural right to decide individually what is pious and what is sin for the right to decide these matters collectively by means of law: '(…)it follows that the supreme right of deciding about religion, belongs to the sovereign power, since it falls to him alone to preserve the rights of the state and to protect them by divine and natural law. All men are obliged to obey his decrees and commands about religion, on the basis on the pledge given to him, which God commands to keep scrupulously' (TTP XVI-

21, p. 207)[8]. We see then how close Spinoza comes to Rousseau[9]: since our freedom consists in empowerment, and since we become more powerful in the state, and since the state can only exist if its citizens obey the commands of the sovereign powers, the people in the state are 'forced to be free' when they are forced to obey the commands of the sovereign powers.[10]

Limits to the Power of the Sovereign

If this would be the whole story, it would have been inexplicable that there are so many commentators who have understood Spinoza as one of the founding fathers of liberalism: Spinoza seems to demand absolute obedience of all citizens to the sovereign power. However, there is also another side to the story, and this is that this story, according to Spinoza, remains 'merely theoretical' (TTP XVII-1, p. 208). In theory it is absolutely true that a state can only exist when the people feel obliged to obey the laws of that state, because if there would be a rule that allows individuals to be disobedient whenever they would not agree with any of the laws of the state, this state would become ungovernable, and this state would then not be able to persist in its own being. In reality, however, pace Hobbes, people will never give up their right to judge the laws of the state in terms of good and bad, and in reality there will never be perfect harmony in the state, because in reality not all men are guided by reason alone. The reality is even so far removed from citizens keeping to their promise in the social contract that they will absolutely obey every decision by the sovereign, that people 'have never succeeded in devising a form of government that was not in greater danger from its own citizens than from foreign foes, and which was not more fearful of the former than of the latter' (TTP XVII-4; see also TP 5-6). The power or the natural right of the sovereign is then only in theory unlimited, because in reality the sovereign powers always have to be scared for rebellions of the populace.

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[8] Often it is stated that Spinoza did not use the theory of the 'social contract' in the *Political Treatise* as a constitutive moment for the establishment of society, and some have held that this would indicate a break or transition in his thought See for example: Balibar (2008), p. 50 and, to a lesser extent, because he doesn't accept the idea of a 'break' Den Uyl (1983), p. 31. See for the opposing view: Bijlsma (2009), p. 27; and Steinberg (2013), 4.1. I agree with the latter that also in the *Political Treatise* Spinoza expresses the same view that people in the state have made a promise to obey the laws of the state, and to no longer live as they themselves believe to be good. Spinoza also names the contract in the TP as he writes: 'The contract or laws whereby a people transfers its right to one council or one man should undoubtedly be broken when this in the interest of the general welfare. But the right to judge whether or not this is in the general interest to do so cannot rest with any private person, but only with the ruler of the state. So by civil right the ruler of the state remains the sole interpreter of these laws.' (TP 5-6, p. 700)

[9] See for the comparison between Rousseau's social contract and Spinoza's notion of it: Frances (1951) and Villaverde (1999).

[10] 'Hence, in order that the social pact shall not be an empty formula, it is tacitly implied in that commitment – which alone can give force to all others – that whoever refuses to obey the general will shall be constrained to do so by the whole body, which means nothing other he shall be forced to be free (…)' Rousseau (1968), Book 1. Chapter 7, p. 64.

This means that, although, according to Spinoza, both reason as well as revealed religion prescribe to obey all the commands of the sovereign absolutely, the sovereign does not have the power (and hence not the right) to command anything that he wishes (TTP XX-3, p. 239). For example, the sovereign cannot command the citizens to go against the laws of nature that also rule over human nature. 'In vain would a sovereign command a subject to hate someone who had made himself agreeable by an act of kindness or to love someone who had injured him, or forbid to take offense at insults or free himself from fear, or many such things that follow necessarily from human nature' (TTP XVII-1; see also TP 3-8 and TP 4-4). Since human beings are programmed by nature to seek their empowerment, they will disobey the sovereign powers, if they think that they are commanded to do things that disempower them. It doesn't matter that they are mistaken in this view, and that both reason as well as revealed religion tell them that they are mistaken in this view, because it is not reason, nor revealed religion that rules over the minds of most men, but the laws of nature. This obliges the sovereigns to think about what people can come to understand as being in their own true interest. In the true interest of the people is their freedom, that is that the people are guided by reason, and that they come to acquire the knowledge and the love of God.

Freedom Found in a Harmony of Minds

The goal of the state is freedom (TTP XX-6, p. 252). But according to the first chapter of the *Political Treatise* 'Freedom of spirit or strength of mind is the virtue of a private citizen; the virtue of a state is its security' (TP1-6, p. 682). Some scholars think therefore that, because Spinoza uses other words in the TP, he changed his mind about what exactly the goal of the state is at the end of his life. However, this change of mind doesn't have to be presupposed if we understand safety or security to consist in the absence of fear and in the presence of a certain harmony of minds.[11] In the TTP Spinoza just as well writes that 'the aim of all society and every state (…) is to live securely and satisfyingly', which seems to suggest that not freedom but safety is the goal of the state. But then he adds to that: 'a state cannot survive except by means of laws that bind every individual' (TTP III-6, p. 47). In order to have laws that bind each individual the individual must become free, in the sense that he willingly obeys the laws of his state. But in order that people willingly obey, they need to have religion, as was explained in the previous part.

[11] In the TP Spinoza writes that the goal of society is 'peace and security of life'. (TP V-2, p. 699) Again this is seen by some, such as Balibar, as a break between the TP and the TTP Balibar (2008), p. 50. However, Spinoza uses 'peace' here, not only in a negative sense, as 'the absence of war' (TP V-4, p. 699), but in the positive sense, as making possible a harmony of minds, which in its turn is made possible if people are being led by reason, which means that they are truly free. See for a point of view that is similar to my own: Steinberg (2009), p. 47.

Now, liberalism assumes that people will obey the laws, because this is in their own best interest. Spinoza agrees that it is in their own best interest to obey the laws of the state, but he disagrees that the majority of mankind is reasonable enough to understand that this is the case. Liberals might even agree with this, stating that they therefore also understand that a state needs laws that force people to obey by means of the threat of punishments, and not by means of reasonable argument alone. But to this Spinoza would reply that the threat of punishments is nog enough for a society to become stable, because people by nature pursue their desires and seek to free themselves from fear. It is then only by means of an inner change that people can come to wholeheartedly obey the laws.

Religion can do much to make this inner change possible. Spinoza's two main Biblical examples, Moses and Jesus, make this clear. What attributed most to the fact that there were almost no rebellions in the Hebrew state founded by Moses, was 'the strong discipline of obedience' in which the people were brought up. Everything they did – working on the land, eating at the table, visiting a friend, going to war, etc -, they considered to be prescribed by divine law, which was at the same time the law of the state. 'To people wholly accustomed to this, [this obedience to the laws of God that were at the same time the laws of the state] it must have appeared to be freedom rather than slavery; surely no one could have desired what was forbidden, only what was prescribed' (TTP XVII-25, p. 225). Spinoza thought it would not be wise to imitate this theocracy, founded by Moses (TTP XVIII-1, p. 238).

However, Spinoza did believe that the contribution that 'Christ' had made to the stability of the state was still very useful indeed. Whereas Moses had equated religion with the state-laws, 'Christ' had taught religion as a universal ethics, in other words, as obedience to the divine law to love God above anything else and your neighbor as yourself. 'Hence', Spinoza writes, 'he [Christ] freed them from servitude to the law and yet in this way also confirmed and stabilized the law, inscribing it deeply in their hearts' (TTP IV-10, p. 64). Christianity, in other words, can function as the civil religion that teaches people obedience to the state-laws (without making these laws into the direct covenants of God), by showing people that the highest kind of love for the neighbor can only exist in a well-functioning state, and the state can only exist and function well when the citizens obey its laws. The Christian state-church can teach the leaders as well as the citizens obedience, helping to bring about the inner change which is needed in order to prevent that the first become tyrants and the second become rebels.

Once people come to know the philosophical religion, arriving at the third kind of knowledge and the highest kind of freedom or blessedness, they do not need to hear the Biblical narratives

anymore (TTP V-15, p. 76). But not everybody can reach these highest peaks of freedom. Den Uyl has made the point that people, according to Spinoza can be guided by reason in two different ways: 1) as one acts guided by reason directly, or 2) as one is indirectly guided by reason when one is threatened or seduced to act *according to reason*.[12] This is then what Spinoza wants to do: he wants as many people as possible to be directly guided by reason, and the rest he wants to be indirectly guided by reason as they act, by means of threats and by means of the state religion that spreads the universal faith, to act in conformity with reason. Spinoza refers to this goal as he writes: 'to construct a state that affords no opportunity for trouble making, to organize everything in such a way that each person, of whatever character, prefers public right to private advantage, this is the real task, this is the arduous work' (TTP XVII-4, p. 211; see also TP 5-2, p. 699).

The Goal of the State: Making People More Reasonable

The metaphysical definition of freedom as pertaining to things that exist and act from their own nature alone, leads Spinoza to embrace the establishment of society and political order as a path to freedom. So when Spinoza writes, at the end of the TTP, that the goal of the state is freedom, he means that the state does have a task in trying to make people as reasonable as possible. 'The state installs as it were an external reasonableness'. [13] The state tries to help people to arrive at the positive conception of liberty as autonomy that Spinoza has analyzed in the *Ethics* as well as in his political works. Institutions such as democracy and a state church can play an important role in helping people to become more free or more autonomous, because they inspire people to contribute to the state wholeheartedly, because they desire this themselves, not because they are violently forced to do so. The goal of the state is then not to protect negative liberty. However, the *Theological-Political Treatise* is devoted to the defense of a negative liberty, namely, the freedom to philosophize. Isn't that enough of an argument to call Spinoza a liberal? The answer to this question will be the central concern of the final chapter of this book.

[12] Den Uyl (1983), 64
[13] De Dijn (1970), p. 37.

10. Spinoza's Defense of the *Libertas Philosophandi* in the TTP

Spinoza makes a case for religious toleration, democracy, freedom of thought, and freedom of speech, and for this reason he seems to be liberal. However, as I argue in this chapter, his way of thinking is clearly different from liberalism.

