

## *Theological-Political Treatise*

Benedict de Spinoza was born on 24 November 1632, to a Jewish community in Amsterdam. Spinoza was an intellectually gifted youth that excelled at the Talmud Torah school, but, contrary to many rumors, he did not study to be a rabbi. In early 1649, his older brother Isaac, who had been helping his father run the family business, died and Spinoza had to quit his studies to take his place in the business. He was then 16 years old.

However, three years later when his younger brother was able to join the business, he said, “That experience has taught me that all the things which regularly occur in ordinary life are empty and futile. I saw that all the things which were the cause or object of my unease had nothing of good or bad in themselves, except insofar as my mind was unmoved by them. I resolved to try to find out whether there was anything which would be the true good, capable of communicating itself, and which alone would affect the mind, whether there was something which, once found and acquired, would continuously give me the greatest joy, to eternity.” By the early to mid 1650s, Spinoza had decided that his future lay in philosophy for the search for knowledge and true happiness was not the importing of dried fruit.

Then on 27 July 1656 at the age of 23 Spinoza was banned from the Jewish community of Amsterdam with extreme prejudice. Since he had not yet published anything, nor (as far as we know) even composed any written works, we are really not certain of the cause of the banning. Spinoza never refers to this period of his life in his letters, and thus does not offer us any clues as to why he was banned. Spinoza took his expulsion in good stride. “All the better,” he said, “they do not force me to do anything that I would not have done of my own accord if I did not dread scandal. . . I gladly enter on the path that is opened for me.”

Sometime in the late 1650s, Spinoza began work on a paper on the philosophical method, called the "*Treatise on the Emendation of the Intellect*," his first original philosophical work. It was intended as the preliminary part of a larger project. In this work, Spinoza addresses some basic problems concerning the nature and varieties of knowledge and the proper means to achieving true understanding. This was all in the context of a broad conception of what constitutes "the good" for a human being. Spinoza decided in late 1660 or early 1661 to abandon this initial work altogether and start over. This time working on what would become the "*Short Treatise On God, Man and His Well-Being*." The chapters overlap with much of the material in the previous work. This treatise was published posthumously in 1677. It was published along with the "*Ethics*" and "*Tractatus Politicus*" at the instigation of some of his philosophical circle of friends.

Spinoza left the family business sometime between the years 1656 and 1661. By 1661, Spinoza had made acquaintances among members of the Collegiants, a religious group in Amsterdam that resisted any formal creed or practice (this group later was called the Quakers). In 1661, Spinoza moved from Amsterdam to Rijnsburg (ryns-berg). He was visited there by Pieter Balling one of the Collegiants shortly after his arrival. After the visit, Balling published a pamphlet entitled, "*Light on the Candlestick*." The work contains terminology that Spinoza later employed in his writings, suggesting that Spinoza helped to formulate the basic statement of Quaker doctrine, which eventually became a standard piece of Quaker theology. Later while in Rijnsburg (ryns-berg), Henry Oldenburg visited him. Oldenburg later became secretary of the British Royal Society. As a result of this visit, Oldenburg initiated a correspondence that lasted until Spinoza's death. He regarded Spinoza as a kindred spirit and was eager to promote

Spinoza's ideas among the radical Protestants with whom he associated in England.

In 1662, he worked on two pieces of literature, "*Short Treatise on God, Man and His Well-Being.*" The Short Treatise was a relatively brief work on the order of 125 pages in print and it was Spinoza's only work in Dutch. It presented Spinoza's early philosophical ideas in a concise form written in conventional narrative style and served as a precursor to his later work, "*Ethics.*" This work was published after his death in 1677. Then Spinoza started on "*Ethics.*" He developed the work over several years, revising and refining his ideas before finally completing it around 1675. Despite completing the text, Spinoza chose not to publish it during his lifetime due to concerns about the controversial nature of its content and the state of the politics in the Republic. *Ethics* was eventually published posthumously in late 1677.

