

SPINOZA'S RELIGION

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SPINOZA'S RELIGION

The Question of Religion

BENEDICT DE SPINOZA did not have a religion—at least not in the usual sense of the word. He was brought up and educated within Amsterdam’s Jewish community, from which he was cast out in 1656, at the age of twenty-three. As far as we know, he made no effort to reconcile with this community: leaving it was, it seems, a welcome intellectual liberation.¹ For the remaining twenty years of his life he pursued his philosophical enquiries in conversation with Christians of various sorts, while refusing to convert to Christianity.² In the seventeenth century Spinoza was unusual, perhaps even unique, in engaging closely and deeply with theological questions as a free thinker, deliberately occupying a perspective outside any religious tradition. His masterpiece the *Ethics* (1677) shines out even amongst the philosophical works of his most original contemporaries—Descartes and Leibniz, for example—as a metaphysical and ethical vision unconstrained by the demands of doctrinal orthodoxy.

About a year before his death, while he was completing the *Ethics*, Spinoza wrote a letter to Albert Burgh, a young man who had just converted from Calvinism to Catholicism. Here Spinoza discussed Judaism, Christianity and Islam, and made plain his rejection of dogmatic, sectarian religion. He explained that he knew the truth of his own philosophy ‘in the same way you know that the three angles of a triangle are equal to two right angles ... for the true is the indicator both of itself and of the false’.³ He asked Burgh, who naturally thought his religion superior to any other,

How do you know that [your teachers] are the best among those who have ever taught other Religions, still teach them, or will teach them in the future? Have you examined all those religions, both ancient and modern, which are taught here, and in India, and everywhere throughout the globe? And even if you had examined them properly, how do you know you have chosen the best?⁴

These are good questions, and they are only partly rhetorical. Mocking the pride and competitiveness that often characterise religious sectarianism, Spinoza granted that ‘the organization of the Roman Church ... is well-designed politically, and profitable for many. I do not believe there is any order more suitable for deceiving ordinary people and controlling men’s minds, unless it would be the order of the Mahommedan Church.’ Yet his irreverence towards sectarian claims to spiritual pre-eminence also went in more tolerant, more conciliatory directions. ‘In every Church there are many very honourable men, who worship God with justice and loving kindness,’ he reminded Burgh, ‘for we know many men of this kind among the Lutherans, the Reformed, the Mennonites, and the Enthusiasts. So you ought to concede that holiness of life is not peculiar to the Roman Church, but is common to all.’ Spinoza closed his letter by counselling the eager young convert to ‘recognize the reason God has given you, and cultivate it’.⁵ In his *Theologico-Political Treatise* (1670), he had made similar arguments about Judaism, challenging the idea that the Hebrews were God’s chosen people. ‘God is equally beneficent, compassionate, etc. to all,’ Spinoza argued, adding that as far as ‘intellect and true virtue’ are concerned, ‘no nation is distinguished from any other’.⁶

Given Spinoza’s resistance to what commonly passes for religion, the title of this book contains an irony, and perhaps for some a provocation. At the same time, it is entirely in earnest. The book offers a new interpretation of Spinoza’s *Ethics* which takes seriously the question of its religious and theological import. At the same time—as I argue in detail in my final chapter—it suggests that understanding Spinoza’s religion forces us to rethink the concept of religion itself. And this is no coincidence, since our modern category of religion, structured by notions of belief and belonging, ideology and identity, rose to prominence during Spinoza’s century. Thanks in part to Jonathan Israel’s pioneering history of the ‘Radical Enlightenment’, Spinoza is now recognised as an architect of modernity—but was his vision of

human beings and their place in the cosmos radically secular, or radically religious?⁷ And does this very distinction between ‘religious’ and ‘secular’ rest on a distinctively modern concept of religion, which Spinoza challenged in its infancy? How might the *Ethics* lead us to rethink our assumptions about what religion is, and what it means to be religious?

Raising these questions leads to a new appreciation of Spinoza’s significance. He is rightly seen as a decisively modern thinker: like other forward-looking philosophers of his century, he turned his back on medieval cosmology and scholastic theology in favour of a more streamlined metaphysics, and took a keen interest in new scientific discoveries. He criticised superstitious religion, and sought to liberate philosophy from the still-powerful churches. Yet look a little closer, and we see that Spinoza challenged some of the defining features of modernity. In place of the increasing separation of God from nature, he argued that everything is in God, and even proposed ‘Nature’ as an alternative name for God. In place of modern individualism, with its ideals of autonomy and free choice, he regarded human beings as entirely dependent on God, interdependent on one another, and embedded in a complex ecosystem of causes: he understood the self to be deeply impressionable and porous, constituted by its relations with other things, and he rejected the idea of free choice as a kind of superstition, akin to belief in miracles.⁸ While an ethic of restless striving and relentless industry shaped, from Francis Bacon onwards, the modern pursuit of scientific knowledge, Spinoza balanced his own emphasis on effort and activity with an ideal of intellectual rest—an intuitive knowing that brings peace of mind—which echoes the ideal of contemplation cherished by pre-modern philosophers, monks and scholars.⁹ Indeed, he argued that resting in God is the highest human good. And while modern capitalist culture spurs a race for productivity and profit, fuelled by anxieties which, as Max Weber argued in 1905, can be traced to the sixteenth century’s Protestant theologies, Spinoza insisted that our deepest happiness is found not in production, wealth or competitive success, but in knowledge.¹⁰ A wise person, he writes at the end of the *Ethics*, is ‘conscious of himself, and of God, and of things, and always possesses true peace of mind’ (E5p42s). His own way of life bears witness to this ideal: he lived humbly and modestly, devoted to his philosophical enquiries.