The first section sketches how the TTP can be read as one big defense of the freedom to philosophize, which is 1) the *philosophical* freedom to think without having to base your ideas on what the Bible teaches; 2) the *theological* freedom to think about God as you wish; and 3) the *political* freedom to think and to discuss the laws that should govern a democratic state.

The second section outlines Spinoza's 'philosophical' defense of the freedom of thought, based on the idea of natural right and argues that it is alien to mainstream liberalism, because Spinoza doesn't think that the freedom of thought and speech are universal rights. His way of thinking rather is 'situationalist': how much freedom citizens get, depends on the kind of state they have, and the kind of state they have depends on the level of autonomy the people have become accustomed to over time. Since right equals might, the government does have considerable right to restrict thinking by means of propaganda and censorship, simply because it has the power to do so. Man in the state has, on the other hand, according to this philosophical argument, only a limited freedom of thought, since an individual has almost no power compared to the state. Furthermore, Spinoza's idea of natural right as power cannot be reconciled with liberalism's meta-ethics in which power and right are clearly separated.

The third section makes clear that Spinoza limits the freedom of speech to a degree that would be unacceptable to liberals, because he allows only for a reasonable exchange of arguments. This to a certain extent has to do with Spinoza's idea of democracy, which is not a representative, but a direct democracy. A state guided by reason would immediately forbid party politics, as they tend to divide the nation, rather than unite it. In this rational defense of free speech Spinoza also is far removed from liberalism, because he doesn't value pluralism or transparence as values in themselves. Rather, he thinks of them as flaws in the human nature that have to be tolerated.

The fourth section provides an outline of Spinoza's 'ethical defense of free speech', showing that, in order to perfect man and make man free, a free state should not hinder him in the philosophical search for the truth, in his religious search for the knowledge of God, and in his political search for the best kind of state. This is also different from liberalism as it departs from an idea of the good life (instead of leaving it up to the individual what he considers to be good)

and because it thinks that, in order to have citizens more needs to be done than simply granting them these negative freedom rights. The state also has, through the state church and through the obligation to contribute to society, a considerable and active role in making people better citizens.

The fifth section concludes the argument why Spinoza's defense of the freedom to philosophize is not to be counted as one that belongs to the tradition of liberalism: Spinoza is not an egalitarian. Although people are born with more or less the same cognitive capacities, people will always remain different in that one is more reasonable and capable of autonomous rule than another. This means that Spinoza would have considered the idea of a 'Radical Enlightenment' to be nothing but a dream, but not something that can actually be achieved.

10.1. In the Theological Part

The TTP is dedicated in its entirety to the defense of the freedom to philosophize, as its subtitle testifies. In the first, theological part, which contains chapters 1 till 15, Spinoza shows that the freedom to philosophize is no threat to piety, but cannot be abolished without also abolishing piety itself. He proves this by means of separating philosophy from theology, the first being about truth, the second about obedience. Since theology is not about finding (theoretical) truth, and since both philosophy as well as theology arrive at the same moral teachings, theology leaves philosophy as the pursuit of (theoretical) truth completely free. There is then no threat for piety coming from the freedom to philosophize.

Why people also can't be pious without the freedom to philosophize is because the Bible (just as reason) teaches that people have to adapt the dogmas of faith to their own level of understanding in order to be truly obedient to the law of God. If this process of adaptation is not allowed many people will not be able to be pious. Furthermore, denying the right of people to freely philosophize about God, when they sincerely want to come to know and love him, is an act against true faith which requires from men that they love their neighbor. Tolerance is a religious duty. Hence, there can be no piety without the toleration of other beliefs.

The defense of the freedom to philosophize in the theological part of the TTP promotes the freedom of thought and toleration of other religious convictions. Is it therefore justified to call Spinoza's philosophy a liberal one? One could call it a form of 'early liberalism', but then it is important to point out the ways in which Spinoza's political philosophy with regard to religious issues differs from liberalism. In the first place does the TTP only allow for the freedom of conscience or the freedom of internal religion, but not the freedom of external religion as the state also had absolute power to decide the content and the interpretation of the sacred law *[ius circa sacra]*(TTP, chapter 19, title). The TTP is furthermore, as we have made clear in part 2, in

favor of a civil religion and a state church, which stands very far from liberalism's separation between church and state. Spinoza also, last, but not least, did uphold the necessity of believing in dogmas of faith, thereby outlawing atheism.[1]

10.2. In the Political Part

Spinoza's defense of the freedom to philosophize in the political part of the TTP is devoted to proving that this freedom is no threat to peace, but a *sine qua non* for peace in the state. It is no threat to peace, if this freedom pertains only to thoughts and words, and not to acts. People cannot be allowed to act according to what they themselves consider to be good, since they are held by the social contract with the sovereign to obey the laws of the state absolutely. As long as they do that, they are, however, allowed to politely criticize these laws, and then there is no threat to peace. When the freedom to philosophize is abolished, one also abolishes the peace in the state.

Why can't there be peace without the freedom to philosophize? I will research this question by making use of a distinction that Miriam van Reijen has made. Van Reijen has found Spinoza to come with three arguments in the TTP's final chapter to defend the freedom to philosophize: 1) a philosophical argument that tries to deduce the rights people have from the laws that govern the nature of men, 2) a rational argument that looks at what is most beneficial for men if they wish to persist their own being, and 3) an ethical argument which looks at what perfects men in making them most reasonable and happy.[2]

First the philosophical argument, which departs from the laws of nature. This philosophical argument starts at the beginning of chapter 16. In order to find out how far the 'freedom to think what we want and to say what one thinks extends in the best kind of state', one has to 'consider this in an orderly fashion', beginning 'with the natural right of each individual' [*de jure naturali uniuscujusque*] (TTP XVI-1, p. 195).

Spinoza's Situationalism

It is noteworthy that Spinoza writes here that he only wants to research freedom and its limits in 'the best kind of state', because this implies that the extent to which freedom should be allowed to the citizens varies from state to state. This is affirmed in the preface where Spinoza writes that he wants to defend the freedom to philosophize, because he is fortunate to live in a 'republic where every person's liberty to judge for himself is respected, everyone is permitted to worship

[1] See on Spinoza's intolerance of atheists: Laursen (2012), p. 39-53 and Rosenthal (2012), p. 813-839.
[2] Van Reijen (2008), p. 163.

God according to his own mind, and nothing is thought dearer or sweeter than freedom'. (TTP Preface 8, p. 6) The defense of the freedom to philosophize is then from the very beginning of the TTP clearly situated in the context of the Dutch Republic. Important for the Dutch Republic is that is democratic. In chapter 16 Spinoza writes that he will discuss only the democratic regime, 'since it is the most relevant for my design, the purpose being to discuss the advantage of liberty in a state' (TTP XVI-11, p. 202). Apparently it is less clear that liberty has advantages in other than democratic regimes. This is again supported by the title of chapter 20 which states that in 'a free state' everyone should be allowed to have the freedom to philosophize. Apparently this freedom does not apply to the same extent to people who do not live in a free state. This all suggests that the freedom to philosophize is not a universal right, but a right that is restricted to people who are fortunate enough to live in a free state.

That not everybody can live in a free state, and that hence freedom is not a universal right – as liberals would say it is[3] – is affirmed by Spinoza as he writes about the ancient Hebrews: coming from a long period of slavery in Egypt, they were not able to be *sui iuris*, and to run their own affairs, and this is why Spinoza praises the way in which Moses led them as he made sure that '[t]hey could do nothing without being obliged at the same time to bring to mind a law and follow commands that depended on the will of the ruler alone' (TTP V-11, p. 74-75). Another instance of something that I wish to call 'Spinoza's situationalism', is shown in chapter 18 where he writes it 'is equally dangerous to depose a monarch, even it is clear by any criterion that he is a tyrant. A people accustomed to royal authority and held in check only by it, will despise any lesser authority and hold it in contempt' (TTP XVIII-7, p. 235). In a society where people are used to obey the authority of an absolute monarch, a monarch will have to subjugate opinion, but in a democracy, which is a government of the people, by the people and for the people, this is not conceivable (TTP XX-2, p. 251). Spinoza's philosophical argument in defense of the freedom to philosophize in the *Treatise* is then not liberal, because it is not a defense of universal human right, but a situationalist defense of the freedom people should have in a democracy.

Spinoza's Universalism

Still there is also a sense in which Spinoza's defense of the freedom to philosophize is not to be called situationalist, but universal. Spinoza bases his political defense of freedom of expression on

[3] The definition of liberalism implied here is that liberalism defends certain universal freedom rights, which are both individual as well as forms of what Berlin would call 'negative liberty'. Examples of such universal freedom rights are the freedom of religion, the freedom of speech, and the freedom to exchange goods on the marketplace. Spinoza's realist situationalism implies that Spinoza does not share this notion of universal and individual freedom rights. Every particular state has to find the particular ways in which it can best persevere in its own being. How this is done differs from time to time, and from place to place, depending also on the state of reasonableness of its population.

a theory of natural rights, that is, on everything that necessarily follows for each particular thing from the laws of nature. These laws of nature are universal. So when Spinoza writes that it is by natural right 'that a state can never succeed very far in attempting to force people to speak as the sovereign commands' (TTP XX-4, p. 251), he is making a universal claim. Spinoza chooses his words carefully though: he does not say that a government does not have a lot of power to make its citizens think in a certain way[4], he only states that this power has its natural limits. That sovereigns do not have an absolute power to make all their citizens think alike in the way they desire them to think, is something that follows from the universal laws of nature that rule over the minds of men.[5] But since words can also be used to undermine a sovereign, and with this, the stability of the state, and since it is equally a universal law of nature that all things – including states – try to persevere in their own being, it follows that it is likewise inconceivable that a sovereign would not put any limits on the freedom of expression. The extent to which sovereigns can allow for the freedom to philosophize is, in other words, a gradual matter: 'if it is impossible altogether to deny citizens this freedom, it is, on the other hand, likewise very dangerous to concede it without any restriction' (TTP XX-5, p. 252). The degree to which sovereigns will allow for the freedom to philosophize depends on the kind of regime: in a democracy where people collectively rule over themselves this freedom will be quite extensive, because otherwise this democracy cannot survive. But in a monarchy where people have to obey the orders of one man, this freedom needs to be restricted, because if this would not be the case, the monarchy would not survive.[6]

Right is Might

In this reasoning we detect a second reason why the philosophical argument in defense of the freedom to philosophize is far removed from liberalism, and that is, because it is completely free

[4] To the opposite, Spinoza claims that sovereigns have in fact a lot of power to do so, as he writes: 'And while it is impossible, of course, to control people's minds to the same extent as their tongues, still minds too are to some degree subject to the sovereign power, which has various ways to ensure that a very large part of the people believes, loves, hates, etc. what the sovereign wants them to do. (…)Thus, without any logical contradiction, we can conceive of men who believe, love, hate, despise, or exhibit any passion whatever, owing to the power of the state alone' (TTP XVII-2, p. 210). Later again Spinoza writes: 'A person's judgement, admittedly, may be subjected to another's in many different and sometimes almost unbelievable ways to such an extent that, even though he might not be directly under the other person's command, he may be so dependent on him that he may properly be said to be under his authority to that extent' (TTP XX-2, p. 250).

