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

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## 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.<sup>1</sup> 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

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<sup>1</sup> 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.<sup>2</sup>

### *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'.<sup>3</sup> Aquinas, furthermore, equated man's final end with 'knowing and loving God'.<sup>4</sup> 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'.<sup>5</sup> 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'.<sup>6</sup> 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',

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<sup>2</sup> '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).

<sup>3</sup> Aquinas (1920) First Part, Question 1. Article 6.

<sup>4</sup> Aquinas (1920) First Part of the Second Part. Question 1. Article 8.

<sup>5</sup> Aquinas (1920) First part of the Second Part. Question 1. Article 5.

<sup>6</sup> 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.<sup>7</sup>

#### 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’.<sup>8</sup>

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’.<sup>9</sup>

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

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<sup>7</sup> See 5.3.

<sup>8</sup> Aquinas (1920). First part. Question 1. Article 1. Compare this to TTP XV-10, p. 194

<sup>9</sup> 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*'.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> 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*'.<sup>11</sup>

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.<sup>12</sup> To solve it, Spinoza granted God the attributes of extension as well as thought.<sup>13</sup> Furthermore he simply denied that God as well as man have a (free) will.<sup>14</sup>

### *Spinoza's Break With Tradition?*

In this way Spinoza transformed the traditional fusion of philosophy and religion into his own 'religion of reason'<sup>15</sup>. '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

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<sup>11</sup> Wolfson (1965), Volume 1, p. 5

<sup>12</sup> 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 then 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)

<sup>13</sup> Wolfson (1965), Volume 1, p. 80-85

<sup>14</sup> Wolfson (1965), Volume 1, p. 313-319

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

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’.<sup>17</sup>

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.<sup>18</sup>

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:

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<sup>16</sup> Wolfson (1965), Volume 2, p. 347

<sup>17</sup> Wolfson (1965) Volume 1, p. 177. Strauss (1952), p. 189.

<sup>18</sup> Fraenkel (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).<sup>19</sup>

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’)<sup>20</sup> 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 pedagogical-political program’ in helping the non-philosophical majority of mankind on a path to become more reasonable and more divine themselves.<sup>21</sup> 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’.<sup>22</sup>

#### 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

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<sup>19</sup> Fraenkel. (2012), p. ix.

<sup>20</sup> Fraenkel. (2012), p. xii.

<sup>21</sup> 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’.

<sup>22</sup> 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'.<sup>23</sup>

### 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.<sup>24</sup> (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'.<sup>25</sup>

### 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'.<sup>26</sup> 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

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid, p. 160

<sup>24</sup> Ibid, p. 19

<sup>25</sup> Ibid, p. 21

<sup>26</sup> 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'.<sup>27</sup>

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'.<sup>28</sup> 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'.<sup>29</sup> 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'.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid, p. 217.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid, p. 37.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid, p. 283.

<sup>30</sup> 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).<sup>31</sup> 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.<sup>32</sup> 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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<sup>31</sup> Ibid, p. 11-17.

<sup>32</sup> Strauss (1952), p. 170. Fraenkel (2012), p. 277-283: '(...) whereas the first line of argument leads 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.<sup>33</sup>

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.

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<sup>33</sup> 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.<sup>34</sup>

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).<sup>35</sup>

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

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<sup>34</sup> 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.

<sup>35</sup> 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'.<sup>36</sup>

### *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

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<sup>36</sup> 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'.<sup>37</sup> 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*] in 1673 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<sup>38</sup>. 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'

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<sup>37</sup> Balling (1963), originally published in Dutch in 1662.

<sup>38</sup> 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’.<sup>39</sup>

### *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 duistere plaatsen]<sup>40</sup>. 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 Koerbagh’s 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’.<sup>41</sup>

### *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

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<sup>39</sup> Krop (2014), p. 84.

<sup>40</sup> Koerbagh (1668) and Koerbagh (2011)

<sup>41</sup> Krop (2014), p. 102.

his life he [Van den Enden] presented himself as a Roman Catholic'.<sup>42</sup> 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'.<sup>43</sup>

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"'.<sup>44</sup>

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)'.<sup>44</sup>

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'.<sup>45</sup>

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'.<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> Mertens (2017), p. 62.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid, p. 65

<sup>44</sup> Ibid, p. 79.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

<sup>46</sup> 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.