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

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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.