Spinoza thus resisted deep tendencies of modern thought, which had begun to shape his own century and would produce the world we inhabit today. He did so not by drifting back into pre-modern science and religion, but by forging an alternative modernity that preserved or developed some of the profound insights of his ancient and medieval forebears, by setting them on new philosophical foundations. For example, the *Ethics* affirms the traditional theological view that we are thoroughly dependent beings, not by appealing to a Jewish or Christian doctrine of creation, but by arguing that we are modes, which are by definition ‘in another’, rather than substances, which are self-sufficient, ‘in themselves’. To offer just one further example (as we shall see, there are more), Spinoza echoes Plato’s insistence that virtue is synonymous with inner happiness—a view challenged first by superstitious beliefs in posthumous rewards and punishments, and later by the means–end thinking of utilitarianism. Yet his defence of virtue’s intrinsic value dismantles the idea of final causes that had structured medieval thought.

As its title indicates, the *Ethics* is primarily a book about how to live a good human life. Like a stripped-down *Summa Theologiae*, it begins and ends with God. For Spinoza, we work out how to live well by understanding our relation to God, to other people, and also, crucially, to ourselves. The core principle of his philosophy, governing his ontology and epistemology as well as his ethics, is that ‘whatever is, is in God’ (E1p15). I call this principle ‘being-in-God’, and regard it as Spinoza’s deepest thought. He argues that the highest, most truthful kind of human life is fully conscious of being-in-God—and conscious, too, that every other creature and thing is also a being-in-God. We will be able to say much more about what Spinoza’s religion consists in once we have considered what it means, both conceptually and existentially, to ‘be in God’.



In his *Theologico-Political Treatise* Spinoza drew a decisive distinction between ‘superstition’ and ‘true religion’. This distinction was emphasised by early modern writers as diverse as Calvin, Montaigne, Bacon, Hobbes and Bayle. For all these thinkers superstition was, as Bacon put it, ‘a deformation of religion’.¹¹ For Spinoza, it meant a form of religious life based on ignorance rather than wisdom, and motivated more by fear of punishment than by love of truth and goodness. He put this point bluntly in his letter to Albert Burgh, where he wrote that ‘having become a slave of [the Roman] Church, you have been guided not so much by the love of God as by fear of hell, the only cause of superstition’.¹²

Spinoza spent all his life in the Dutch Republic, which had a Reformed state church. He had ample opportunity to observe how the Calvinists’ emphasis on the stark polarities of salvation and damnation

gave rise to unstable emotions—'fluctuations of the soul' (*animi fluctuationes*), and particularly oscillations between hope and fear, confidence and anxiety—which caused turbulence both within and between individuals, and within and between religious communities.¹³ For Spinoza, superstitious faith typically involved belief in miracles, and practices of worship that approached God anthropomorphically—as if God were a capricious prince demanding flattery in return for favours, or a vindictive despot who had to be placated by submission and adoration. He criticised the anthropomorphic imagination of 'the common people, who suppose that God is male, not female'.¹⁴ He would have been no happier with a feminine image of God: when grammatical requirements force us to refer to God by pronouns such as 'he', 'him' and 'himself'—which are unnecessary in Spinoza's Latin text—we should bear in mind that these pronouns are merely a linguistic convention, and do not ascribe a personal or gendered nature to God.