Although living in Rijnsburg (ryns-berg) Spinoza continued to correspond with his philosophical circle of friends in Amsterdam. In Late 1662 they requested that he provide them an accessible introduction to Descartes philosophy because they considered him an expert. He acceded to their request and in 1663 he provided "*Parts One and Two of the Principles of Philosophy of Rene Descartes Demonstrated According to the Geometric Method.*" In these works Spinoza presented the metaphysics, epistemology, and basic Physics of Descartes's philosophy in a geometric format. By this point in time, he had decided that the Euclidian format was the best way to present these parts of philosophy.

At the same time Spinoza was continuing to write the "*Ethics*" and would do so into the summer of 1665. By that time, he had completed what he considered a substantial draft and was allowing a few selected friends to

read it in both the Latin and Dutch languages. It appeared that Spinoza was considering its publication in the near future when the political climate in Amsterdam began to look dangerous for its publication.

Adriaan Koerbagh a 35 year old lawyer and medical doctor was a member of the philosophical circle in Amsterdam with Spinoza. The members of that circle discussed Spinoza's writings in the early manuscripts of the *Ethics*. Koerbagh and Spinoza were good friends with shared perspectives on much of their religious and political views. Koerbagh published two books in Dutch that were very critical of the Calvinist protestantism that they considered blasphemous.

The Dutch language made Koerbagh books readily accessible to the general public and Even though the United Provinces had a policy of broad toleration towards religious practices, Koerbagh, in the minds of the government officials, had gone too far with his statements. The myth of the Dutch Golden Age as an era of openness for all Faiths may have been an exaggeration, but it was nonetheless true that the Republic was an unusual model of religious toleration in that period. Article thirty of the Union of Utrecht (1579), which served as a kind of founding constitution for the Republic, explicitly stated that "every individual should remain free in his religion, and no man should be molested or questioned on the subject of divine worship."

Koerbagh, however, was arrested for his publications. After a trial, he was convicted and sentenced to 10 years in prison, followed by banishment from Amsterdam for an additional 10 years. After two months in jail, he died. Spinoza saw Koerbagh's incarceration and death as a betrayal of the ideals of Amsterdam and the principles of the Dutch Republic and he reconsidered the publication of the "*Ethics*" at that time for his own safety.

In the Fall of 1665, Spinoza returned to an older project one, believed to deal with theological and political questions that had already occupied his attention in the late 1650s. He had already written an early draft of some of the material that would appear in what he was now calling the "*Theological-Political Treatise*" (TTP). The TTP intended readership was one that included both the political leadership to which it was to make a direct appeal. He was also appealing to the religious dissenters and progressive intellectuals, and the actual and potential philosophers who would benefit from the success of the appeal.

Spinoza did not fully trust the ordinary public, such as the retail merchants, laborers, artisans, and tavern keepers who made up a majority of the population of Amsterdam. "I know that the masses can no more be freed from their superstition than from their fears. I know that they are unchanging in the obstinacy that they are not guided by reason, and that their praise and blame is at the mercy of impulse. Therefore, I do not invite the common people to read this work, nor all those who are victims of the same emotional attitudes. Indeed, I would prefer that they disregard this book completely rather than make themselves a nuisance by misinterpreting it after their wont."

The TTP would be written in Latin and even those few of the general public who could read the TTP would not be able to make a balanced judgement of it. His intended audience would range from atheists to pious believers and from democrats to monarchists. It was, above all, a Christian audience. Least he alienate any segment of the intended audience, he had to be careful about how he made his points in a work intended to effect a radical rethinking and bring about serious theological-political change.

In essence, the TTP was to address a serious problem for the European rulers in the seventeenth century. The rulers sought to use religion in the form of an official church to control their regimes, while at the same time the Reformation had introduced greater religious diversity and division among their populations. Some of the secular institutions in the Netherlands and England, for instance, were beginning to grow suspicious of religious encroachment on civic life. On the other hand religious authority now feared being marginalized by an increasingly independent political authority. Should the church rule the state or the state rule the church? Or should one have nothing whatsoever to do with the other? Into these waters Spinoza stepped without a life raft.

