



Universiteit  
Leiden  
The Netherlands

**Spinoza's theory of religion : the importance of religion in Spinoza's thought and its implications for state and society**  
Stein, Y.

**Citation**

Stein, Y. (2019, October 23). *Spinoza's theory of religion : the importance of religion in Spinoza's thought and its implications for state and society*. Retrieved from <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/79825>

Version: Publisher's Version

License: [Licence agreement concerning inclusion of doctoral thesis in the Institutional Repository of the University of Leiden](#)

Downloaded from: <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/79825>

**Note:** To cite this publication please use the final published version (if applicable).

Cover Page



Universiteit Leiden



The handle <http://hdl.handle.net/1887/79825> holds various files of this Leiden University dissertation.

**Author:** Stein, Y.

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

**Issue Date:** 2019-10-23

## 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.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> 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'.<sup>3</sup> 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'.<sup>4</sup>
2. *fides* is the Biblical faith, which 'requires not so much true as pious dogmas'.<sup>5</sup> Spinoza discusses the necessity of faith for 'the salvation of almost all men' in the *Theological-Political Treatise*.<sup>6</sup> 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'.<sup>7</sup>
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.<sup>8</sup> 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'.<sup>9</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> Juffermans (2003).

<sup>2</sup> Juffermans (2011), p. 302 distinguishes also a fourth, 'conventional meaning of religion, related to revealed, positive and historical religion, especially Judaism and Christianity'.

<sup>3</sup> See the final sentences of the *Ethics*. (EV-42s, p. 182)

<sup>4</sup> Ibid, p. 301

<sup>5</sup> See the fourteenth chapter (TTP XIV-8, p. 181).

<sup>6</sup> See the very end of the first 'theological part' of the *Treatise* (TTP XV-10, p. 194)

<sup>7</sup> Juffermans (2011), p. 302.

<sup>8</sup> See the very beginning of the TTP *Preface* 1-5, (p 3-5)

<sup>9</sup> 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.<sup>10</sup>

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.<sup>11</sup> 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.<sup>12</sup> 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.<sup>13</sup>

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'.<sup>14</sup> 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'.<sup>15</sup> 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

---

<sup>10</sup> Gueroult (1968) and Gueroult (1974)

<sup>11</sup> Gueroult (1969), p. 564.

<sup>12</sup> Strauss (1953) p. 9- 34; Strauss (1959), p. 56-78; Zuckert (2013) , p. 25.

<sup>13</sup> Skinner (1969), p. 50; Skinner (1978), p. xi; Bevir (2013), p. 11.

<sup>14</sup> Ward (2009), p. 238.

<sup>15</sup> 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.<sup>16</sup>

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.<sup>17</sup> However, at the same time, he is reacting to the thoughts of people such as St Paul and Maimonides.<sup>18</sup> 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'<sup>19</sup> 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

---

<sup>16</sup> In chapter 1 I will distinguish this (con)textualist approach from both the teleological as well as Straussian approach.

<sup>17</sup> James (2012), p. 4-14; Krop (2012), p. 70-71.

<sup>18</sup> See for an overview of Spinoza's indebtedness to classical authors: Wolfson (1965); Klever (2005);

<sup>19</sup> 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.<sup>20</sup> 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.<sup>21</sup>

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.

---

<sup>20</sup> 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.

<sup>21</sup> 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.