[5] What people will think has to do with the laws of nature that rule over our minds, for instance the rule that 'when a man recalls one thing he immediate remembers another thing which he has seen along with the first thing' (TTP IV-1, p. 57). Since it is inevitable that people in a state have different private histories, no government has the power to prevent that one person associates something with one thing, while the other will associate it with some other thing.

[6] 'It may indeed be the highest secret of monarchical government and utterly essential to it, to keep men deceived, and to disguise the fear that sways them with the specious name of religion, so that they will fight for their own servitude as if they were fighting for their own deliverance (…) But in a free republic, on the other hand, nothing that can be devised or attempted will be less successful' (TTP Preface, 7, p. 6).

of liberalism's moralizing language, which it inherited from the natural law tradition. Liberalism is in that sense still indebted to that old tradition, even though it, at the same time, changed it by starting to emphasize 'natural rights' over 'natural law'.[7] Liberalism makes the distinction between might and right, between 'the contingent powers that be', on the one hand, and 'a universal rule of law', on the other hand. In this sense liberalism is still presupposing a kind of Platonism in implying that there are two worlds: the world as it is, and the world as it should be. But for Spinoza there is only one world, there exists only one being, God, in which everything happens necessarily according to fixed laws, whether we like the outcomes of these natural processes or not. In conceiving the world in terms of right and wrong, rather than in terms of necessary laws of nature, liberals followed the example of the classical philosophers and the natural law tradition[8] who, according to Spinoza, were more engaged in dreaming than in understanding reality.[9] In Spinoza's philosophical thinking right simply equals might.[10] '[W]hatever each man does from the laws of his own nature, he does this by the sovereign right of Nature, and he has so much right over Nature as his power extends' (TP 2-3, p. 683). This is the case, because man is a part of nature, which is a continuous war of forces in which the weaker force necessarily will give in to the stronger force: 'fish are determined to swim and big fish to eat little ones, and therefore it is by sovereign natural right that fish have possession of the water and that big fish eat small fish' (TTP XVI-2, p. 195).

Man is 'not a kingdom within a kingdom' (E-III Preface, p. 277), but a part of nature, and as such, he cannot do anything against nature. It is for this reason that we have to deduce the behavior of societies and states 'from the nature and condition of men in general' (TP 1-7, p.

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[7] 'On the eve of the American and French Revolutions the theory of natural law had been turned into a theory of natural rights. The old notion (…) had become (…) a liberating principle, ready to hand for the use of modern man to existing institutions.' d'Entrèves, Alexander Passerin. 2009. *Natural Law. An Introduction to Legal Philosophy.* Translation Publishers. p. 62.

[8] Harris (1995), p. 96-111. Curley (1996), p. 315-343.

[9] 'Philosophers look upon the passions by which we are assailed as vices , into which men fall through their own fault. So it is their custom to deride, bewail, berate them, or, if their purpose is to appeal more zealous than others, to execrate them. (…) The fact is that they conceive men not as they are, but as they would like them to be. (…) they have never worked out a political theory that can have practical application, only one that borders on phantasy or could be put in effect in Utopia or in that golden age of the poets where there would naturally be no need of such.' (TP I-1, p. 680)

[10] Curley writes that he does not think that for Spinoza 'rights *extends as far as* power'. According to him Spinoza 'does not identify the two concepts'. Curley (1996), p. 322. But this depends on the way in which we understand the word "right". When Curley writes that right does not extend as far as power does, he uses right as a normative term. Spinoza, however restricts the usage of the word right to simply describe the power of something as becomes evident in the distinction he makes in the TTP between the right or the power of the state to do certain things, such as arresting and killing citizens for futilities on the one hand, and how this evaluated by 'sound reason'.(TTP II-3, p. 251) See also Den Uyl who writes: 'One of the most fundamental distinctions Spinoza makes in the TTP is between the right (*jus*) of the state and what is useful or profitable (*utile*) for the *civitas*.' Den Uyl (1983), p. 107.

682). This behavior follows – just like the behavior of every other thing in nature- from the universal law of nature in which everything tries to persevere in its own being.

In short: if liberalism is about protecting the inalienable rights of the individual, then Spinoza cannot be called a liberal. An individual does scarcely have any power, compared to the power of states, and for this reason one has to logically deduce that an individual scarcely has any rights. (TP 2-15, p. 687) Individuals by nature do not have a lot of rights. Spinoza with this philosophical argument, therefore, only allows for a bare minimum of free thought: by the right of nature governments are forced to allow only for that freedom that the government does not have the power to take away.

10.3. The Argument From Reason

Fortunately for free thought the argument doesn't end there. The second argument that Spinoza uses to defend freedom of thought *and* freedom of speech extends this right, as it is not based on the right of nature, but on the teachings of reason. By the right of nature a government can imprison and torture anyone who expresses an opinion that the government does not like, 'but we have moved on from arguing about right, and are now discussing what is beneficial. So while conceding that they may by natural right employ a high degree of violence in governing, and arrest citizens or liquidate them for the most trivial reasons, nevertheless everyone will agree this is not consistent with the criteria of sound reason. Indeed, rulers cannot do such things, without great risk to their whole government, and hence we can also deny that they have absolute power to do these and similar things and consequently that they possess any complete right to do them. For, as we have proved, the right of sovereign powers is limited by their power' (TTP XX-3, p. 251). What Spinoza is explaining here is that, even though the right of nature allows everyone to do what he wants to do and has the power to do, also acting in ways which are completely unreasonable, reason shows us how we can best persist in our own being. Reason shows us then what course of action is most to our advantage. As long as we are being determined by the passions a ruler might do many things that are not to his own advantage, such as arresting, out of anger and ambition, all people who have different theological or political views. Once the ruler understands that this course of actions would undermine his regime, but that a certain level of tolerance would strengthen it, he will take his guidance more from reason.

The Power of Reason

But does reason then have any power in political affairs, according to Spinoza? Didn't he show that God or Nature, which is all powerful, does not follow the laws of human reason? Didn't he

explain that the nature of man is so that he will not be led by sound reason, but by his passions? Why then would the argument from reason have any force? The answer to these questions is that the more someone cultivates reason, the better he will be in persisting his own being, and this applies to individual men and commonwealths alike. Although men by nature are not completely reasonable, they are, on the other hand, also not completely devoid of reason, because if this would be the case, they would not survive. But nature programmed everything with a desire to try to persist its being. Nature has a sort of evolutionary tendency to select reasonable ways of acting over unreasonable ones, simply because reason better enables things to persist in their own being. This also applies to rulers. If a ruler would say: 'maybe there are some limits that nature has set to my power. I will find out where these limits are as I try to have as much power over the thoughts of my citizens as God or Nature has granted me; Spinoza would reply that the sovereign surely can try this, but that such a policy does come with a risk: If the sovereign, in seeking the limits of his power, would overplay his hand and would command things from his subjects that go against the laws of nature, he will in this way – and by his own doing – force people to rebel against him as nature doesn't allow his subjects to obey his commands. In this way he will undermine his power and that of his regime. In other words, reason shows what a ruler can do, and what a ruler cannot do, if he wants to persist his own being.

A government that does not allow for the natural human right 'to judge about any matter whatever' will need to resort to extreme violence in order to stop people from acting in the way that nature has determined them. A government that does not try to stand in the way of the laws of human nature will be a moderate one (TTP XX-14, p. 257). Spinoza cites Seneca twice for his saying that 'no one has maintained a violent regime for long; it is moderate regimes that endure' (TTP V-8, p. 73; see also TTP XVI-9, p. 200). This is why the argument from reason is effective: nobody knows exactly how much power a government has to control people's minds, and therefore any legislation forbidding certain thoughts is risky. The wiser course of action, according to Spinoza, especially in a democracy, is to allow people to think what they want, and to say what they think.

Spinoza argues that we should contemplate the consequences of outlawing certain opinions. Since it is inconceivable that everybody would think exactly in the way in which the government wants them to think, it will come to pass 'that men would be continually thinking one thing and saying something else. This would undermine the trust which is the first essential of a state: detestable flattery and deceit would flourish (…)' (TTP XX-11, p. p. 255). Whereas people with no moral character would find it easy to lie and to feign that they totally agree with the beliefs

that all men are dictated to express, the people with a sense of pride and love of truth, will find such a state unlivable. They would rather die for their beliefs than live as hypocrites. A state that, in this way, has created a climate in which hypocrites thrive and honorable men perish, will not sustain.

