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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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Citation

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

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Issue Date: 2019-10-23

Summary

What is Spinoza's theory of religion? In order to answer this question this study builds on the work of Paul Juffermans who has shown that religion takes on three 'different meanings' in Spinoza's works, namely 1. illusory and harmful *superstitious beliefs* that make people hate and persecute each other; 2. unphilosophical, but extremely useful *dogma's of faith*, that everyone needs to adapt to his or her own level of understanding in order that he or she can lead a life in which the love of God and the neighbor is at the forefront; and 3. the philosophical *religion* which leads to the *amor intellectualis Dei*. In this way Spinoza has provided us with a nuanced normative theory that can help us to evaluate existing religions.

Different from the depictions of Spinoza as an atheist, secularist and liberal philosopher, this comprehensive theory of religion shows that Spinoza thought that religion – understood as Biblical faith or as philosophical religion - was indispensable for society. Different also from the Straussian view that Spinoza's theory of religion is rife with contradictions, and that his writings therefore need to be read 'between the lines', this study argues that the three perspectives on religion are not mutually exclusive, but can in fact exist side by side.

Spinoza's theory of religion can, as Carlos Fraenkel has described, be understood to belong to a long tradition of philosophical religions. This tradition, which started with Plato, combined a philosophical notion of the Divine as the perfect exemplar of reasonableness with the view that historical religions had to be reinterpreted as pedagogical-didactical tools to lead the common people to a life of reason.

This study makes use of a whole range of different arguments to show that Spinoza was not only a critic of religion and the Bible, but that he also endorsed them for individuals as well as for societies. Spinoza's religious ideas were understood by Spinoza's circle of friends, as the contextual historical research of Henri Krop and others have shown, as an example of 'reasonable Christianity'. Spinoza, other contextual research shows, also was not in favor of the separation of Church and State. Krop and others have argued that he, just as his contemporaries, was a proponent of a state-guided 'public church', guarding over the faith of the general population and fighting the superstitious beliefs that can divide society.

A close reading of Spinoza's political texts reveals that Spinoza thought that society is in need of religion, and that true freedom cannot be reached without religion. In short, Spinoza's political philosophy needs to be read against the background of his comprehensive religious theory.