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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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## 6. Religion and Politics

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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<sup>1</sup> Steinberg (2013).

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

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

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

### Internal Religion

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

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

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

<sup>3</sup> Fukuoka (2018), p. 14.

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

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

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

### *The State Has Authority Over External Religion*

The title of chapter XIX states that 'the authority in sacred matters' (*jus circa sacra*) belongs solely to the sovereign powers, and that 'the external cult of religion' (*religionis cultum externum*) should always serve the 'stability of the state'. Spinoza calls all these things 'sacred' that 'promote the practice of piety and religion' (TTP XII-5, p. 165), that is, everything that helps people to arrive at the love of God and the love of the neighbor. To the external religion, which needs to serve the peace of the state, belong 'pious conduct and formal religious worship' and not 'private worship of God or the means by which the mind is internally directed wholeheartedly to revere God' (TTP XIX-3, p. 239). That is to say: the state can punish people for the way in which they behave (externally), but the state cannot punish people for the things that they believe (internally).

The state then also has the authority to decide what 'pious conduct' is, making clear exactly what acts are considered to be 'just and charitable' and what not. '(TTP XIX-10, p. 242). The state furthermore has the right to decide on the ways in which God is revered in religious ceremonies and rites. Here the state gets an absolute authority over religion, which totally contradicts the central tenets of modern liberalism, since the freedom of religion is not accepted. To allow the churches the freedom to decide themselves what they consider to be just and unjust, pious and impious, is to divide sovereignty and to allow for a state within the state. 'Therefore, any body which attempts to remove this authority from the sovereign power, is attempting to

divide the government (...) and is, in effect, preparing a road to power for himself' (TTP XIX-16, p. 245).

Frank and Waller explain the difference between the internal religion and the external religion in the following way: 'The Bible is essentially teaching us how to act, not what to believe (...). However, in order to act in these appropriate ways, one must undergird those actions with certain minimal beliefs. These beliefs, which are necessary for the public practices commanded by Scripture, Spinoza defines as faith. (...) The public *faith* which comprises those beliefs required for acting justly and charitably must be promoted by the state and publicly endorsed by all citizens. But the public faith is not the same things as one's private opinions'.<sup>5</sup> In other words: acts of justice and charity fall under the jurisdiction of the state and are proscribed by law, just as the religious beliefs that are necessary in order for people behave justly and charitably are proscribed by the state's laws. This is all part of the 'external religion', which always needs to be adapted to the interests of the state. But the way in which civilians interpret these dogmas, or the way in which the civilians understand God – intellectually or through the imagination – is not a matter of the state at all. This is the 'internal religion' in which individual people are completely free to adapt the knowledge of God to their particular level of understanding.

## 6.2. The Rights of Sovereign Powers and the Rights of Citizens

How did Spinoza defend the single-authority thesis<sup>6</sup>, or the idea that the state has absolute authority over the way in which external religion is practiced? In order to investigate Spinoza's theological as well as philosophical arguments for this thesis, I will focus on the text of chapter 19 of the TTP, in which Spinoza shows 'that authority in sacred matters belongs wholly to the sovereign powers and that the external cult of religion must be consistent with the stability of the state if we wish to obey God rightly'. (TTP XX, title, p. 238). The argument in chapter 19 is, however, already made in the previous chapters of the political part of the TTP, that is chapter 16 through 18. In order to understand the argumentation in chapter 19, I will have to give some attention to what Spinoza writes in these previous chapters.

### *Arguments For a State-Church*

Chapter XVI, 'on the foundations of the state, on the natural and civil right of each person, and on the authority of sovereign powers' (TTP XVI Title, p. 194), is one of the two chapters in the TTP that almost does not contain any Bible citations, signifying that this chapter unfolds a

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<sup>5</sup> Frank & Waller (2016), p. 95.

<sup>6</sup> See 10.1 for the argumentation with which Spinoza defended the separation thesis.

philosophical argument, based on reason alone, and not a theological argument, based on Scripture. Let's now take a look at how Spinoza defines the four things mentioned in the title of the chapter, and see what this means for the relationship between the divine law and the law of the state.