Reasonable Limitations on the Right of Freedom of Speech

This all does not mean, however, that Spinoza defends 'full freedom of speech'. Although the argument from reason does make Spinoza move closer to the position of liberals[11], he still deviates substantially from liberalism's defense of free speech on two crucial points. The first point on which Spinoza clearly differs from liberalism is that he restricts the freedom of speech to an extent that would be unacceptable to liberals, as he claims that this freedom can only be granted, provided that people 'speak or teach by way of reason alone, not by trickery or in anger or from hatred or with the intention of introducing some alteration in the state on their own initiative. For example, suppose someone shows a law to be contrary to sound reason and voices the opinion that it should be repealed. If at the same time they submit their view to the sovereign power and in the meantime do nothing contrary to what that law commands, they surely deserve well of their country, as every good citizen does. If, on the other hand, they make use of this freedom to accuse the magistrate of wrongdoing and render him odious to the common people or make a seditious attempt to abolish the law against the magistrate's will, then they are nothing more than agitators and rebels'. (TTP XX-7, p. 252-253).

Many debates that take place in modern democracies - in the media, as well as in parliament - will not meet these criteria that Spinoza names as necessary conditions for the freedom of speech to be allowed. This also has to do with the way in which our democracies are organized. Different political parties compete with one another over the popular vote, and in this competition it might be profitable to invoke hatred of political opponents in the common people. Spinoza has another idea of democracy. He favors a form of direct democracy.[12] Allowing different political parties automatically leads to a division of the state, whereas the state can best persist if all men are united as if by one mind. Spinoza is well aware that it is impossible to make

[11] For example, just as John Stuart Mill, Spinoza makes a distinction between people's opinions and people's acts. The laws of the states should forbid only illegal acts, but should leave thoughts free, Spinoza writes (TTP Preface 6, p. 5). In 'On Liberty' Mill writes at the beginning of chapter 3, after he has defended an extensive freedom of speech in chapter 2, that, of course, acts cannot be as free as thoughts as one has in acting always keep in mind to not hinder other people. See for a comparison between Mill and Spinoza: Grant Havers. 2007. 'Was Spinoza a Liberal?' in *Political Science Reviewer*. Fall 2007. Vol. 36. No 1. September, p. 143- 174

[12] Klever (2007), 4.4.

everybody think alike (TTP XX-7, p. 252). Still, a state can be organized in ways that make it more or make it less harmonious and peaceful.[13]

So what idea of democracy did Spinoza endorse? Spinoza describes democracy as a state that is ruled by a council 'which is composed of people from the general population' [*quod ex communi multitudine componitur*] (TP 2-17, p. 687.)There are then no parties that compete with one another over the popular vote, but there are people from the general population that have the duty together to make the laws of their country. In such a context, in which people have to collaborate, in order to make laws, there will be less heated emotional debates, and more need for a serious discussion in which different reasonable arguments are contemplated. It is this exchange of reasonable arguments that the *libertas philosophandi* in its political sense provides for. The freedom to philosophize, in other words, is not an inalienable right, but stands at the service of the search for truth.

Transparency and Diversity are not Values in Themselves

A second reason why Spinoza's rational argument for the freedom to philosophize is far removed from liberalism is the way in which it is being defended. Whereas liberalism tends to argue that pluralism or diversity, as well as openness or transparency are values that are in need of protection, Spinoza does not consider these things to be valuable in themselves. It is only because it is impossible to make all people think alike that we are forced by the power of nature to allow for differences in opinion, but this diversity of opinions is not something valuable in itself. What is valuable in itself is to come to a harmony of bodies and minds (E-IVp18s, p. 331). The biggest threat for the continued existence of the state is namely not external enemies, but discord within society. The 'real task', Spinoza writes, is therefore 'to construct a state' in which each citizen 'prefers public right to private advantage' (TTP XVII-4, p. 211). To come to a harmony of bodies and minds is what Spinoza also means with the word 'peace'. Because peace is not merely the absence of war, but 'the union or harmony of minds' (TP 6-4, p. 701).

Not only pluralism but also openness or transparency is not considered by Spinoza to be valuable in itself. 'It is a universal failing in people that they communicate their thoughts to others, however much they should [sometimes] keep quiet' [*Hoc hominum commune vitium est, consilia sua, etsi tacito opus est*] (TTP XX-4, p. 251). Spinoza believed that expressing your opinion is not something admirable in itself. Rather, he often describes it as something which, from the point of view of reason, can be described as 'a failing' in man: 'the human condition would indeed be far

[13] For example, the special position given to the Levites in the ancient Hebrew state under Moses, in the end caused the downfall of that state (TTP XVII-26, p. 226).

happier if it were equally in the power of men to keep silent as to talk. But experience teaches us with abundant examples that nothing is less within men's power than to hold their tongues or control their appetites' (E-IIIp2s, p. 281). A wise man would be careful in telling the truth, because the truth can be harmful too, not only to the one who tells it, but also for the one who receives it. I do not at all wish to imply with all this that Spinoza was against debates between people. People surely have to be allowed to have different opinions, and they have to be allowed, to state them. The only thing I say is that Spinoza didn't think that openness or transparency is something valuable in itself.

As Spinoza makes clear to his friends at the end of the *Short Treatise on God, Man and his Well-Being* (KV), which was written for his friends, he doesn't believe that communicating the things he holds to be true to everyone will make all people happy. Part of the kind of wisdom Spinoza wants his friends to have, is then to understand when to tell what to whom, which is very far from the modern ideal of complete transparency and honesty and that we should just let everybody know everything.[14]

The organization of society, however, should be based on humans as they are, not on how humans ideally are. Spinoza then does come to the same conclusion as liberalism as he allows for a certain degree of diversity and openness in the state, but he does not do it because he finds these things valuable and in need of protection – as liberals would say -, but because there is simply nothing to prevent men from being different and from expressing their opinions.

10.4. The Ethical Argument

So far we have discussed the philosophical and the rational argument for the freedom to philosophize, and we have seen that both are in several ways at odds with important presuppositions of liberalism. Let us now research the ethical argument in favor of this particular freedom. Just as the rational argument came forth out of the philosophical argument, the ethical argument comes forth out of the rational argument. The rational argument makes clear that the state can better persist in its own being if it understands that the laws of nature that determine the human being will make all attempts to limit the freedom of thought by means of legislation dangerous for the stability and harmony (that is peace) in the state. The ethical argument follows up on this as it makes clear that we can detect – from understanding the laws of nature that

[14] See for a more extensive discussion of this practice: Bagley (1999), p. 241-255. Although I disagree with Bagley on the Straussian thesis that Spinoza made use of exoteric communication by means of deliberately inserting self-contradictions in his texts, I do think that Bagley makes a strong case here that Spinoza was not in favor of complete transparency. My standpoint is then: Spinoza did think that you have to be careful in communicating the truth, but he did not resort to the strategy of radical concealment that Strauss has 'accused' him of.

determine the human being – the entire purpose of the state, and that is to create citizens that are free from fear, *sui iuris* and have attained the highest possible peaks of reasonableness.[15] In light of this goal it becomes clear, according to Spinoza's ethical argument, that the state needs to grant its citizens the freedom to philosophize.

Spinoza's Perfectionist Politics

In this argument Berlin's dichotomy between negative and positive liberty is transcended: the freedom to philosophize (which is, in Berlin's terms, a negative liberty), is needed in order that people become free, that is rational (which would in Berlin's terms be a positive liberty). This *libertas hilosophandi* is needed, not because the government should not interfere with its citizens, leaving them the freedom to decide for themselves what they consider to be the best kind of life. No, this freedom is given in order that citizens are capable of perfecting themselves and become more *sui iuris*, that is independent, autonomous and empowered. The *libertas philosophandi* helps to perfect the citizens *philosophically* as it gives them the freedom to explore different ideas, and to search for the truth about God, man and his well-being. This freedom also helps the citizens to perfect themselves *religiously*, as it encourages them to find the freedom of an internal religion, that is, that they come to the knowledge of God which determines them internally to love God and their neighbors And this freedom encourages the citizens to perfect themselves *politically* as it allows them a reasonable and respectful exchange of arguments in order to find the best way in which citizens of a democratic state can rule over themselves. Spinoza's political philosophy is then different from liberalism, because it seeks to perfect man.

Already in his first work we find the idea that there is such a thing as man's supreme good and that there is such a thing as his true good. Man's supreme good is to come to the knowledge and love of God. Man's true good is everything that helps him to come closer to that goal, with as many people as possible. Most important in order to reach the true good, is therefore the establishment of a free state.[16] A free state needs piety as well as peace. True piety and true peace

[15] '[The] ultimate purpose of the state is not to dominate or control people by fear or to subject them to the authority of another. On the contrary, its aim is to free everyone from fear so that they may live in security as far as possible, that is, so that they may retain, to the highest possible degree, their natural right to live and to act, without harm to themselves or others. It is not, I contend, the purpose of the state to turn people from rational beings into beasts or automata, but rather to allow their minds and bodies to develop in their own ways in security and enjoy the free use of reason, and not to participate in conflicts based on hatred, anger or in malicious disputes with each other. Therefore, the true purpose of the state is freedom.' (TTP XX-6, p. 252)

[16] This is of course an expression of the classical idea that it is in the *vita contemplative* and in the *vita activa* that man finds his final destination and his greatest happiness. Spinoza uses the terms 'true good' [*verum* bonum] and 'supreme good' *summum bonum*] in the TIE where he makes clear that the supreme good in consists in the knowledge and love of God, there described as 'the union which the mind has with the whole of Nature', whereas the 'true good' consists in the 'means of his attaining this objective'. (TIE 13, p. 5-6) However, the supreme good also includes the desire that as many people as possible should likewise come to the knowledge and love of God. Part of the true good is 'to

cannot be enforced on people, because it is something that has to come from the people themselves. They are pious and peaceful to the extent that they live together in harmony, not because they are forced to do so, but because they deeply desire it themselves. The external religion, on the other hand, can be enforced by law. People in the state are, in their acts, obliged to care about the rights of their fellow men, just as men in a democracy are obliged to collectively rule over themselves in the state. Underlying Spinoza's political philosophy is then an idea of the good life that the state wants to bring about. This is different from liberalism that does not have a theory of the good life, but leaves the citizens free to decide themselves what they consider to be a good and valuable life.