The TTP opens with a brief natural history of religion and an account of the psychology of traditional theism. Religion as we know it, Spinoza argues in the work's preface, is nothing more than organized superstition. Power hungry ecclesiastics prey on the naïveté of citizens, taking advantage of their hopes and fears in the face of the vicissitudes of nature and the unpredictability of fortune to gain control over their beliefs and their daily lives. The preface of the TTP makes clear Spinoza's contempt for sectarian religions and opens the way for his reductive and naturalistic explanations of central doctrinal and historical elements of the Judeo-Christian traditions.

In the area of biblical interpretation, Spinoza dismisses the idea of scripture as a divine document, instead viewing it as a historical one and finding its message in the spirit that pervades it: that God exists, causes everything, and people should treat each other as they wish to be treated. He said further that the Bible is not literally the word of God but rather a work of human literature, that "true religion" has nothing to do with theology, liturgical ceremonies, or sectarian dogma but consists only in a simple moral rule: love your neighbor. He also insisted that "divine providence" is

nothing but the laws of nature, that miracles (understood as violation of the natural order of things) are impossible, and belief in them is only an expression of our ignorance of the true causes of phenomena. The prophets of the Old Testament were simply ordinary individuals, who while ethically superior, happened also to have particularly vivid imaginations.

In light of the reason that Spinoza was writing the TTP, why was he attacking the Bible? In his view, the Calvinist clergy were meddling in public affairs and in the lives of the private citizens. They claimed that their right to do so was defined by the word of God and pointed to the Bible as their source of their moral, social, and even political authority. In addition, they said that they were the only true and qualified interpreters of scripture and they read it to suit their purposes. Their chief aim is to compel others to think as they do, while using religion as a pretext. They do this primarily by exaggerating them with impressive ceremonies. By showing that the Bible is not in fact, the work of a supernatural God, Spinoza hoped to undercut ecclesiastic influence in politics.

Spinoza says that people who are in a mode of fear are prey to superstition and this is the region of spurious religious reverence. But, as soon as things start going well again, people will typically cease those practices that they had believed would bring them better circumstances. Those who have the most to gain from the continuation of such superstitious practices, such as members of the church, therefore take great pains to control their thoughts about the superstitions.

In the political portion of the TTP, first he advocates for broad toleration of religions that are subordinate to the state. Second, he supports complete freedom of thought and speech, arguing people should be allowed to express their thoughts freely as long as it doesn't interfere with the state. He was

also supportive of a scientific humanist view of government and of the neutrality of the state in matters of belief. His view was that philosophical truth and religious faith have nothing in common with one another, and one must not serve as the rule of the other.

The *Treatise*, in other words, is an extended argument for freedom of thought and expression in the modern state, as well as for the separation of philosophy and religion as a means to such liberty. The outcome of philosophy is truth and knowledge, the outcome of religion is pious behavior or obedience. Reason, therefore, must not be the handmaiden of theology, or vice versa, and religion oversteps its bounds when it tries to limit intellectual inquiry and the free expression of ideas.

He continued to work on the TTP and it was finally ready for publication in 1670. The TTP was an astoundingly bold and radical work which he had to publish anonymously, with a false publisher, and false city on the cover. It generated an enormous outcry in the Netherlands and elsewhere. The *Treatise* was also a very angry work. The decision to publish it anonymously sooner rather than later came from the personal loss of Adriaan Koerbagh that Spinoza had suffered. It represented not only the loss of a close friend, but also a representation of a violation of the highest principles of freedom and toleration to which his homeland was dedicated. Following the publication he returned to the completion of his major work *Ethics*.