The state, according to Spinoza's account of it in chapter 16, seems to be founded in Hobbesian fashion by means of a social contract<sup>7</sup> in which each person 'transfers all the power they possess to society; and society alone retains the supreme natural right over all things, i.e., supreme power, which all must obey, either of their own free will or through fear of the ultimate punishment' (TTP XVI-8, p. 200).<sup>8</sup> The natural right of each person is the same as the right of each natural thing, which means 'that each individual thing has the sovereign right to do everything it can do, or the right of each thing extends so far as its determined power extends' (TTP XVI-2, p. 195). This natural right is what Spinoza in the *Ethics* and in the *Political Treatise* calls 'the power of God' and the 'conatus': all things are determined to strive for self-persistence. The civil right then is 'the freedom of each person to conserve themselves in their own condition, which is determined by the edicts of the sovereign power and protected by its authority alone'. (TTP XVI-13, p. 202).

So we see how Spinoza in this chapter starts with a state of nature in which everybody strives to persist in its own being. In this state of nature, everyone judges for himself what he considers to be good or bad. Civil society is then founded the moment that all give up their individual right to decide what is right and wrong. Instead, they give the sovereign the absolute right to decide what rights the citizens should have. The authority of sovereign powers is absolute: 'No offense can be committed against subjects by sovereigns, since they are of right permitted to do all things'. (TTP XVI-14, p. 203).

But what about the divine law then? Is the law of God – to love thy neighbor – not by definition above the law of state? To answer this, Spinoza first points out that the state of nature

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<sup>7</sup> Spinoza speaks of a contract or agreement in TTP XVI-5 -11, p. 197-202. He also discusses it in the TP: 'The contract or laws whereby a people transfers its right to one council or one man should undoubtedly be broken when this is in the interest of the general welfare. But the right to judge whether or not this is in the general interest to do so cannot rest with any private person, but only with the ruler of the state. So by civil right the ruler of the state remains the sole interpreter of these laws.' (TP 5-6, p. 700)

<sup>8</sup> Compare what Spinoza writes with Hobbes (1968), p. 226: 'The only way to erect such a Common Power (...) is, to conferre all their power and strength upon one Man, or upon one Assembly of men, that may reduce all their Wills, by plurality of voices, unto one Will (...)' Den Uyl (1983), p. 64 however writes that 'social contract' in Spinoza 'should not be seen as an event where men have, through reason, recognized their plight and sought to alleviate their condition by formally agreeing upon certain courses of action. Spinoza rather presents the picture of institutions that emerge instead of being founded or created. He cannot, therefore, be seen as falling within the British tradition of social contract theorists'. Malcolm (2002), p. 554, on the other hand, writes that Spinoza's account of the transfer of natural rights to the sovereign 'through a contract is reminiscent of De Cive'.

is prior to the state of religion. Revelation was necessary, because men obviously were unaware of the fact that they should obey God. The divine law only becomes binding once people 'promised to obey God in an explicit agreement. With this agreement they surrendered their natural liberty, so to speak, transferring their right to God, and this (...) occurred in the civil state' (TTP XVI-19, p. 205).

Secondly, Spinoza argues that the sovereign powers that rule the state are bound by the divine law in the same way as the people in the state of nature were bound by the divine law. That is to say, they had the right, i.e. the power, to not be just and charitable, but in acting this way they would act against their own best interest. Therefore: 'Should the sovereign refuse to obey God in his revealed law, he may do so, but at his own peril and his own loss. No civil or natural law forbids him' (TTP XVI-20, p. 206).

Thirdly, Spinoza argues that if citizens are allowed to disobey the laws of the state, because they think that they go 'against religion and the obedience we have promised to God', this will generate 'serious conflict', as 'people are very prone to go astray in religion and make dubious claims that result from the diversity of their understanding' (TTP XVI-21, p. 206). In other words, again a very Hobbesian argument: the alternative for not trusting the sovereign in his defense and interpretation of the divine law is chaos and civil war which is worse than an unreligious government.

