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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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5. Towards a Comprehensive and Coherent Spinozistic Theory of Religion

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

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

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

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

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

5.1. ‘Between the Lines’?

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

¹ Rosenthal (2001)

² Bagley (1999), p. 234

³³Klever (1996B), p. 41

⁴ Strauss (1952), p. 25

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

A Hermeneutical Principle

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

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

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

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

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

⁶ But why should it only be ‘other people’ that can lie to us? Are we sure that we are not continuously lying to ourselves?

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

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

Is 'Accommodation' Lying?

The relevance of studying rhetoric⁸ for the understanding of texts (including Spinoza's texts) is addressed by Spinoza when he writes about rules for living well. The first of these rules: 'To speak to the understanding of the multitude (...) For we can gain no little advantage from the multitude, provided that we *accommodate* ourselves as far as possible to their level of understanding'. (TIE 17, p. 6, *Italics* not in the original)

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

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

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

⁸ Cf Frankel (1999), Rosenthal (2003A) and Smith (1997), p. 41-44.

⁹ Strauss (1952), p. 179. Bagley (1996), p. 404-405.

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

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

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

5.2. Is Revealed Faith a Kind of Superstition?

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

¹⁰ See for instance the title of chapter 13 of the TTP: ‘Where it is shown that the teachings of Scripture are very simple, and aim only to promote obedience, and tell us nothing about the divine nature beyond what men may emulate by a certain manner of life.’

¹¹ Strauss (1952) p. 30.

¹² Sometimes the perceived contradictions are coming forth out of not making use of certain other distinctions. One has to be a very careful (*caute!*) reader. Spinoza makes many distinctions. In this process the same words can have different meanings. As Spinoza doesn’t always point out which of the two meanings of a word he is discussing, this can easily result in confusion.

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

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

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

Superstition in the Ethics

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

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

¹³ Strauss (1952), p. 184. Harris (1973), p. 207.

¹⁴ Juffermans (2003), p. 73-77.

Spinoza writes at this point of the text: ‘So it came about that everyone devised different methods of worshipping God to their own disposition in order that God should love them above others and the whole of Nature so as to serve their blind cupidity and insatiable greed. Thus it was this misconception that developed into superstition (...)’. Spinoza shows us in other words how one misconception leads to another¹⁵, which causes man finally to come to live in a total delusional world of his own imagination.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Superstition in the TTP

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

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

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

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

When people cultivate reason and come to a more adequate understanding of God or Nature, they discover that many things are not under their control, and that therefore they have to accept that there is no guarantee in God or Nature that they will obtain the uncertain things they desire for. But as desire is the very essence of man (E-III def. emotions 1, p. 311), and as human beings are the slaves of their desires¹⁶, they – so long as they don't desire to know and to love God as their highest good – will not accept these teachings of reason. Instead they will embrace some kind of supernatural, miraculous force which, in their imagination, will help them to get the things that they desire.

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

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

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

¹⁷ Curtius(1946), p. 255.

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

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

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

Superstition in the Correspondence

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

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

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

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

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

5.3. The Consistency of Revealed Faith

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

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

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

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

But on the other hand, one can also say that only faith leads to obedience, whereas religion does not, because 'by the guidance of reason we can love God, but not obey him' (TTP, Annotation 34, p. 272). Only in faith is it possible to imagine God imperfectly as a lawgiver or a prince that we have to obey. This idea of God is untrue. Yet this untrue depiction of God is useful to us, and therefore it is good (E-IIIId1, p. 322). In this sense faith is both 'untrue and good'.

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

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

Faith as Salvation of the Ignorant

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

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

This also sheds light on the relationship between the philosophy of the *Ethics* and the theology of the TTP: Spinoza's philosophical religion that leads one on a path to salvation is only accessible for a few. Spinoza's TTP, his 'neglected masterpiece', just as well teaches this philosophical religion that is described in the *Ethics*, as Curley has been right to note²¹, but the TTP does more than this, because this book is first and foremost about 'the salvation of the ignorant' by means of the Biblical religion.²²

¹⁹ James (2010), p. 252, and James (2011) p. 181-199. See also: Gatens & Lloyd (1999).

²⁰ TTP XIV-8, p. 181: '(...) faith requires not so much true as pious dogmas, that is, such tenets as move the mind to obedience, even though many of these may not have a shadow of truth in them'.

²¹ Curley (1990).

²² Matheron (1971).

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

Dogma's of Universal Faith

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Faith as ‘Transcending the Limits of the Intellect’

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

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

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

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

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

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

²³ Strauss (1952), p. 169- 176.

²⁴ Harris (1995), p. 135.

²⁵ Harris (1995), p. 137, Juffermans (2003), p. 335, and Donagan (1996), p. 371.

²⁶ Harris (1995), p. 137

²⁷ Juffermans (2003), p. 333, Note 13..

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

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

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

Faith and Certainty

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

5.4. Faith and Philosophical Religion

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Are the Two Paths to Salvation Compatible?

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

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

³⁰ De Dijn (2009), p. 117-136.

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

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

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

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

³¹ Cook (1999), p. 209-231.

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

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

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

5.5. Did Spinoza Pretend to be a Christian?

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

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

³³ Cook (1999), p. 215.

³⁴ Cook (1999), p. 228-229.

³⁵ Internal religion has to do with how people *think about God*. External religion with the way in which religion materializes in churches, ceremonies and sermons. Spinoza in the *TTP* defends the freedom of each individual to

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

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

Spinoza's Treatment of Judaism and Christianity

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

³⁸ Strauss (1965), p.18

³⁹ Strauss (1965), p. 20

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

⁴⁰ Melamed (2012) is an example of such a commentator.

⁴¹ Strauss (1952), p. 171, Frankel (2001), Melamed (2012), Huenemann (2014), p. 18

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Conclusion to the First Part

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

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

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