### **Digression to Today**

Since Spinoza highlights a problem that I am specifically interested in, I would like to digress to a short piece that I have written in a book that I am currently finishing. I would like to take a look now at a modern version of the effects of religion in a democracy, in a country that officially expresses

freedom of religion the US. At the time of the writing of the Constitution, there was a minority of delegates that thought that a national religion should be adopted to make sure that those who were in control of the country and the voters would have the proper moral standards to vote properly. To support this idea, they proposed that they adopt a national religion and they proposed a Protestant form would be a good choice. But, many who had come to this country were facing religious persecution from where they came from and were here specifically to avoid being limited in their choice of religious practices. Therefore selecting a single form of religion for the whole country would be a problem. Instead, the delegates settled for the compromise of freedom of religion for all religions and now, let's look at how it turned out after 250 years of operation.

The US constitution embraces both a secular democratic government and freedom of religion. A minimal assumption about a *democratic government*, shared by many, is that the term properly applies only where political offices are held on the basis of free elections, that is, the ballot box determines the will of the people. An important assumption for the question of how a given religion is related to democracy is that a religion has an ethic: a set of standards indicating how one is to live while a member of the religion.

According to John Stuart Mill (English Philosopher: 1806 - 1873) there is one very simple principle that entitles a government to interfere with the liberty of any member of a society: to prevent harm to others, (from “*On Liberty*,” 1859). This principle is referred to as the harm principle and is one of the most influential explanations on the limits of individual action by a government against an individual. On the other hand, there are also accepted principles that define how a government treats religious liberty. There are three widely accepted principles that define the relationship

between a government and the religion: the liberty, equality, and neutrality principles. All three of these are included in the US Constitution. According to the *liberty principle*: *A government should protect religious liberty to the highest level possible within a reasonable interpretation of the harm principle*. Then there is the *equality principle*: *This principle requires that the government must treat different religions equally*. And, finally, there is the *neutrality principle*: *This requires that the government should not prefer the religious over the secular and vice versa*.

Freedom of religion means that there may be, and in fact are, multiple religious ethics among the citizens of the country. The US constitution also makes it clear that the government cannot favor one religion over another, it must remain neutral relative to all religions. It is also true that protections of individual liberty and the general benefits of citizenship should be universal for both the religious and the nonreligious alike. The relationship between religion and democracy is important because apparent conflicts are unavoidable with freedom of religion and the law of the land. In a democracy, one may hold views of our own, regardless of whether they come from a moral sense that apparently bespeaks a conscience, a coolly reasoned position, a persisting intuition, or a religious view held in deference to authority. Democracy does, however, provide limits on what we may do, or be excused from doing, on the basis of our views. This brings us to the delicate matter of the limits of liberty in regard to all religions in democratic societies that have the concept of freedom of religion.

The three Abrahamic religions (Christianity, Islam, and Judaism) of which significant numbers of each residing in the US are highly variable in their stance towards a non-theocratic government such as found in the US, because their ethics may conflict in some ways with both the constitution and each other. These three religions collectively embody standards of

conduct and some prohibitions that cannot be sanctioned by a democratic government that supports a “freedom of religion” and maintain the three principles for religious freedom. What about the other, smaller sects that have residents in the US? Do they have to be considered also? Religious liberty must be constrained in certain cases when any of the democratic principles are violated. *Unless the ethics of all the various religions in the US are very well integrated, the concept of freedom of religion in the Constitution may actually mean no or a very limited number of religions.* I don’t think that the writers of the Constitution had that in mind at all.

In a secular society, religiously based opposition to the civil rights of, for instance, people of non-white skin color, gay people, trans gender people, and supporters of abortion rights are often in conflict to the neutrality principle. One can imagine an exception to religious liberty if a particular religion and most of its followers are committed to violent acts against other citizens or overthrowing the basic political system to support their specific religious ethic. What about misogyny? Are women truly equal as citizens of a democracy, or are their rights defined only by the ethic of one or more religious beliefs? What if differences in religious ethics create conflicts between two or more religions and the courts settle the conflicts and the losing religion claims that the equality principle has been violated? What about the inclusion of “Under God” in the pledge of Allegiance, does that favor the religious as opposed to those with a secular viewpoint? Is it a violation of the neutrality principle when it is required by an alien citizen to recite the pledge before becoming a citizen of the US? These are just small samples of the possible conflicts between democracy and multiple religions within a democracy (i.e., freedom of religion).