Spinoza in the next chapter does two things with the argumentation that he has set up in chapter 16. The first thing he does, is to make clear in what way he differs from Hobbes's idea of a social contract.<sup>9</sup> Although it is true in theory that a state functions only if all the citizens obey the commands of the sovereign power, in reality the sovereign power does not have the right, that is, the power, to make all the citizens obey him absolutely in everything he decrees. People cannot really give up their natural right, as they are still determined by nature to do the things that they consider best for their self-persistence. And if they think that obeying the laws of the state is not helping them in persisting in their own being, they will break the contract, disobey the laws, and rebel against the sovereign. This is also what experience teaches. For, never have people 'succeeded in devising a form of government that was not in greater danger from its own citizens than from foreign foes' (TTP XVII-4, p. 211). In this way, Spinoza also strongly relativizes the power of sovereigns to go against the divine law, because if a sovereign would force people to

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<sup>9</sup> Spinoza does not explicitly distance himself in this chapter, but only implicitly. But what he does here is described in his letter to Jarig Jelles: 'With regard to political theory, the difference between Hobbes and myself (...) consists in this, that I always preserve the natural right in its entirety, and I hold the sovereign power in a State has right over a subject only in proportion to the excess of its power over that of a subject.' (Letter 50, p. 891-892)

hate each other or to act unjustly and uncharitably to each other, he will surely face rebellions and uprisings (TTP XVII-1, p. 208-209). This is what Spinoza meant when he wrote that sovereigns run a risk if they go against divine law.

The second thing that Spinoza does, is to provide backing for his single-authority thesis by means of theological arguments derived from Scripture. What Spinoza shows in this chapter is that religion in the Hebrew state under Moses only acquired the power of law because of a *political decision*. The Hebrews made a social contract with God. After the Hebrews escaped slavery in Egypt, they were again in the state of nature in which there was no consensus over what needs to be called right or wrong or piety or sin. But then ‘they resolved, on the advice of Moses in whom they had the greatest trust, to transfer their right to no mortal man but rather to God alone. Without hesitation, all equally with one shout promised to obey God absolutely in all his commands, and to recognize no other laws but that which He himself conferred as law by prophetic revelation. This undertaking or transfer of right to God was made in the same way that we conceived above it is made in an ordinary society, whenever men make up their minds to surrender their natural right’ (TTP XVII-7, p. 213).

Religion only received the force of law because of a decree of the sovereign power, which in the Hebrew state was the entire people. Spinoza calls this state in its initial face, that is, before the power to consult God was delegated to Moses alone, a ‘democracy’ (TTP XVII-9, p. 214).

### *Internal Religion Important For Political Stability*

Relevant for a better understanding of the distinction between internal and external is what Spinoza writes in chapter XVII about obedience, because there he states that ‘obedience is less a question of an external than an internal action of the mind. Hence he is most under the dominion of another who resolves to obey every order of another wholeheartedly’ (TTP XVII-2, p. 209). This is important, because it most clearly shows that internal religion is in fact extremely important for the stability of the state. This was already indicated by Spinoza in chapter 4, where he wrote that Christ did teach to those capable of understanding that the divine law should be understood as an eternal decree and not as a command, and ‘Hence, he freed them from the slavery of the law and yet in this way also confirmed and stabilized the law, inscribing it deeply in their hearts’ (TTP IV-10, p. 64). In other words, Christianity freed the people from ‘the slavery of the law’ in that it teaches them that religion is not an affair of the state, but of the heart and the mind. Yet, in this way, it only strengthens the state and its laws, as people come wholeheartedly to desire the love of God and the neighbor, which is best served in a well-organized state.