Spinoza's critique of certain images of God, and certain forms of religious life, leaves open the question of what a Spinozist 'true religion' would be like.¹⁵ In 1671, he outlined a response to this question in reply to a critique of his newly published *Theologico-Political Treatise* by Lambert van Velthuysen, the governor of Utrecht and a Calvinist Christian influenced by the philosophies of Descartes and Hobbes. Velthuysen had complained that Spinoza, 'to avoid being faulted for superstition, [seems] to have cast off all religion'.¹⁶ Spinoza wondered what conception of religion could have led Velthuysen to make this claim:

Has someone who maintains that God must be recognized as the highest good, and should be freely loved as such, cast off all religion? Is someone who holds that our greatest happiness and freedom consist only in this [love of God] irreligious? Or that the reward of virtue is virtue itself, whereas the punishment of folly and weakness is folly itself? And finally, that each person ought to love his neighbour and obey the commands of the supreme power? Not only have I explicitly said these things, I have also proven them by the strongest arguments.¹⁷

These views are indeed defended in Spinoza's *Theologico-Political Treatise*, and they receive an intricate metaphysical elucidation in the *Ethics*. Nevertheless, the question of Spinoza's religion has remained in dispute ever since he wrote this letter. Despite his insistence that 'God must be recognised as the highest good', many of his contemporaries accused him of atheism. In September 1677, a few months after his death, a manuscript of the *Ethics* that Spinoza's young disciple Tschirnhaus had taken with him to Rome was confiscated by Vatican authorities and added to the Index of prohibited books.¹⁸

Successive generations of readers have repeated the charge of atheism—though during the last century this has increasingly been meant as a compliment, as secularist readers championed Spinoza as an early pioneer of their own worldview. An alternative interpretation of Spinoza emerged towards the end of the eighteenth century, when certain radical thinkers, particularly in Germany, read him as a deeply religious thinker. In 1787, Herder's *God: Some Conversations* put forward a Christianised Spinozism, setting the scene for Novalis to claim Spinoza as a 'God-intoxicated man'.¹⁹

While we can admire Spinoza's Romantic readers for their creativity and expansive spirit, their representations of his philosophy are often unreliable. As J. A. Froude wrote in a clear-eyed introduction to Spinozism, published in the *Westminster Review* in 1855,

The Herder and Schleiermacher school have claimed him as a Christian—a position which no little disguise was necessary to make tenable; the orthodox Protestants and Catholics have called him an Atheist—which is still more extravagant; and even a man like Novalis ... could find no better name for him than a *Gott trunkner Mann*—a God intoxicated man.... With due allowance for exaggeration, such a name would describe tolerably the Transcendental mystics; but with what justice can it be applied to the cautious, methodical Spinoza, who carried his thoughts about with him for twenty years, deliberately shaping them, and who gave them at last to the world in a form more severe than had ever been attempted before with such subjects? With him, as with all great men, there was no effort after sublime emotions. He was a plain, practical person.²⁰

In reading Spinoza as a religious thinker, I take a different path from the various interpretations summarised here by Froude. Pursuing the *question* of religion in his thought, I expect this pursuit to be most productive if we treat Spinoza's religion as a genuinely open question, rather than a matter of deciding whether to classify it as Christian, Jewish or Buddhist; pantheist, atheist or secular. All these labels have been applied to Spinozism, but none of them is quite right—not only because Spinoza's religious vision is so original that it eludes ready-made categories, but also because his work calls into question the very *concept* of religion that underlies such classifications. It is, in fact, simplistic to say that the question of Spinoza's religion has been disputed, because the question itself has been so entangled in what Bruno Latour describes as a 'cascade of category mistakes' about the concept of religion.²¹

Investigating Spinoza's religion provides an opportunity to confront these mistakes, or confusions, and to think again—yet again—about what 'religion' means.

When the word *religio* occurs in the *Ethics*, it almost always signifies a kind of virtue, and is associated with other virtues. This echoes Thomas Aquinas's discussion of *religio* within the section of the *Summa Theologiae* known as the 'Treatise on Justice and Prudence'. In the *Ethics*, *religio* is never treated as a matter of belief or doctrine. (In the *Theologico-Political Treatise*, religion is associated with certain 'tenets [*dogmata*] of universal faith', but there Spinoza makes it clear that religion consists not in adherence to these doctrines, nor in specific practices of worship, but in a way of life characterised by justice and loving-kindness.²²) Treating *religio* as a virtue might seem to preserve the medieval notion of religion—yet Spinoza understood virtue itself in a new way. My final chapter considers Spinoza's concept of religion in the context of a historical shift that happened during his lifetime, towards an objectifying representation of religion—as both a system of propositional beliefs, and a social reality—so that it became possible to speak of 'a religion', or 'the Christian religion', in the way we do today.