Men Are Not Born, But Need To Be Made Into Citizens

The second reason why the ethical argument for the freedom of thought is not a liberal one is closely connected to the first one. Liberalism seems to assume that the only thing that is needed for a free state is to grant all the citizens their inalienable human freedom rights. Different from liberalism, Spinoza believes that man's nature is so constituted that, if you want to free man, it is not enough to just let him do the things he wants. Man, the *Ethics* states, is by nature a slave to his passions, and, as the very beginning of the *Treatise* testifies, by nature man is constantly wavering back and forth between hope and fear. The goal of the state is to free man from fear, and hence also from superstition, because fear is 'the root from which superstition is born, maintained and nourished' (TTP Preface 6, p.5). The state can only do this by means of the state religion. [17]

The importance of a state-controlled church is not described in the TTP's final chapter, but in the chapter that precedes it: there Spinoza insists that the right over *ius circa sacra* should be in the hands of the state, and that no pastor or priest is allowed to say or do anything that is related to sacred matters, which goes against the official religious policy of the state (TTP XX-15, p. 245). These pastors are civil servants whose job it is to instill the civil religion in the hearts and minds of the people, helping the people in this way to find the internal religion they need so that they can wholeheartedly obey the laws of the state. The ecclesiastical classes are then not completely allowed 'to think what they want and to say what they think', because they are as civil

establish such a social order as will enable as many as possible to reach this goal with the greatest possible ease and assurance.' (TIE 14, p. 6)

[17] This sounds awkward in modern ears. Yet, if we understand that the task of the church is an educational task, we see that in modern liberal states the task to instill the dogmas of liberalism in the citizens is now, to a certain extent, being performed by state-sponsored schools and media-outlets (although liberals will be hesitant to admit this is the case).

servants obliged to help citizens to interpret the divine law in such a way that these citizens will contribute to society.

One of the problems that has plagued commentators is how this idea of a state-church with dogmas of faith can be rhymed with the freedom to philosophize.[18] How can Spinoza defend a civil religion if he at the same time writes that in a free state 'it is completely contrary to the common liberty to shackle the free judgement of the individual with prejudices or constraints of any kind'. (TTP- Preface-7, p. 6) The answer to this question is that 'the free state' refers to an ideal state, not to an actual existing one.[19] Freedom, as we have learned, is not absolute, but gradational. The free state where everybody can rule over themselves presupposes a society of completely free men that are all *sui iuris* and completely rational. This is an ideal that we can approach, but we will never reach it.[20]

Because freedom in Spinoza's philosophy is not absolute but gradational, and because the freedom of thought and expression that is allowed in a state is instrumental for making the people and the state more reasonable and free, the freedom of thought that Spinoza grants can never be absolute. If this freedom were to threaten the piety or the peace in the state, it would need to be curbed. Spinoza believes that the *libertas philosophandi* does not have to threaten the piety and the peace in the state, but this will only be the case to the extent that the state succeeded in freeing the people from fear. In order to be freed from fear, citizens have to willingly obey the laws of the state, because if they do not willingly obey these laws, they will have to be forced to obey them by means of threatening punishments (and in that case, they will know fear). In order to willingly obey the laws, they need to be internally motivated by either the Biblical or the philosophical religion. It is then an illusion that a free state can come into

[18] Balibar writes, for example, with regard to this problem: 'Even the best will in the world cannot remove the feeling of an underlying contradiction when confronted with certain passages in Spinoza's text.' Balibar (2008), p. 43.

[19] Sometimes Spinoza gives the impression that the Dutch republic embodies already the ideal of this free state. (TTP Preface 8, p. 6; TTP XX-15, p. 257) This can be considered Spinoza's propaganda for the state party and the reign of "true freedom" of Johan de Witt, also used strategically against the threat to that regime that came from the alliance of the Stadtholder, orthodox pastors and theologians (such as Voetius), and their supporters in the common people. In a certain sense the regime of De Witt was ideal, because God or Nature is perfect, and to imagine that anything better can exist, is imagination. It would also not have been possible to create a state that was more free than that, because if we engage in these kind of thoughts we are dreaming, and not describing reality. But as it is a theoretical concept that only exists as an *ens rationis* the 'free state' can of course never have existed (also not in the guise of the Dutch Republic). Such a free state does not exist and will never exist.

[20] In the *Political Treatise* Spinoza writes that people who believe that the state can become completely rational are 'dreaming of the poets' golden age' (TP1-5, p. p. 681). That he links the freedom of the individual (which in reality is always less than perfect and absolute, since only God is absolutely free) to the freedom of the state (which, for the same reason, also cannot be absolutely free) becomes evident from (TP III-7, p. 692)

existence by just giving their citizens total freedom. 'Men are not born to be citizens but are made so' (TP 5-2, p. 699).[21]

10.5. Beyond the Teleological and the Straussian Approaches

Before we turn to the third and final reason why Spinoza's ethical argument in favor of free speech is not a defense of freedom as it has become known in liberalism, let me ask a question: Did Spinoza believe that all men are born equal? I ask this question, because this question - whether Spinoza should, or should not, be considered an egalitarian – is one of the most hotly debated issues in the secondary literature. On this point there is a severe clash between the adherents of the teleological approach, on the one hand, and the followers of the Straussian approach, on the other hand.[22] But what did Spinoza write with regard to this question?

Was Spinoza an Egalitarian?

The problem is, of course, that what he has to say about it is highly ambiguous. Spinoza, when it comes to the most important political feature of Modernity - the 'love for equality'[23] – seems to contradict himself. There is strong textual evidence that Spinoza embraced some sort of egalitarianism. For example, in favor of egalitarianism, Spinoza writes: 'The highest good for those who pursue virtue is common to all, and all can equally enjoy it.(…) For it belongs to the essence of the human mind (E-IIp47, p. 271) to have an adequate knowledge of the eternal and infinite essence of God' (E-IVp36, p. 338). But then he ends the *Ethics* with the statement that it is 'rare' for people to come to blessedness or the intellectual love of God. And how to reconcile the egalitarian passage from the *Ethics* with the fact that Spinoza in the *Theological-Political Treatise* explicitly and forcefully rejects the idea that all people have 'intellectual or precise knowledge of God': 'For this purpose [of explaining what religion is], we need to demonstrate, first and foremost, that an intellectual or precise knowledge of God is not a gift generally given to the faithful, in the way that obedience is' (TTP XIII-4, p. 173-174)?

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[21] See also: Prokhovnik, Raia (2009), p. 413-429. Prokhovnik does, however, think that Spinoza is dedicated to secularism. The formation of citizenship is then solely done by means of the political institutions. This is a logical conclusion if one bases one's interpretation of Spinoza's political philosophy on the *Political Treatise* alone, in which there is much less attention being given to the necessity of religion in making men fit for citizenship, a theme that has a dominant presence in the TTP. This is not to say that there is no mention of the necessity of civil religion – and the obedience that it is meant to instill in people - in the TP. Spinoza writes that 'it is important that churches dedicated to the national religion (the state religion) should be large and costly'. (TP VIII-46, p. 740)

[22] Nadler. (1999), p. 226: 'Despite the difficulties of the book [i.e., the *Ethics*], Spinoza clearly believed that anyone – and we are all endowed with the same cognitive faculties – with sufficient self-mastery and intellectual attentiveness can perceive the truth to the highest degree.' Smith (1997), p. 39-40: 'Spinoza's writings teem with allusions to the distinction between the few who live according to reason and the many who are governed by passion and imagination. This distinction he took to be a permanent aspect of human nature (…)'

[23] Tocqueville (2000), p. 479.

Another example, in the *Political Treatise* he wants to refute the objections of those who believe that the common people are not capable of ruling themselves: 'But all men share in one and the same nature; it is power and culture that mislead us, with the result that when two men do the same thing we often say that it is permissible for the one to do it and not the other, not because of any difference in the thing done, but in the doer. (…) Finally, that "there is no truth or judgment in the common people" is not surprising, since the important affairs of state are conducted without their knowledge (…)' (TP, 7-27, p. 719). Yet, in the first chapter of the TP it is stated that 'the path taught by reason is a very difficult one, so that those who believe that ordinary people (…) can be persuaded to live solely at reason's behest are dreaming (…)'. And in the TTP we find Spinoza making the distinction between the ignorant many and the few wise multiple times in almost every chapter.

The Solution: Gradual Freedom

How to resolve this final contradiction? I believe the way to do it, is by means of our explanation of freedom as something gradual. Spinoza then does not believe that all men are equally free. Some people are more free than others. This has been the argument all along: some people live solely under the guidance of reason, but most people do not live in this way. They might need some false beliefs in order to live a reasonable life, which make them less than perfectly reasonable, even though they, in this way, will be freed from fear and saved from the slavery of their passions. They might need threats in order to obey the laws of the state, which make them not very reasonable at all, even though they are in this way forced to live under the guidance of reason, and, in this sense, also forced to be free. Against the adherents of the teleological approach, Spinoza would say: to believe that all people can become completely free and reasonable is an illusion, a 'Radical Enlightenment' will never be achieved. Many passages in the TTP explicitly confirm this: genuine wisdom or 'to be guided by reason alone' is the preserve of only a few.

On the very first page of the *Treatise* we read sentences as: 'most people are quite ready to believe anything'; 'most people have no self-knowledge'. [W]hen things go well, most people, however ignorant they may be, are full of their own cleverness and are insulted to be offered advice'. A few pages later we read: 'because the common people everywhere live in the same wretched state, they never adhere to the same superstition for very long' (TTP, Preface 5, p. 5). And at the end of the *Preface* Spinoza writes that he offers the topics in the book to 'the philosophical reader'. And he continues: '(…) I know that it is as impossible to rid the common people of superstition as it is to rid them from fear. I know that the constancy of the common

people is obstinacy, and that they are not governed by reason but swayed by impulse in approving or finding fault. I do not therefore invite the common people and those who are afflicted with the same feelings as they are, to read these things' (TTP Preface, 15, p. 12). Spinoza did not think that it was possible to enlighten everybody. It is almost impossible not to be in the grip of the imagination, and not to be overcome by passionate reactions to the things that happen to us. To expect that a whole society would be able to live by the guidance of reason alone, is then extremely unrealistic.