### *Spinoza Repeats the Main Political Teachings in Chapter XVIII*

The political lessons of the Hebrew state are rehearsed by Spinoza so that nobody misses his main point, which is the single authority thesis. The absolute authority ‘to decide what is religiously right or not [should be assigned] to the sovereign power alone’ (TTP XVIII-6-3, p. 234). But also, the teachings of the first theological part are repeated. The state should ‘regard piety and the practice of religion as a question of works alone, that is, as simply the practice of charity and justice’ (TTP XVIII-6-2, p. 234). The state should refrain from making in the domain of religion ‘laws about opinions which man can or do dispute’ (TTP XVIII-6-2, p. 234). This was already stated by Spinoza in chapter 14, where he wrote that the dogmas of faith that everybody needs to know for practicing charity and justice should be so formulated that they cannot cause conflict ‘among honest people’ (TTP XIV-9, p. 182).

### **6.3. Spinoza’s Defense of the Single Authority Thesis**

Let’s turn then to the argumentation in chapter 19. Spinoza there want to prove two things: 1) that the authority in sacred matters belongs wholly to the sovereign powers; 2) that the external cult of religion must be accommodated to peace of the commonwealth, if we want to obey God rightly. The first of these two propositions is defended by means of both philosophical as well as theological arguments, largely derived from the previous chapters.

#### *The State Has a Religious Function: Providing For Justice*

The philosophical argument begins by restating that justice can only exist in a state where everybody has given up its natural right to judge about right and wrong, and has given this right to decide what should be called just and unjust, pious or sinful, to the sovereign power. Justice does not have any force of law in a state of nature where everyone decides for himself what is right and wrong, because this leads to a situation where nothing is forbidden: ‘strife or hatred or anger or fraud or anything at all that appetite foments’ (TTP XVI-4, p. 197). Now, since ‘sacred things’ pertain to all things that can be of help in promoting justice, and for justice obedience to the sovereign power is necessary, we need to absolutely obey the sovereign powers if we desire the justice which God commands (TTP XX-4 and 5, p. 239-240).

This is also supported by means of a theological argument: the Bible also testifies that the Hebrews all had to give up their natural right in order that revealed religion received its status as a law that can be enforced on people. ‘On the same grounds, revealed religion, no longer possessed the force of law after the destruction of the Hebrew state. For there can be no doubt that as soon

as the Hebrews transferred their right to the king of Babylon, the kingdom of God and the divine law immediately ceased to be effective' (TTP XX-6, p. 240-241).

That 'religion, whether revealed by the natural light of reason or by prophetic light, receives the force of commandment solely from the decree of the those who have authority to govern' (TTP XX-7, p. 241), is furthermore proved by the fact that God cannot be adequately conceived as a legislator, a king, or a judge, which is 'confirmed by experience itself. For we find no traces of divine justice except where just men rule' (TTP XX-8, p. 241-242).

In the same fashion, Spinoza defends the second thesis: that external religion, which consists in acts of justice and charity, must be consistent with the stability of the state. For, if everybody (just like in the state of nature) should decide what is to be called just and pious, then justice and piety can have no force of law. For example, if someone helps a criminal, who is pursued by the state, this cannot count as a just and pious act (TTP XX-10, 11 and 12, p. 242-244). It is for this reason that the sovereign powers are the interpreters of religion.

### *Arguments Against the Separation of Church and State*

Spinoza wants the state to have absolute jurisdiction over the churches. This goes very far. In the end, it is the state which decides what is being taught or preached or done in the churches, and the churches may never do anything which goes against the authority of the state. 'No one has the right and power without their authority [that is, the authority of the sovereign powers] to administer sacred matters or choose ministers, or decide and establish the foundations and doctrines of a church, nor may they give judgments about morality and observance of piety, or excommunicate or receive anyone into the church, or care for the poor'. (TTP XX-15, p. 245).