After a long career translating Spinoza, and thereby gaining an unparalleled familiarity with the full range of his writings, Edwin Curley offered the following judgement on Spinoza's religion:

The question, I think, is whether the advocates of organized religion are entitled to insist that anyone who does not accept their conception of God does not believe in God. Spinoza's God does have a number of the properties traditional religions ascribe to God. It's an immutable first cause of all things, active everywhere in the universe, uncaused by anything else. It's also, Spinoza would argue, a being humans can love. He thinks the love of God is our greatest good. His God does not issue commands, or perform miracles, or reveal itself to man the way the God of the monotheistic religions is supposed to do. It is not the sort of God you can pray to for help in times of trouble. I can understand thinking that belief in so different a God makes for a different kind of religion. But I also think the ethical importance Spinoza attached to this belief weighs heavily in favour of regarding his view as a genuine, if eccentric, form of religious belief.²³

This book develops an interpretation of Spinoza's *Ethics* which broadly accords with Curley's view—though the extent and orientation of the text's religious 'eccentricity' is one of the questions to be addressed here. Curley is right, I think, to suggest that Spinoza offers a 'different kind of religion' from what we late-moderns are used to. But what kind of religion is it? Framing this question in terms of the familiar notions of 'belief in God' or 'religious belief' will lead us in the wrong direction, and obscure the way Spinoza interrogates the very concept of religion.

Spinoza's own definition of religion as 'whatever we desire and do insofar as we know God' (E4p37s) offers a much more promising formula for philosophical thinking about religion, Spinozist or otherwise. This definition helps us to follow a direction indicated by Susan James in her 2012 book *Spinoza on Religion, Politics and Philosophy*, which offers a reading of the *Theologico-Political Treatise*. James argues that while 'philosophy progressively engulfs theology', philosophy itself 'becomes a form of religion, sharing its capacity to bind, and transforming devotion to the divine law into rational piety. Rather than focusing on a goal external to true religion, this kind of philosophy [cultivates] the same end.'²⁴

Most studies of Spinoza's view of religion focus, as James's book does, on the *Theologico-Political Treatise*. But with her remarks about the relation between philosophy and religion in mind, I ask how the *Ethics* illuminates what, precisely, is religious about Spinoza's thought. Responding to this question will involve putting forward interpretations, some of them quite new, of concepts and arguments familiar to readers of the *Ethics*: the metaphysics of substance and mode; the three kinds of knowledge; the critique of free will; the doctrine of *conatus*, or striving for self-preservation; the nature of the affects, particularly desire, joy, love and fear; the intellectual love of God; and the eternity of the human mind. I will also, in my first two chapters, reflect on the nature of philosophy, as Spinoza practised it, and discuss the distinctive literary form of the *Ethics*.



Spinoza's principle of being-in-God makes philosophy inseparable from theology—though he would not himself have put it this way. The word 'theology', though not quite so open-ended as 'religion', isn't straightforward either. Spinoza's rather negative remarks about theology and theologians are an obstacle to appreciating the close connection between philosophy and theology in the *Ethics*, and we need to overcome this obstacle by distinguishing between two senses of 'theology': one broad and literal, and the other much narrower and more culturally specific.

When I talk about Spinoza's theology, I am using 'theology' in its broad and literal sense, meaning a discourse on God, and on things in their relation to God. While the *Ethics*—which provides a definition of God on its first page—is quite evidently concerned with theology in this sense, Spinoza used the word 'theology' more narrowly, to signify a confessional intellectual practice based on scriptural and ecclesial authority, and tied closely to obedience and faith. In Spinoza's hands, this culturally specific sense of 'theology', which was deeply embedded in seventeenth-century debates, became virtually a term of abuse, implying dogmatic sectarianism and even fanaticism. He helped cement a cornerstone of Enlightenment thought by contesting the view, widespread among his Christian contemporaries, that 'reason ought to be the handmaid of theology'.²⁵ At the end of his *Theologico-Political Treatise*, he declared that he had 'shown how Philosophy is to be separated from Theology ... and that neither should be the handmaid of the other, but that each has charge of its own domain without any conflict with the other'.²⁶ In other words, Spinoza argued that philosophy should be emancipated from strictures on religious belief and practice that were enforced by churches and underpinned by belief in the supernatural authority of the Bible—described by Calvin, the supreme religious authority in the Dutch Republic, as 'a declaration of the word of God', and 'the testimony which God has been pleased to deliver concerning himself'.²⁷ If we were to adopt Spinoza's own conception of theology, we would have to say that he offers a philosophy of God without theology.

Since the word 'theology' comes from the Greek *theos*, meaning God, it is perhaps self-evident that theology, in both its broader and its narrower senses, is a form of discourse or enquiry which takes 'God' as its starting-point. 'God' is given in theology, and it is this givenness that distinguishes theology from philosophy. If God is given through scriptures mediated by an exegetical and ecclesial tradition, then we have theology in the narrow sense, which Spinoza eschewed. Yet God might be given to human thoughtfulness in many different ways: as a question to explore, as a problem to wrestle with, as a mystery to contemplate, as a belief to justify, as a hypothesis to prove, as a desire to pursue, as a doctrine to expound, for example. We have seen that God is given, or defined, in the first few lines of the *Ethics*, but to say that the text is engaged in theology does not commit us in advance to any specific mode of theological engagement—let alone to any specific image of God.