But to believe, on the other hand, 'that the gulf separating 'the wise' and 'the vulgar' [is] a basic fact of human nature which could not be influenced by progress or popular education'[24], is equally misled: 'This, then, is the end for which I strive, to acquire the nature that I have described [of a union of the mind with the whole of Nature] and to endeavor that many should acquire it along with me. That is to say, my own happiness involves my making an effort to persuade many others to think as I do, so that their understanding and their desire should entirely accord with my understanding and my desire. To bring this about, it is necessary 1) to understand as much about Nature as suffices for acquiring such a nature, and 2) to establish such a social order that will enable as many as possible to reach this goal with the greatest possible ease and assurance. Furthermore 3), attention must be paid to moral philosophy and likewise the theory of the education of children (…)' (TIE 14, p. 6) Even though it might be impossible for any human being to become completely free, and even more impossible for an entire society to become completely free, it is not impossible to make people more free. This can be done by education and other institutions that empower men and make them more *sui iuris*.

The third reason why the ethical argument for defending the freedom to philosophize is not a liberal argument is then that, according to Spinoza, not everybody is equally free and reasonable to the same degree, nor can everybody be made free and reasonable to the same degree. It is because of this difference between people that the state should have different methods in order to make people more free, and this includes the spread of the universal faith.

[24] Strauss (1952), p. 34.

Conclusion to the Third Part

In chapter 1 we discussed three perspectives on religion, the first one being that religion is untrue and bad. If freedom is the goal of Spinoza's philosophy, and if we understand Spinoza as endorsing the view that religion is both untrue and bad, it seems evident that Spinoza wanted *to free people from religion*. This, according to the people we have called the followers of the teleological approach, he wanted to do by replacing religious faith by modern philosophy (or modern science), by means of modern, historical criticism of the authority of Holy Scripture, and by means of discrediting the political power of the church. We have dealt with these ideas in the first part, where we have argued against this view of an anti-religious Spinoza. Spinoza was, if we try to understand him as he understood himself, not an atheist, because he understood himself as someone who was endorsing and practicing a philosophical religion (Chapters 2 and 4). Spinoza was also not only criticizing the authority of the Bible, as he believed (against his friend Lodewijk Meijer) that the Bible is necessary for the salvation of the ignorant masses. (Chapter 3) And Spinoza can also not be called a secularist, since he believed that religion is necessary for a stable state (just as that he believed that a stable state is necessary for religion): religion and politics are then not separated, but intrinsically linked, as Spinoza makes clear by naming his work a 'theological-political' treatise. (Chapters 6 and 7)

From all this it already logically follows that Spinoza's intention was not to free people from religion, but *to free people by means of religion*. This means that we also have to let go of the idea that Spinoza's political philosophy can be called a philosophy of liberalism, since liberalism does not want to come with a vision of what is the best life or what entails man's supreme good. According to Spinoza, however, the supreme good is to know and to love God, and a stable state is one in which this religious idea is spread by the state-church. Liberalism is opposed to naming a particular view of the good life the best kind of life, because it wants to make the question of the good life into one that every individual should decide for himself, and it is this what liberalism calls 'freedom'.

Spinoza, on the other hand, has quite another conception of freedom than this liberal one as his idea of freedom is positive and belongs more to the ancients than to the moderns. Freedom is an ideal of reasonableness, sociability, and self-rule [*sui iruis*]. His notion of freedom is not universal, but gradual and 'situationalist': not all individuals and not all peoples are free to the same degree. And although the fruits of Spinoza's political philosophy – democracy, religious toleration, and freedom of thought and speech – seem liberal, they are on closer scrutiny not the same as the

goods that the true liberal defends. The democracy that he stands for is a direct democracy without parties in which people rule over themselves, his religious toleration allows only for freedom of conscience and not for freedom of religion, and his freedom of speech is limited to the exchange of reasonable argumentations.

General Conclusion

It has not been mere antiquarianism, which has prompted the author to study Spinoza's philosophy afresh, but the problem of whether religion and modernity can be thought of together. Where else to turn to than to the man who has been described as 'the last of the Medievals' as well as 'the first of the Moderns'[1], for finding the solution to the unresolved problem that religion poses for modernity, and modernity poses for religion?[2]

The solution to the problem of religion that has come to dominate modernity has been to separate religion, on the one hand from 1) reason, 2) politics, and 3) morality, on the other hand. But radical separation on all these three fields comes at a cost.

First, religion becomes more dangerous when it agrees on the division, and then defines itself as the very opposite of reasonableness.[3] Modern science, on the other hand, becomes more nihilistic. Understanding itself as religion's opposite, it cannot provide us with any guidance or any values. It cannot even explain why modern science itself is important.[4]

Secondly, the wall of separation between the religious and the political also has problematic consequences, both for the adherents of the ancient religion, as well as for those favoring modernity. The religious are more or less encouraged to first withdraw from, and later actively to fight against, a society which doesn't care for the things they value most. The moderns are left with a society – purified from all expressions of political religion – in which one question remains painfully unanswered: How can we live together if we do not share certain fundamental beliefs?

Thirdly, a morality without positive religious duties – one only has the negative duty not to harm others – is called 'freedom' in modern liberalism; the religious call it 'license'. And so modernity witnesses religious people who want to get rid of almost all individual freedom, and modern people who want to get rid of all moral tutelage. As time passes, those in both camps seem to become ever more disgusted from each other, making each and every one painfully aware of the double problem: 'religion does not go away', and 'we cannot go back in time'.

There are two reasons why I believe that Spinoza can be of help: 1) Spinoza took religion extremely serious as a philosophical issue, making it the prime topic of his entire work; 2)

[1] Wolfson (1965), p.5
[2] Religion poses an unresolved problem for modernity, because religion didn't disappear. Modernity poses an unresolved problem for religion, because we cannot go back in time.
[3] Benedict XVI (2006).
[4] Strauss, (1953), p. 1-9 and p. 35-81. Huenemann, (2014), p. 131-143.

Spinoza's philosophy does not completely fit into the dominant idea of modernity. But neither does *he* belong to antiquity; he is, as Antonio Negri has called him, 'a savage anomaly'.[5] It is for these two reasons that Spinoza can come to our aid by providing us with a new, richer understanding of religion that transcends the current debate between the adherents of ancient religion, and those who identify with modern atheism, secularism, and liberalism.

Spinoza was aware that he lived in a time in which a new philosophy came to the fore. It is in the light of this new philosophy that he had to write a new *Ethics*, in which he explained how this new philosophy can help us to lead the best kind of life, as the old *Ethics* of Aristotle was based on the old philosophy which was being replaced. And, as Maimonides's old *Guide to the Perplexed* was based on Aristotle's philosophy, Spinoza also had to write the TTP as a new *Guide to the Perplexed* (written not for the pious Jew, but for the pious Christian in the Dutch Republic) in which it was made clear to religious people that this new philosophy was no threat to piety and peace. And at the end of his life he also wrote a new *Politics*, leaving teleology behind as it tries to build on the Machiavellian notion that we should base society on the way man is, not on the way man should be.

Spinoza's philosophy clearly has certain typical modern features. However, he did not share the secularization thesis. He thought that religion always has been important and always will remain important. This is of course the main thesis of this entire book – that Spinoza thought religion to be important, even extremely important for the human being as an individual, as well as for the collections of human beings that we call societies, states or republics. We don't have any reason to suspect that Spinoza thought that this would hold true only for his own time.

Spinoza knows that 'everyone is naturally prone to [superstition]' (TTP Preface 5, p. 5) and that 'it is as impossible to rid the common people from superstition as it is to rid them from fear' (TTP Preface 15, p. 12). Therefore superstition should not be considered a specific phase in history that humans will grow out of, thanks to progress, Enlightenment or the general education of the people. If people are doing well, they become arrogant as they imagine themselves to be the cause of their success, but if misery strikes them, they take advice from anyone. It is then that they are most vulnerable to superstition (TTP Preface 2, p. 3). We only have to wait therefore for the next crisis to occur and then we will see how the majority of man will again be prone to the worst kinds of superstition.

[5] Negri (2000), title.

But not only Spinoza's account of superstition bears 'upon our own predicament as much as on that of the Dutch state in the second half of the seventeenth century'[6], also the philosophical religion of the *Ethics*, and the four great advantages that knowledge of God brings us that Spinoza outlines at the end of its second part, are to be considered timeless. If people could profit from Spinoza's philosophical religion in his time, there is no reason to believe that people can't still profit from this religion in ours. We can still understand ourselves in these two different ways: As finite modes that are continuously being affected by other finite modes, causing imaginary and emotional reactions. And from 'the standpoint of eternity', in which we experience our bodies as a part of an infinitely extended space, and our minds as a part of the infinite intellect of God. This is important for our time, because it will make us understand that philosophy or science is not only something we do for instrumental reasons – for finding new technology with which we will be able to make money -, but that acquiring this kind of knowledge is a joy in itself, alas the greatest joy, even an eternal joy.[7]

Biblical faith will just as well remain important. Not all people will become philosophers or scientists. The great majority of man rather want to hear spectacular stories that arouse strong emotions in them than that they will take the time for studying and understanding things adequately. This is why elections are never won by means of scientific or philosophical argumentations, but by rhetorical appeals, something which Biblical faith has always understood. Biblical faith therefore remains necessary for the salvation of the great majority of men (TTP XV-10, p. 194). In this sense superstition, true religion and Biblical faith are not to be considered specific to the age in which Spinoza lived, but are timeless phenomena.

However, there is also a temporal dimension attached to religion. Theologico-politics always needs to be adapted to the level of understanding of the common people, making the concrete manifestations of faith differ from time to time and from place to place. Spinoza in the TTP endorses a form of 'situationalism': the position that the specific answer to the theological-political problem depends on the specific cultural and psychological characteristics of the people involved. 'We are *fortunate* to enjoy the rare happiness of living in a free republic' (TTP, Preface 8, p. 6, italics not in the original). Spinoza's defense of freedom is in other words *not* a principled defense of a universal human right to individual freedom, but a defense that belongs and is situated by Spinoza himself in the particular political, cultural and historical circumstances of the Dutch Republic of the 17th century. Spinoza is not a liberal or a neoconservative who says that

[6] James (2012), p. 6.
[7] See for a defense of the importance of Spinoza's 'metaphysics of the infinite' for our time: Huenemann (2014), p. 131-141.

everybody should have a free state. He just says that when you have a free state you also need to allow people to think what they want. The two are intrinsically linked. In fact, Spinoza is so far from being a liberal universalist that he in the TTP insists that the best rule in the Hebrew commonwealth was *not* democracy (TTP, 5-10, p. 74; see also TTP, 18-7, p. 235).