How would Spinoza have judged the idea of a separation of Church and State? The way in which this famous notion often is defined, for example, by Locke in his *Letter Concerning Toleration* (1689), is that the state should have jurisdiction over matters that pertain to the protection of the body, but that the churches have the right to decide on the ways in which people can find salvation. Locke writes, 'the care of souls is not committed to the civil magistrate, any more than to other men'.<sup>10</sup> Spinoza, however, clearly argues against such a division of power. 'I will not waste time on the arguments of my opponents where they strive to separate sacred law from civil law and to maintain that only the latter belongs to the sovereign authorities, while the former adheres to the universal church. Their arguments are so flimsy that these do not deserve to be refuted' (TTP XX-14, p. 244). Since Spinoza already has made the case that God does not hold any sovereignty over men, except through those who are in charge of the government of the

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<sup>10</sup> Locke (2013) p. 49.

state, and since he has proved this to be so according to reason as well as according to revelation, he does not judge it necessary to investigate this alternative position of his opponents.

One thing he wants to mention, however, and this is that his opponents are wrong in maintaining that high priests such as Phinehas got their authority directly from God. 'For the high priests received this right from Moses who (...) alone retained the sovereign power' (TTP IX-14, p. 244). As Moses had authority to 'make and to repeal laws, to decide about war and peace, send ambassadors, appoint judges, choose a successor, *and carry out all the functions of a supreme power*' (TTP XVII-10, p. 215, Italics added). These rights were given to him by the Hebrews, not by God. It was not the law of God that ordered Phinehas to kill the Israelite and the Midianite woman (Numbers 25-7), but the law of the state (TTP XX-14, p. 244).

Spinoza's opponents who argue that the church is a separate power with rights of its own are in fact conspiring against the sovereign power as they try to divide it and claim power for themselves. Since religion 'has the greatest control over people's minds', it is a very serious offense to attempt 'to remove this authority from the sovereign power'. (TTP XX-16, p. 245).

### *Separation and Single Authority*

Spinoza's defense of the freedom of the individual can be reconciled with the absolute authority that Spinoza grants the state in deciding what religion is. It is with regard to 'internal religion' that everybody enjoys the freedom to philosophize, which includes the individual freedom to think about God as one wants. But it is with regard to the 'external religion' that the state has absolute authority over the way in which religion is expressed. Spinoza writes, 'everyone, wherever he may be, can worship God with true piety and mind his own affairs, as is the duty of a private individual. But the burden of propagating religion should be left to God or to the sovereign, on whom alone devolves the care of public affairs'. (TP 3-10, p. 693).

The internal religion has to do with the way in which we come to understand God. It doesn't matter, Spinoza holds in the TTP, in what way people have come to understand God, because as he has pointed out, also the prophets differed among each other in the way they have described God, and it is also for this theological reason that people are free to think about God as they please, as long as this depiction of God leads them to the love of their neighbor. The external religion has to do with the ways in which religion is being taught to the people. The state church does this by means of instilling in the population the seven dogmas of the universal faith that are necessary for obedience. The public faith of the republic should have no more than the seven religious dogmas, and should clearly separate philosophy from theology (TTP XX-22, p. 249).

Why did Spinoza not want to end all religion, Frank and Waller – who consider Spinoza to have been a ‘radical atheist’ – ask. They answer in these three ways: 1) it was (and still is) practically impossible to rid all people of religion; 2) societies need a common ground that religion provides; and 3) religion is necessary for the cultivation of certain virtues such as obedience and tolerance.<sup>11</sup> ‘The challenge, as Spinoza sees it’, Frank and Waller write, ‘is to convince the existing religious institutions to cultivate the necessary civic virtues without thereby dividing the republic’.<sup>12</sup> By separating external and internal religion, Spinoza allows different people the freedom to have different ideas of God as part of the internal religion, while he simultaneously makes sure that there is an external religion in which all can unite and that can instruct the people with certain virtues necessary for peacefully living together.<sup>13</sup>

#### 6.4. Spinoza’s ‘Theological-Political Problem’

The idea that Spinoza in the TTP tried to solve ‘the theological-political problem’ we find expressed in many (mostly American) books and articles on the subject.<sup>14</sup> But what exactly is the theological-political problem according to Spinoza? As Frankel makes clear, Spinoza never explicitly states that he is dealing with a ‘theological-political problem’. But Frankel thinks that one way to grasp Spinoza’s take on it is by first researching the theological and then the political problem in Spinoza’s thought. We will follow this procedure, but with one big difference: in discussing theology we will keep in mind how Spinoza differentiates between three different perspectives on religion as he separates the philosophical religion from Biblical faith and both of them from superstition.