Today, philosophy and theology are distinct and often separate academic disciplines. Because Spinoza tends to be read more by philosophers than by theologians, the theological significance of his thought is rarely discussed by those best equipped to appreciate it. Philosophers little acquainted with theological concepts—such as divine transcendence—or with theological debates concerning the relationship between divine and human agency, tend not to consider how Spinoza contributes to these questions. Theologians, accepting philosophers' judgements that Spinoza is a pantheist or an atheist, usually assume that he simply rejects their conception of God, and do not expect the *Ethics* to reward close reading. I wish to challenge all these assumptions, and show how philosophy and theology are intertwined in Spinoza's metaphysics and ethics. This allows us to draw from the *Ethics* a distinctive account of religion that is, I believe, profound, truthful and compelling.

Philosophers need not be persuaded of Spinoza's importance: his most radical ideas have reinvigorated contemporary metaphysics, and he is recognised as a brilliant theorist of emotion and embodiment. In many intellectual contexts, Spinoza now rivals Kant and Descartes as both the compass and the watershed of modern philosophy.²⁸ For theologians he remains a more marginal figure, yet he brings to theology both critical and constructive insights that should not be ignored. The *Ethics* articulates a philosophy of being-in-God that does not require the conceptual architecture of a pre-modern age. It thus shows theologians that they need not choose between seeing human beings (and nature as a whole) as grounded in God, and inhabiting the world explored by their scientific colleagues. For while the *Ethics* anticipates the critiques of modernity voiced by many humanities scholars—and not least by theologians—it refuses to indulge in nostalgia for a bygone cosmology. For this reason, it equips us philosophically to confront specifically modern issues, such as religious diversity, nihilism, and ecological collapse. It also outlines a compelling philosophy of religious life, rooted in Spinoza's principle of being-in-God: a philosophy of desire, affect and practice; of restlessness and rest; of living well and facing death. This is not to suggest that theologians will find only a mirror of their own views in the *Ethics*: like any readers, they can expect to have some of their commitments and assumptions challenged. But they may find Spinoza's alternative modernity surprisingly conducive to their sense of the proper orientation of a human life.



When seventeenth-century readers accused Spinoza of atheism, they usually meant that he challenged doctrinal orthodoxy, particularly on moral issues, and not that he denied God's existence. However, when

contemporary scholars interpret Spinoza as an atheist, they are concerned chiefly with his metaphysical position.²⁹ Given Spinoza's extensive treatment of God's existence, nature and productive power in Part One of the *Ethics*, entitled *De Deo* (On God)—and his insistence in Part Five that human 'blessedness' consists in knowledge and love of God—any argument that attributes to Spinoza the kind of atheism espoused by many moderns can proceed only by reading the text with a strategically suspicious eye. Some such interpreters insist that Spinoza was deceiving his readers about what he really thought to keep himself out of trouble. Others argue that his concept of God is so vacuous that he might as well not have used the word *Deus*—and, given that he did use this word, he must have done so for purely pragmatic purposes.³⁰

These kinds of argument tend to delve behind the text to access the author's intentions, even to unmask his 'real views'. This is a rather questionable enterprise, and I want to approach the *Ethics* as something more than a representation, more or less trustworthy and sincere, of its author's ideas—for the *Ethics* is also a literary work of art, and a philosophical instrument, that is designed to have certain cognitive and ethical effects on its readers. At the same time, we should avoid overlooking the author, either on account of a structuralist literary theory, or as a consequence of imagining that philosophical texts are merely vehicles for the arguments to be elicited or reconstructed from them. To overlook Spinoza himself would risk abstracting the text from the work that produced and shaped it: the durational, devotional labour of studying, thinking, writing and rewriting over the days, weeks, months, years of its author's remarkable life. Reading the *Ethics* requires us to hold these concerns in delicate balance. While we are letting the text speak for itself—rather than treating it as a window onto Spinoza's hidden intentions, or reading it through the lens of those imagined intentions—we want to do so in a way that does not estrange the product from the means of its production.

With these methodological issues in mind, there are at least two good reasons to challenge the view that Spinoza was a covert atheist. First, the suspicious reading cannot be proven correct or incorrect, leaving an undecidable question: what if Spinoza *did* mean everything that he said about God? And second, regardless of whether or not he meant it sincerely and unequivocally, what kind of religion emerges from the *Ethics* itself? If we simply dismiss these questions, we risk overlooking the theological issues that are quite palpably addressed in the text.