Once Spinoza's specific answer to the theological-political problem is understood as situationalist, it becomes clear why his verdict on the political philosophers is harsh, whereas he thinks highly of the political understanding of 'statesmen' who have real life experience. As he writes in the first chapter of the *Political Treatise*: '(..) no men are regarded as less fit for governing a state than theoreticians or philosophers.(..) Yet there can be no doubt that statesmen have written about political matters much more effectively than philosophers'. (TP-1-1 and 1-2, p. 680) Statesmen understand from experience that politics is about finding the best solution for the particular situation that is found at hand, whereas philosophers tend to dream of some sort of Utopia that is nowhere to be found. Different people in different periods need different laws to survive. The Mosaic laws that helped the Hebrews to survive in the Sinai desert were excellent for this particular people in that particular time (TTP III-6, p. 47; TTP V-10, p. 74; TTP XVII-7 till 17-25, p. 213-p. 224), but the state made possible by these laws should now not be imitated (TTP XVIII-1, p. 230). And in likewise fashion Spinoza writes that the content of religious laws change over time: when the Hebrews had their own state the religious law was 'to love your neighbor and hate your enemy', but when the Jews were about to be 'scattered around the world, he [Christ] taught them to cultivate piety without distinction. All of this most evidently shows that religion has always been adapted to the interest of the state' (TTP XX-12, p. 243-244).

People will always need to think about solutions to the theological–political problem, but the specific content of these solutions will differ over time, making also Spinoza's specific solution in the TTP dependent on that particular time. But there will always be a need to some kind of civil religion. The state can only persevere in its own being when there is this religious sense that it is everyone's duty to obey the laws. 'If all the members of a society disregard the laws, they will, by that very action, dissolve society and destroy the state'. (TTP III-6, p. 47)

Obedience is not only necessary for true faith, it is also indispensable for maintaining political stability. A pious citizen needs to obey the laws of the state, because divine revelation has commanded him to do so (God demands us to be just and charitable, but since the state is necessary for justice and charity, our highest piety consists in upholding the state). But he is also a good citizen, as the final proposition of the fourth part of the *Ethics* testifies, if a person is led by reason and the philosophical religion. This person will not blindly obey the laws of the state, but

he will do this because he understands that 'we are obliged to carry absolutely all the commands of the sovereign power, however absurd they may be. Reason too bids us to do so: it is a choice of the lesser of two evils'. (TTP XVI-8, p. 200; p. 534; cf E-IVp65, p. 354 and E-IVp37p, p. 265) Absolute obedience to the state's laws is the lesser evil since the alternative is that the state collapses and people can't survive on their own without the state. 'It is certain that piety towards one's country is the highest that anyone can show, for if the state is dissolved, nothing good can exist'. (TTP XX-10, p. 242) To be a good citizen is practicing the highest piety.[8] The union of all the different citizens in the body of the state is the true church.[9]

But what about criminal regimes that order mass murder: should we also obey the commands of these 'sovereigns'? Spinoza's answer here is ambiguous. On the one hand he doesn't allow for any exception: the people *should* always obey the laws of their communities. On the other hand, he states that *in fact* the people simply *will not* obey these commands that go against nature and reason. In this way he limits the power of the sovereign; not by appealing to some higher moral law, but by appealing to the highest law, the law of God of Nature, which doesn't allow for any exceptions and which can never be disobeyed. And this law of God or Nature shows: violent regimes do not last long. In the end no society can survive by means of threats of punishments alone.

On the other hand, no society will be able to survive by means of reason alone. And it is therefore that faith remains important for the state. Faith remains important to the state, because people need a common set of moral, religious and political beliefs in order to live together in peace and harmony. Although the specific content of these beliefs may vary over time, that people need to have shared moral values. This is for the survival of the state today as indispensable as it has always been.

Spinoza's philosophical religion can also be called a philosophical-ethical path to salvation. As we come to the knowledge of God and simultaneously understand that in this knowledge lies our highest good, we will come to accept our fates, experience peace of mind, and love for everything

[8] Michael L. Morgan clarifies in a note to TP II-21 where Spinoza writes that 'reason teaches men true piety' that 'the term *pietas* denotes reverence or respect for law, and does not have an exclusively religious meaning. In classical contexts (Cicero or Vergil) it is often translated as "patriotism" and in Spinoza it is often taken to be the highest form of civil duty', Shirley (2002) p. 688, n. 24. Matthias Riedl writes in his article on the Roman Empires in the third and fourth centuries that the word *pietas* is 'the dutifulness and loyalty to parents, patrons, ancestors, and gods, to all the authorities on whose care one depends', Weed & Von Heyking (2010), p. 54.

[9] Israel and Silverthorne translate the word *ecclesia* in Spinoza's TTP as both meaning 'Church' as well as 'community'. In the accompanying note they repeat the opinion of Wim Klever who 'has pointed out that although the word *ecclesia* in Latin normally means "church", Spinoza here seems more likely to be using it in the original Greek sense of the community of all the people including the public cult.' (TTP XX-12, p. 256, n. 3.)

that exists thanks to the power of God. This religion or (in its adapted form: faith) helps us not to be the slave of our passions. This religion then helps us to become free.

Spinoza carved out in his philosophy a path to freedom. But freedom here should not be confused with license. Freedom means to become more reasonable, and hence more autonomous, and at the same time freedom means that you come to understand that the other person is not a threat to your freedom, but that 'man is a God to man' (E-IVp35s, p. 338). What truly makes us free is the universal divine law which commands that in the knowledge and love of God, which includes the love of our neighbors, lies our highest good.

Also this teaching – that freedom is both to become more reasonable as well as to become more social - has not lost its relevance. It has become even more important in our individualist societies in which many people, if not most, are led and enslaved by media-induced passions. Spinoza's comprehensive theory of religion can then be said to remain valuable, also for our time.

But this is all true for the modern person, who has left religion behind, and who is confronted with 'the religious problem'. Spinoza's philosophy of religion might give this person pause to consider not only the disadvantages, but also the importance of religion. But what about the religious Jew, Christian or Muslim who has remained faithful to the tradition and who finds himself confronted with the problem of modernity: is Spinoza's philosophy of religion also relevant for this man or woman? In bringing religion back to its core teachings, which are of a moral kind, enabling us to live together in peace, Spinoza might also be important there.

Strauss – paraphrasing Rosenzweig - has characterized modern Judaism as 'a synthesis between rabbinical Judaism and Spinoza'.[10] And maybe other religions do well in following this example: creating a synthesis between orthodoxy on the one hand, and Spinoza on the other. Let me explain this. Spinoza strips – as is not unusual in the tradition of the Reformation - religion of all its ornaments to keep only its bare essence alive. In this way he has – to my opinion – underestimated the relevance of ceremonies and tradition. That Spinoza underestimated this importance might also have to do with many things: the influence of the Reformation, the influence of the Marrano community that was violently cut off from the tradition, but it also might have to do with the fact that Spinoza never had children or a family. He never was confronted with the real issue of a parent or an educator, who has the noble task to pass wisdom from one generation to the next. It is in these roles that one comes to realize best what the value is of at least some of the traditional ornaments of religion – stories and ceremonies. On the other hand, by stressing the ethical heart of religion, Spinoza's theory can also be a remedy for those

[10] Strauss (1965), p. 27

who are so busy following the letter of the law that they forget the spirit of the law: love of God and the neighbor. Modern religions therefore all have to deal with this tension: adherence to the tradition and its specific customs on the one hand, staying faithful to the eternal and universal message contained in religion, on the other hand.

Let me then finally address the religious person for I do not think that he should feel threatened by Spinoza's philosophy. If this religious person would have been able to ask Spinoza how he judged his specific interpretation of the faith, he would have answered in the same way as he answered his Lutheran landlady when she asked him whether he believed that she could be saved in the religion she professed: 'Your religion is a good one, you need not look for any other, nor doubt that you may be saved in it, provided, whilst you apply yourself to piety, you live at the same time a peaceable and quiet life'.[11]

[11] Colerus (1906), p. 41.

Summary

What is Spinoza's theory of religion? In order to answer this question this study builds on the work of Paul Juffermans who has shown that religion takes on three 'different meanings' in Spinoza's works, namely 1. illusory and harmful *superstitious beliefs* that make people hate and persecute each other; 2. unphilosophical, but extremely useful *dogma's of faith*, that everyone needs to adapt to his or her own level of understanding in order that he or she can lead a life in which the love of God and the neighbor is at the forefront; and 3. the philosophical *religion* which leads to the *amor intellectualis Dei*. In this way Spinoza has provided us with a nuanced normative theory that can help us to evaluate existing religions.

Different from the depictions of Spinoza as an atheist, secularist and liberal philosopher, this comprehensive theory of religion shows that Spinoza thought that religion – understood as Biblical faith or as philosophical religion - was indispensable for society. Different also from the Straussian view that Spinoza's theory of religion is rife with contradictions, and that his writings therefore need to be read 'between the lines', this study argues that the three perspectives on religion are not mutually exclusive, but can in fact exist side by side.

Spinoza's theory of religion can, as Carlos Fraenkel has described, be understood to belong to a long tradition of philosophical religions. This tradition, which started with Plato, combined a philosophical notion of the Divine as the perfect exemplar of reasonableness with the view that historical religions had to be reinterpreted as pedagogical-didactical tools to lead the common people to a life of reason.

This study makes use of a whole range of different arguments to show that Spinoza was not only a critic of religion and the Bible, but that he also endorsed them for individuals as well as for societies. Spinoza's religious ideas were understood by Spinoza's circle of friends, as the contextual historical research of Henri Krop and others have shown, as an example of 'reasonable Christianity'. Spinoza, other contextual research shows, also was not in favor of the separation of Church and State. Krop and others have argued that he, just as his contemporaries, was a proponent of a state-guided 'public church', guarding over the faith of the general population and fighting the superstitious beliefs that can divide society.