#### *Solving the Theological Problem*

Theology, literally meaning ‘knowledge of God’ – as discussed so far - can be the intellectual knowledge of God in the philosophical religion of Spinoza and his friends, or it can be the knowledge of God that plays a role in Biblical faith in which the knowledge of God is adapted to the level of understanding of the common people. In order to live well people need this knowledge of God – either in its pure philosophical guise or in its mediated and adapted form as Biblical faith. Knowledge of God leads to harmony – both in the human soul as well as in society

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<sup>11</sup> Frank & Waller (2016), p. 93-94.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid, p. 94.

<sup>13</sup> In making this distinction between internal and external religion Spinoza was by no means original. He simply followed an existing practice. See: Hobbes (1968), p. 399. See also: Lavaert (2017), p. 158

<sup>14</sup> Meier (2006), Chapter 1: The theological-political problem is the central problem in Leo Strauss’s thought. See also: Janssen (2002), p. 19-21. This notion of a ‘theological-political problem’ has been later picked up by both Straussian as well as non-Straussian Spinoza-scholars. See, among others, Smith (1997), Chapter 1; Nadler (2011), Chapter 2; Frankel (1999), p. 897-924.

at large. This is why knowledge of God can save us. Most people lack intellectual knowledge of God, but they can be saved by using the prophetic imagination in which God appears as a prince, a judge and a lawmaker and in which He commands all people to love God and their neighbor and to be just and charitable.

All people need the philosophical religion or its adapted form in Biblical faith, because else they will be in the grip of superstition. All men are by nature prone to superstition (TTP, Preface 5, p. 5). Superstition is different from both religion and faith in that it doesn't acknowledge that our supreme good consists in the knowledge and love of God. Superstition therefore divides men, making men into each other's enemies. Superstitious people, driven by fear and the immoderate desire for uncertain things, will hope that their imagined God will chose them over all the others. In this way superstition leads to religious hatred and war, while religion and faith lead to love and peace.

We see then that theology provides us with a problem. The theological problem is that we need to fight superstition, and that we need to promote universal faith in the common people in order that they obey God by acting just and charitably, while we also need to protect the philosophical religion. How to solve this theological problem? This we can only do by means of politics. Therefore we have to understand the political to which we now will turn.

### *Solving the Political Problem*

Politics can be defined as the art that makes it possible that people live together in peace over a longer period of time. That politics is an art is not immediately clear. People are programmed by nature with the desire to persist in their own being. Yet people cannot survive on their own. Therefore nature will force human beings to live together in societies. (People who will not unite and conform to a set of rules that enables them to live and work together, will die; and this is simply the way in which God or Nature has organized the world.) In this sense no special 'art' for living together is needed. We see that 'all men, barbarian or civilized, enter into relationships with one another and set up some kind of civil order'. Therefore, 'one should not look for the causes and natural foundations of the state in the teachings of reason, but deduce them from the nature and condition of men in general' (TP 1-7, p. 682).

But although all humans will be forced to live together with other people or die, this will not always result in stable societies. Societies, brought together by the forces of God or Nature, would be stable if God or Nature would act with the best interest of the human being in mind. If this would be the case God or Nature would have made the human beings fully rational. But this

Spinoza stresses, over and over again, is not the case.<sup>15</sup> The nature of the human beings is not such that they will let themselves be led by reason alone. Instead they are driven by their passions and their appetites. Envy, pride, anger and the desire to revenge are only some examples of passions that drive human beings away from each other in different directions. Reason, Spinoza also stresses again and again, on the other hand, prescribes to us how we best can survive by uniting with our fellow human beings in a state ruled by common laws.<sup>16</sup> But since most human beings are more led by their appetites than by reason, living together becomes a problem.