At the current time, the Religious right is concerned that they are not being treated fairly by the US government. Among several other complaints,

segregation is one of the specific subjects of their concern. A significant segment of the religious right believe that they can conduct private schools in which the students of the school will be all white. Because they are a religious organization, they also claim the right of a non-profit to be tax exempt, but the Internal Revenue Service says that any form of segregation is against the law. The courts uphold the non-segregation law and then, as a result, they lost their tax exempt status. The Religious right claim that their freedom of religion is being violated. But religions are not allowed exceptions to the law. For another example, the honor killings that are allowed in some instances in the Islamic religion would certainly not be allowed in the US.

### **Back to Spinoza's Time**

I would like to point out how exceptional Spinoza was. First, he lived only 44 years and he probably died of a respiratory problem by inhaling the glass dust from the grinding lens which he did for a living. He apparently learned to grind lenses between the time that he was banned from the Jewish community and the time he moved to Rijnsburg (ryns-berg) Spinoza was known as an authority on optics, and scientist Ehrenfried Walter von Tschirnhaus (churn-haus) sent him an optical tract to review.

Notice also, he really didn't really get started on his philosophic writing until he was banned from the Jewish community. At the time that he was banned, he had already lived more than half his life. During the time that he was writing he also learned to read and write in Latin, Greek and Dutch in addition to the Hebrew and Spanish languages he grew up with.

After Spinoza died, his circle of philosophical friends collected his unpublished works for publication. They also destroyed much of the communications with many of the others which had communicated with

Spinoza to protect them from the repercussions that might occur from his writings. Because of this we lost valuable information of the information exchanges between other philosophers and scientists that he communicated with, such as Rabbi Mortera, Henry Oldenburg, Leibniz, Robert Boyle, and Ehrenfried Walter von Tschirnhaus (churn-haus) among others.

He was well respected among his peers he was offered a professorship at the University of Heidelberg in 1673. However, he declined the offer because he was concerned that it would impinge on his academic freedom to teach as he wished. He also considered an invitation from Louis II to move to Paris in the same year, but ultimately decided against it fearing that Louis lacked sufficient power to shield him from bigots in France.

Spinoza's "Theological-Political Treatise" was referred to as a "book forged in hell" by Jacob Thomasius, a German philosopher and theologian. This characterization reflects the intense controversy and hostility that Spinoza's work generated among religious and philosophical circles of his time due to its critical examination of religious texts and advocacy for the separation of philosophy and theology. The most number of objections to the TTP was the statement that miracles are impossible and belief in them is only an expression of our ignorance.

## **Thoughts**

Now let's go back and consider the problem that Spinoza faced about the interaction of religion and the governing powers of the state and the current state of our country in the light of the efforts of the Religious right to return the country to 'family values'. What does freedom of religion really mean? Can freedom of religion and democracy really coexist?

## Timeline of Spinoza

	Year	Age
Born 24 November	1632	
Started to Run family business	1649	16
Banned from Jewish community 27 July	1656	23
<i>Treatise on the Emendation of the Intellect</i>	1661	29
Started writing <i>Ethics</i>	1662	30
<i>Short Treatise on God, Man and His Well-Being</i>	1662	30
Two Volumes <i>Renati des Cartes Principiorum Philosophiae</i>	1663	31
Started writing <i>Theological-Political Treatise (TTP)</i>	1665	33
Adriaan Koerbagh died in prison	1669	37
Published <i>TTP</i> Anonymously	1670	38
Spinoza died 21 Feb	1677	44

The following were published late 1677

*Treatise on the Emendation of the Intellect,*  
*On God, Man and His Well-Being,*  
*Ethics*

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