Instead of a hermeneutic of suspicion, I propose a hermeneutic of credulity.³¹ Let's accept what the text says, and let's assume its author's sincerity, unless his works themselves demand otherwise. This interpretative strategy does not deny the possibility that Spinoza was deceiving his readers, to some undetermined (and indeterminable) extent, but it does not pursue this line of argument. It certainly does not deny that Spinoza is a subtle writer, capable of irony and rhetorical sophistication.³² Indeed, we must acknowledge the possibility that the *Ethics* is positively, irresolvably ambiguous, lending itself to two equally plausible, equally coherent interpretations: *either* as a religious philosophy *or* as a secular philosophy. Perhaps Spinoza's famous phrase *Deus sive Natura*, 'God or Nature', signals precisely this ambiguity—not a problem to be solved, a matter to be decided, but an affirmative gesture that opens up the concept of God beyond some of its traditional connotations, turning it into a productive question rather than a divisive dogma.

It is worth considering that a willingness to abide with and explore ambiguity may be one distinctive feature of a religious reading of the *Ethics*. What if ambiguity *must* belong to any human conception of God? A long tradition of apophatic theology—which denies that God can be fully defined or grasped—suggests that God is neither a thing (and so neither an object nor a subject), nor nothing. How, then, should we expect such a God to show up to mark, unambiguously, the difference between a religious worldview and a secular one? It is not as if a religiously conceived universe contains one extra item, which distinguishes it from the atheistically conceived universe.³³

Reading and re-reading the *Ethics* with the question of religion in mind, we find ourselves drawn into a circular path of thinking. Reading Part One, we ask whether the concept of God outlined there is religious; in order to answer this, we turn to Parts Four and Five to find out how this conception of God figures in Spinoza's account of our highest good and our ethical life. There we read that our highest good consists in knowledge and love of God. To what extent does this signify something religious? It depends on what Spinoza means by God, which takes us back to Part One. Following this theoretical circle does not seem to draw us any nearer to an answer. I went around it several times, rather confusedly, before I recalled Kierkegaard's insight that religiousness must be a matter of *how*, rather than *what*, and that this *how* is located in a human being's 'inwardness'. This immediately brings us closer to Spinoza's conception of religion as a kind of virtue, and begins to disentangle us from the objectifying, speculative notion of religion which Kierkegaard was explicitly resisting in the nineteenth century—and which Spinoza was confronting as it crystallised during his own lifetime.³⁴ As readers of Spinoza, we must exercise caution in

objectifying *his* religion, and even in objectifying the forms of religion he reflected on and criticised.

All this raises questions about *how* we move into and through the interpretative circle of the *Ethics*: how we read the text, how we interpret its philosophical gestures—and how we might appropriate and live out Spinoza's ideas once we have interpreted them. Grasping Spinoza's religion is a question of how we understand 'God', and how we understand ourselves and others as 'in God'; it is a question of how we think, feel and act, and how we orient and order our desire. It may be frustrating to find that Spinoza leaves these questions open for us, but it might turn out to be thought provoking, liberating and also peculiarly binding to spend time in this open space. Even granting the legitimacy of a suspicious, atheist reading of the *Ethics*, a credulous religious reading will draw out aspects of Spinoza's thought that would otherwise be occluded. This promises to enrich our understanding of the text and expand its semantic range.



To what extent can we situate Spinoza's philosophy within a recognisably religious tradition? The autobiographical reflections which begin his early *Treatise on the Emendation of the Intellect*, discussed in my first chapter, call to mind similar remarks in Descartes's *Meditations* and *Discourse on Method*. These works bear witness to the intellectual eclecticism of the seventeenth century: they reveal the influence of Ignatian spiritual exercises of self-examination and mental purification which Descartes encountered in his intellectual formation, alongside Stoic texts recovered during the Renaissance and widely disseminated in early modern Europe.³⁵ Spinoza's own formation included at least traces of these influences, since after his excommunication in 1656 he studied with Franciscus van den Enden, a poet, art dealer and humanist philosopher who had spent fourteen years as a Jesuit novice before being dismissed from the order in 1633. Prior to 1656, Spinoza's intellectual and spiritual formation was, of course, intensely Jewish.

There is no doubt that Spinoza's philosophy developed in dialogue with both Judaism and Christianity. His critique of religion in the *Theologico-Political Treatise* is aimed at these two traditions, but he also drew in constructive ways on their scriptural and philosophical resources. According to Warren Zev Harvey, Spinoza anticipated the twentieth-century concept of a 'Judeo-Christian tradition' and held that 'Christianity cannot be understood apart from the Hebrew or Jewish tradition'; conversely, he grew up in a Jewish community shaped by complex relations to Christianity.³⁶ Spinoza cited the New Testament writings of Paul, a Jewish Christian, in support of his own claim that 'God is the God of all nations'.³⁷ Nevertheless, the specialised character of modern scholarship tends more to separation than to integration, and some scholars have situated Spinoza in an exclusively Jewish intellectual context, identifying Maimonides in particular as both an influence and an opponent.³⁸ Fewer have explored Spinoza's engagement with Christian thought, and those who do so have tended to focus on the *Theologico-Political Treatise* rather than the *Ethics*, and therefore on political and historical issues rather than ontological and existential questions.³⁹ As Spinoza's biographer Steven Nadler has argued, 'there is no reason not to be ecumenical here. There are many contexts required for the interpretation of Spinoza's thought, as well as his influence. Research into Spinoza's intellectual sources can only benefit from looking at the variety of backgrounds that make him and his thought so fascinating.'⁴⁰