The political problem – simply put - is therefore the problem how states or human societies, united and ruled by a common law, can persist in their own being. The greatest threat for the persistence of states or human societies, united and ruled by common law, does not come from outside, but from inside. People have devised many strategies, but ‘they have never succeeded in devising a government that was not in greater danger of its own citizens than from foreign foes, and which was not more fearful of the former than of the latter’ (TTP XVII-4, p. 211; See also TP 5-2, p. 699). The greatest threat for the persistence of states is a lack of unity that arises when people, driven by their passions, chose their private interests over the interests of society as a whole. ‘To (...) construct a state that affords no opportunity for trouble-making, to organize everything in such a way that each person, of whatever character, prefers public right to private advantage, this is the real task, this is the arduous work’ (TTP XVII-4, p. 211). When rulers prefer their private interests over the interests of the whole of society they will become tyrants. When citizens chose their private interests over the interests of the whole of society they will become rebels. Therefore the political problem is to devise a state in which the ones that rule don’t become tyrannical and the ones that are being ruled not rebellious (TTP XVII-16, p. 220). The political problem is then how to make men more reasonable in order that they will see that their true interest lies in uniting with their fellows under common laws in such a way that the state can persist in its own being.

How do we obtain peace and harmony? The answer to this question is religion. It is religion that can provide us with the kind of rational conduct needed to achieve unity. This political problem is in other words in need of a theological solution.

### *Spinoza’s Theological-Political Solution*

Why does the theological problem need a political solution? This is so because religion in itself, as an idea or a conviction people have in their minds, is powerless. The conviction of religion that

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<sup>15</sup> E-I Appendix, p. 243; E-4p37s2, p. 340; TTP V-8, p. 72; TTP XVI-7, p. 199; TP II-5, p. 683; TP VI-3, p. 701.

<sup>16</sup> E 4p18s, p. 331; TTP III-5, p. 46; TTP XVI-5, p. 197, TP II-16, p. 687, and TP II-21, p. 688.

we should love our neighbors as ourselves is ‘of little avail against the passions. It is effective, no doubt, at death’s door, that is, when sickness has subdued the passions and a man lies helpless; or again in places of worship where men have no dealings with one another; but is has no weight in law-court or palace where it would be needed most of all’. (TP 1-5, p. 682) Convictions of what we should do, that are, normative laws or categorical imperatives, can do nothing to carve the passions. We can only stop the desires that make men into enemies of each other by having laws that threaten to punish people.

Religion which demands that every man loves God above all things, and his neighbor as himself is extremely important, yes, even a necessary condition, for securing the state (TTP XII-10, p. 170). The doctrine that true faith consists in performing acts of justice and charity is ‘necessary’ in a society ‘if we wish people to live in concord and peace with each other’ (TTP XIV-11, p. 184). Religion is a necessary condition for peace in the state, but it is not a sufficient condition, because the divine law that prescribes justice and charity does not have any authority in the state of nature. God or Nature does – as we know – not act with man’s best interest in mind. Therefore we find in the state of nature that everything is allowed, including among other wrongdoings, murder, theft and rape. Nothing is forbidden by natural right, except those things that ‘no one desires and no one can do’ (TTP XVI-4, p. 197). If we want people to not harm others, to treat others in the same way they themselves want to be treated and if we want people to defend other’s people’s rights as their own, we need a state ruled by law (TTP 16-5, p. 198).<sup>17</sup> Only in the state can religion truly become something that is commanded to us: ‘We conclude therefore that religion, whether revealed by the natural light of reason or by prophetic light, receives the force of commandment solely from the decree of those who have authority to govern, and that God has no special kingship over men except through those who hold power’ (TTP XX-7, p. 241). This is why the theological problem is in need of a political solution. The Church needs to become a State, because the fruits of true religion, justice and charity, can only exist in a state ruled by law.