A close reading of Spinoza's political texts reveals that Spinoza thought that society is in need of religion, and that true freedom cannot be reached without religion. In short, Spinoza's political philosophy needs to be read against the background of his comprehensive religious theory.

Samenvatting (Dutch Summary)

Wat is Spinoza's religie-theorie? Deze studie bouwt, voor de beantwoording van deze vraag, voort op het werk van Paul Juffermans die heeft laten zien dat religie in Spinoza's werken drie verschillende betekenissen verkrijgt, namelijk 1. illusoire en schadelijke *bijgelovige opvattingen* die ervoor zorgen dat mensen elkaar gaan haten en elkaar gaan vervolgen; 2. onwetenschappelijke, maar extreem nuttige *dogma's van het geloof* die een ieder moet aanpassen aan zijn of haar begripsvermogen opdat hij of zij een leven kan leiden waarin de liefde voor God en de naaste voorop staat; en 3. de filosofische *religie* die leidt tot de *amor intellectualis Dei*. Op deze wijze heeft Spinoza ons voorzien van een genuanceerde normatieve theorie die ons kan helpen om bestaande religies te evalueren.

Spinoza's religie-theorie laat zien dat, anders dan de omschrijvingen van Spinoza als een atheïstisch, seculier en liberaal filosoof het doen voorkomen, Spinoza religie – begrepen als Bijbels geloof of als filosofische religie – beschouwde als iets dat onmisbaar was voor de samenleving. Anders ook dan de Straussiaanse opvatting, volgens welke Spinoza's religie-theorie vol staat met tegenstrijdigheden, reden waarom zijn werken 'tussen de regels' gelezen zouden moeten worden, stelt deze studie dat de drie perspectieven elkaar niet uitsluiten, maar in feite naast elkaar kunnen bestaan. Spinoza's religie-theorie kan, zoals Calos Fraenkel heeft laten zien, begrepen worden als een die behoort tot een lange traditie van filosofische religies. Deze traditie, die een aanvang neemt met Plato, combineerde een filosofische notie van het Goddelijke als het perfecte voorbeeld van redelijkheid met de opvatting dat historische religies geherinterpreteerd moesten worden als pedagogisch-didactische middelen om het gewone volk naar een redelijk bestaan te leiden.

Deze studie maakt gebruik van een arsenaal aan argumenten om te laten zien dat Spinoza niet enkel een criticus was van religie en de Bijbel, maar dat hij deze ook aanbeveelt aan individuen en samenlevingen. Spinoza's religieuze ideeën waren, zoals het contextuele historische onderzoek van Henri Krop en anderen heeft laten zien, volgens de vrienden in Spinoza's kring te begrijpen als een voorbeeld van een 'redelijk christendom'. Krop en anderen stellen ook dat Spinoza, net als zijn tijdgenoten, een voorstander was van een door de staat geleide 'openbare kerk', waarin het geloof van de algemene bevolking wordt bewaakt en waarin bijgelovige opvattingen die de samenleving uiteen kunnen rijten bestreden worden.

Een nauwkeurige lezing van Spinoza's politieke teksten laat zien dat Spinoza meende dat de samenleving een religie nodig heeft, en dat ware vrijheid niet bereikt kan worden zonder religie.

Spinoza's politieke filosofie moet kortom gelezen worden tegen de achtergrond van zijn religie-theorie.

Translations, Abbreviations and Texts

All quotations and citations of Spinoza's *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus* (TTP) are taken from: Benedict de Spinoza. 2007. *Theological-Political Treatise*. Edited by Jonathan Israel; translated by Michael Silverthorne and Jonathan Israel. Cambridge University Press. After the designation 'TTP' I indicate first the chapter, then the paragraph, and finally the page number.

All quotations and citations from other works by Spinoza are taken from *Spinoza: Complete Works*. 1998. Translated by Samuel Shirley. Edited, introduced, and annotated by Michael L. Morgan. Hackett Publishing Company.

In my references to Spinoza's works I will use the following abbreviations:

TIE stands for the *Treatise on the Emendation of the Intellect* (*Tractatus de Intellectus Emendatione)*

ST for *Short Treatise on God, Man, and his Well-Being* (*Korte Verhandeling van God, de mensch, en deszelvs welstand*)

PPC for *Principles of Cartesian Philosophy* (*Principia Philosophiae Cartesianae)*

CM for *Metaphysical Thoughts* (*Cogitata Metaphysica)*

E for *Ethics* (*Ethica*)

TP for *Political Treatise* (*Tractatus Politicus*)

I did refer to the TIE and the TP by naming the chapter, paragraph, and page number in Shirley's translation, and I did refer to the ST by naming the part, chapter, and page number. To the books written in geometrical style, that is, the PPC and the E, I first name the part, then the number of the proposition.

I did adopt the following abbreviations for the E:

- the first Latin numerals refer to the part;
- 'p' followed by an Arabic numeral denotes the proposition
- 'c' denotes corollary
- 'def.' denotes definition
- 'p' denotes proof
- 's' denotes scholium

For example: 'E-IVp37s2' refers to Ethics, part 4, proposition 37, scholium 2. I refer to the *Letters* by naming the Arabic numbers of the letter (as they also are used in Shirley's translation) together with the page number. Wherever it aided in understanding, I have added the original Latin in italics and between brackets.

Primary Literature by Benedict de Spinoza.

In English:

- Spinoza. 2007. *Theological-Political Treatise*. Edited by Jonathan Israel; translated by Michael Silverthorne and Jonathan Israel. Cambridge University Press.
- *Spinoza: Complete* Works. 1998. Translated by Samuel Shirley. Edited, introduced and annotated by Michael L. Morgan. Hackett Publishing Company.

In Latin:

- I used the Gebhardt edition, freely available at the website 'Spinoza et nous' for the Latin text of *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus:* http://spinozaetnous.org/wiki/Tractatus_theologico-politicus.
- The website http://users.telenet.be/rwmeijer/spinoza/works.htm, made by Rudolf W. Meijer, which contains Latin web versions of selected works by Spinoza, based on the Bruder-edition, I used for the Latin text of:
  Ethica ordine geometrica demonstrate
  Tractatus de Intellectus Emendatione
  Tractatus Politicus
  Epistola.

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Curriculum Vitae

The author of this dissertation was born on March 10, 1972 in Amsterdam, the Netherlands. After finishing the Montessori Lyceum Amsterdam, where he obtained his athenaeum diploma, he went studying political science and philosophy at the University of Amsterdam and at the University of California, Berkeley. He received his M.A. in political science at the University of Amsterdam in 1999. From 1999 till 2003 he worked as a journalist for the Dutch daily *Trouw*, writing mostly about philosophical and religious issues.

His articles from this period have been published in books (in Dutch), such as:

- *Filosofie voor krantenlezers*. (*Philosophy for Newspaper Readers*) Trouw dossier nr 19. Rainbow Pocketboeken, mei 2002;
- *De terugkeer van de geschiedenis, Letter & Geest, (The Return of History, Letter & Spirit),* edited by Jaffe Vink and Chris Rutenfrans, Trouw/Augustus, 2005.
- *Filosofisch Elftal: Nederlandse denkers over de actualiteit. (The Philosophy Team: Dutch Thinkers on Current Affairs),* Nieuw Amsterdam, 2006.

In 2003 Stein became a teacher in philosophy at the Montessori Lyceum Amsterdam. At present he is still working at this school. In 2006 he also obtained the title M.A. Teaching Philosophy at the University of Amsterdam. From 2006 till 2008 he taught philosophy at the Oostvaarders College in Almere. In 2007 and 2008 he wrote regularly for the Dutch weekly *Opinio*.

In 2010 he published the book (in Dutch): *Stoppen met blowen.; de mythen, de gevaren en je laatste joint. (Stop Pot Smoking: the Myths, the Dangers, and Your Last Joint),* Nieuw Amsterdam, 2010. In the same year Stein's article on Leo Strauss appeared in Baudet & Visser (ed.): *Conservatieve Vooruitgang: de grootste denkers van de twintigste eeuw (Conservative Progress, the Biggest Thinkers of the Twentieth Century).* Bert Bakker. 2010. It is also in 2010 that Stein became an external PhD Candidate at the University Leiden, starting his research on Spinoza's relationship to liberalism.

In 2010 and 2011 he taught philosophy for two semesters at the Roosevelt Academy in Middelburg. From 2011 till 2013 Stein was also an examiner for the Dienst Uitvoering Onderwijs, College voor Examens. In 2014 he gave a seminar on Spinoza's *Ethics* at Leiden University. From 2011 till 2016 he organized and moderated debates on political, religious and philosophical subjects for the Liberal Jewish Community of Amsterdam.

In 2014 and 2015 he published some articles on Spinoza:

- "Wil de echte Spinoza opstaan?"(*Will the Real Spinoza Stand Up?),* Book review in

Radix, tijdschrift over geloof en wetenschap, 40(3), 2014, pp. 202-204

- "Over het nut van religie voor de staat bij Tocqueville en Spinoza" (*On the Utility of Religion for the State in Tocqueville and Spinoza)* in *Filosofie*. Themanummer: Alexis de Tocqueville, November 2015.

In 2015 some other essays appeared, such as:

- "Wij zijn allemaal Jep Gambardella" (We are all Jep Gambardella) in Bolkestein & Cliteur & Fennema: De succesvolle mislukking van Europa, Leiden University Press, (expected: December 2015)

- "Filosofie als motor en als cockpit van de school" ("Philosophy as Motor and Cockpit of the School" *)* in Visser & Kusters (ed.) *Verwonderenderwijs, Filosofie & Onderwijs*, ISVW Uitgevers, 2015.

From 2016 till the present he worked as an instructor at the Webster Leiden Campus, teaching an introductory course on political theory and one titled 'Thinking Through Religions'. From 2016 till the present he also worked as an instructor at the Liberal Jewish Congregation, giving courses on Maimonides and Spinoza and training people in the skills of Socratic dialogue. From 2018 till the present he is also one of the teachers at the Levisson Institute, teaching Modern Jewish Philosophy.