Some of the chapters in this book seek to supplement the extensive literature on Spinoza's critical and constructive engagements with Judaism by exploring how the theological interventions of the *Ethics* come into focus within a broadly Christian milieu. While acknowledging Spinoza's deep debt to Jewish texts and practices of reading, we can find good reasons for locating the *Ethics* within the Latinate lineage of Christian thought. After he left his Jewish community, he pursued his intellectual work in this Christian context. Writing his most significant works in Latin—the literary language of Augustine, Aquinas and Calvin—he situated his philosophy in the rich intertextuality of western Christianity. His critique of superstitious religion was aimed particularly at the Calvinist doctrines and policies of the Dutch Reformed Church, while his metaphysics developed in opposition to the ambiguously Christian philosophy of Descartes, which was shaped by Catholic scholasticism even as it sought to move beyond it. In Leiden, Spinoza encountered the Protestant neo-scholasticism of Francis Burgersdijck and Adriaan Heereboord.⁴¹ Spinoza's neighbours, friends and correspondents were Christians: some Protestants, some Catholics, others of a nonconformist bent.⁴² In his *Theologico-Political Treatise* he approached what Christians call 'the Bible' as a complete text, comprising the Hebrew Scriptures and the New Testament, and though he read these scriptures with a precociously critical eye he quoted approvingly, if very selectively, from the letters of Paul and John. He owned several books on Christian theology and ecclesial history, by authors such as Augustine, Calvin and Hugo Grotius.⁴³ He commented on Christian teachings about the Incarnation, the

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He felt so strong an inclination to enquire after truth, that he renounced the world in a manner, the better to succeed in that enquiry. Not contented to free himself from all manner of business, he also left Amsterdam, because the visits of his friends too much interrupted his speculations, and retired into the country, where he meditated without any hindrance, and made Microscopes and Telescopes. He was so well pleased with meditating, and putting his meditations into order, and communicating them to his friends, that he spent very little time in any recreation, and was sometimes three whole months without stepping out of doors.

Though he lived a very retired life, his name and his reputation flew everywhere. Free-thinkers resorted to him from all parts. The Palatine court desired to have him, and offered him a professorship of Philosophy at Heidelberg. But he refused it, as being little consistent with his great desire of inquiring into truth without any interruption.¹

Pierre Bayle wrote this description of Spinoza around 1700, two decades after the philosopher's death in 1677. The passage begins and ends with his longing for truth, which brought him fame yet caused him to retreat from the world. Bayle tells us very little here about what Spinoza was actually doing. We learn what he was resolutely *not* doing: living in a city, receiving visits, going out, taking up a professorship. Instead, he was 'meditating' and 'enquiring'. But what did this task consist in? Was Spinoza just sitting there, in his quiet, modest rooms? If a human being has a 'great desire for truth', how does he follow this desire?

Perhaps with this deep, urgent question hanging in the air, Bayle was as interested in Spinoza's life as in his unorthodox philosophical views. The biographical synopsis in Bayle's entry on Spinoza in his monumental *Dictionnaire historique et critique* includes some dramatic turning-points: an affecting encounter with a 'young woman who taught Spinoza Latin'; the *cherem*, or ban, imposed by Amsterdam's Jewish community in 1656, when Spinoza was twenty-three; an assassination attempt. Yet Bayle seems more fascinated by the contradiction between Spinoza's reputation as a peace-loving, righteous man, and the 'monstrous scheme' contained in the philosopher's works. He is especially indignant about 'the horrid ideas which Spinoza gives us of God', and finds it 'strange' that 'those who were acquainted with him ... agree in saying, that he was a man of a social disposition, affable, honest, obliging, and very regular in his morals'. But after all, Bayle adds, 'we ought not to be more surprised at it, than to see people who live an irregular life, though they are fully persuaded of the truth of the Gospel'.²

Bayle denounced the 'Atheism' he discerned in Spinoza's *Theologico-Political Treatise*—'a pernicious and execrable book'—and *Opera posthuma* (1677), which included the *Ethics*.³ Yet he also found in these works echoes of various religious teachings: Persian 'sufism' and 'cabalism'; some ancient Indian doctrines; the contemplative practices of a Chinese sect named *Foe Kiao*, founded around the same time as Christianity. Bayle explained that these Chinese 'quietists' practised extreme stillness: 'It was not sufficient to continue several hours without any motion of the body; the soul must likewise be immoveable, and lose its thought.' The *Foe Kiao* believed that 'after a man has arrived at the state of quietude, he may follow the ordinary course of life outwardly, and teach others the commonly received doctrine. It is only in private and inwardly that he ought to practise the contemplative exercise of Beatitude.'⁴ Spinoza, too, lived harmoniously amongst his ordinary Christian neighbours, and encouraged them to abide by 'the commonly received doctrine'—and Bayle may well have wondered whether this notorious philosopher's predilection for a quiet life had anything in common with the spiritual exercises of these exotic mystics.