### Why the Political problem is in Need of a Theological Solution

But why is the political problem then in need of a theological solution? Can’t we just curb the passions and let reason rule by means of laws, threatening people who act otherwise with fearful punishments? Can the political problem, in other words, not be solved by means of the same political solution that can solve the theological problem? The answer is: no, because fear of the

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<sup>17</sup> This is a position that we also find described in E-IIIp39, E-IVp7 and that we find repeated in E IVp37s2 as it is stated that laws are necessary to establish society.

laws is not enough to secure political peace and stability over a longer period of time. '[H]uman nature does not allow itself to be absolutely compelled, and as the tragedian Seneca says, no one has maintained a violent regime for long; it is moderate regimes that endure. For while men are acting out of fear alone, they are doing what they do not at all want to do; they have no reason of interest or necessity for doing what they do; they seek merely to avoid punishment or even execution'. (TTP V-8, p. 73) The most important factor in winning the love of the people in order that they unite 'are those that are concerned with religion and piety (...) Harmony is also commonly produced by fear, but then it is untrustworthy' (E-IV Appendix 15 and 16, p. 360). The State therefore must also be made into a Church, because only in the church do citizens wholeheartedly obey.

Religion and faith produce unity as we have already discussed. Men who live under the guidance of reason are always necessarily in agreement with one another (E 4-35, p. 337). Also, 'the true universal and general faith pertain[s] no dogmas capable of giving rise to controversy amongst honest people' (TTP XIV-9, p. 182). This is why the political problem is also in need of a theological solution, because threatening laws in themselves are not enough to create harmony. It is in the combination of the religious law (to love God above all things and your neighbor as yourself) and the secular law, which forbids unjust behavior by means of threats, that individuals as well as societies can succeed to persist in their own being over a longer period of time.

The theological and the political are intertwined. The theological problem (how to fight superstition, promote faith and protect religion) is also a political problem (how can the state persist in its own being?), and the political problem (how can the state persist in its own being by preventing rebellion and tyranny and securing unity?) is at the same time a theological problem (how to bring people to unifying faith and religion, instead of divisive superstition?)

#### Institutional Arrangements For Solving the Theological-Political Problem

How is the theological-political problem solved? Laws should proscribe only wrongful deeds, but they should leave thoughts free (TTP Preface 7, p. 6). Society should be organized in such a way that the state rules over the church (TTP, title of chapter 19, p. 328). These two measures – the separation thesis which secures the freedom to philosophize on the one hand, and the single authority thesis on the other hand - help to fight superstition, promote faith and protect religion, and help societies in this way to persevere in their own being.

The reason that religion deteriorated from something that has as its fruits 'love, joy, peace, moderation and good will to all men' into superstition that merely breeds 'extraordinary animosity' and 'the bitterest mutual hatred' is that religion is pursued by some as a 'worldly

career', trying 'to win a reputation for themselves while denigrating those who disagreed with them'. But if the state would rule over the church, and pastors and theologians would be civil servants that have to obey the laws of the state, they cannot teach 'new and controversial doctrines designed to seize the attention of the common people', generating in this way 'a great deal of conflict, rivalry and resentment' (TTP, Preface 9, p. 7). If these pastors were serving the state they would only care for what makes people obedient to the religious law which is to love God above all things and one's neighbor as oneself by performing acts of justice and charity. In this way the pastors will promote the universal faith.

Since justice and charity are dependent on the state, and the state cannot exist without obedience to its laws, this means that pastors and theologians have to promote obedience to the state's laws. As these laws proscribe only wrongful deeds and leave thoughts free, hatred towards people who have other ideas of God cannot be spread. The law demands a certain degree of toleration of other religious views. Everybody has the right to adapt the true religion to his own level of understanding, as the Bible itself testifies. This ensures that the true philosophical religion is protected: people are free to philosophize, and this includes the freedom of each person 'to worship God according to his own mind' (TTP Preface 8, p. 6).<sup>18</sup> We can understand then why in this society - where the church stands under the state and where the laws forbid certain acts, but leave the people the freedom to think as they please - the theological and the political problems are solved: state laws guard society against superstition and protect the philosophical religion, whereas the state church and its civil servants ensure that the universal faith is instilled in all men.

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<sup>18</sup> See also: TTP VII-22.