The first full biography of Spinoza was published in 1706 by Johannes Colerus, a Lutheran minister of the parish in the Hague where Spinoza spent his last seven years. Colerus moved to the parish in the 1690s,

and never met Spinoza. He heard about him from several acquaintances, including his former landlady, who remembered him fondly:

If he was very frugal in his way of living, his Conversation was also very sweet and easy.... He was, besides, very courteous and obliging, he would very often discourse with his Landlady, especially when she lay in, and with the people of the House, when they happened to be sick or afflicted; he never failed then to comfort them, and exhort them to bear with Patience those Evils, which God assigned to them as a lot. He put the Children in mind of going often to Church, and taught them to be obedient and dutiful to their Parents. When the People of the House came from Church, he would often ask them what they had learned, and what they could remember of the Sermon. He had a great esteem for Dr. Cordes, my Predecessor; who was a learned and good natured Man, and of an exemplary Life, which gave occasion to Spinoza to praise him very often. Nay, he went sometimes to hear him preach, and he esteemed particularly his learned way of explaining the Scripture, and the solid applications he made of it. He advised at the same time his Landlord and the People of the House, not to miss any Sermon of so excellent a Preacher.

It happened one day, that his Landlady asked him, whether he believed, she could be saved in the religion she professed: He answered, *Your religion is a good one, you need not look for another, nor doubt that you may be saved in it, provided, whilst you apply yourself to Piety, you live at the same time a peaceable and quiet Life.*

When he stayed at home, he was troublesome to no Body; he spent the greatest part of his time quietly in his own Chamber. When he happened to be tired by having applied himself too much to his Philosophical Meditations, he went downstairs to refresh himself, and discoursed with the people of the House about any thing, that might afford Matter for an ordinary Conversation, and even about trifles. He also took pleasure in smoking a Pipe of Tobacco.⁵

Colerus, like Bayle, describes a man who spent most of his time ‘quietly in his own Chamber’, devoted to his ‘Philosophical Meditations’. Though Spinoza seemed to move easily between these solitary meditations and commonplace social intercourse, Colerus also suggests that he was unworldly, caring little for external signs of success and status. He was not only ‘frugal’, but scruffy: ‘As for his clothes, he was very careless of them.... One of the most eminent Councillors of State went to see him, and found him in a very slovenly Morning-Gown, whereupon the Councillor blamed him for it, and offered him another. Spinoza answered him, that a Man was never the better for having a finer Gown. To which he added, *It is unreasonable to wrap up things of little or no value in a precious Cover.*’⁶

More recent biographers have shown that there was a worldly side to Spinoza: while he lived in Rijnsburg he met frequently with several close friends, and often travelled to neighbouring cities; as a young man he was fond of the theatre.⁷ Perhaps he became single-minded only during his last years, when he wanted to secure his reputation by completing the *Ethics*.

The modern critical eye looks unkindly on naivety, and it would no doubt be naive to treat early sources like Bayle and Colerus as authoritative because of their proximity to people who knew Spinoza personally. But it would also be unwise to dismiss the questions raised by their accounts of Spinoza’s way of life—questions that are particularly pertinent to a philosopher who gave the title of *Ethica* to his great work, the fruit of twenty years of intellectual labour. All those hours spent ‘meditating’—whatever this means—were, to state the obvious, part of Spinoza’s life: he chose to spend most of his time on philosophy and organised the rest of his life around this occupation. We can treat the literary portraits by Colerus and Bayle as an invitation to consider the ascetic, contemplative and devotional elements within Spinoza’s philosophical labour.



Devotion need not be an expression of blind faith. It can be animated by desire blended with cognition: in the first place, recognition of a deep, lasting value and importance that is non-negotiable, irreplaceable, perhaps even unconditional. When we are devoted to something, we give ourselves—our time, our attention, our resources—to it freely, though also with a feeling that this is something we *must* attend to. Devotion apprehends its object as necessary: not logically necessary, nor causally necessary, but spiritually necessary.⁸

This is ‘a necessity that we feel, that we undergo’, as Étienne Souriau put it in his remarkable 1956 lecture ‘On the Mode of Existence of the Work to be Made [*oeuvre à faire*]’.⁹ Its apprehension is not merely theoretical, but entails a repeated response, is moved to express itself again and again. Though devotion