



Spinoza's Critique of Prejudices and Miracles as a Basis for establishing the *vera religio*: a rugged Trail¹

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1. Genesis and Critique of Superstition

«Spinoza has the greatest possible scorn for what he considered superstition. Uncharacteristically, he reached for the blunderbuss rather than the scalpel».² With this statement Richard Mason perfectly sums up Spinoza's radical analysis of superstition. Superstition is diametrically opposed to the positive concept of religion that Spinoza affirms. The distinction is clarified in a letter to Oldenburg: «I will here only add, that I make this chief distinction between religion and superstition, that the latter is founded on ignorance, the former on knowledge».³ From ignorance to the belief in miracles it is one small step:

I have taken miracles and ignorance as equivalent terms, because those, who Endeavour to establish God's existence and the truth of religion by means of miracles, seek to prove the obscure by what is more obscure and completely unknown, thus introducing a new sort of argument, the reduction, not to the impossible, as the phrase is, but to ignorance.⁴

Religious criticism, an essential aspect of the modern age, finds a far-from-marginal place in Spinoza's philosophy, since in parallel with the "emendation of the intellect", Spinoza undertakes the "emendation of the religion" that, reduced to superstition, has lost its true meaning, causing catastrophic damage (strife, persecution and disorders) and the disempowerment of man.

There is a close link between superstition and religious prejudices. The latter are an integral part of the former and consist of largely pervasive ways of thinking, deeply rooted in the human mind, or rather, in human imagination.

In the Appendix to Part I of *Ethics* Spinoza outlines the origins of religious prejudice. Finding in the world many appropriate means to achieve their purpose, but knowing they have not prepared them, men conclude that there must be someone else who has prepared them for their benefit. This idea, a figment of imagination, leads to the belief that there is «some ruler or rulers of the universe endowed with human

¹ Unless otherwise noted, all references to Spinoza's *Ethica*, his early works, and the letters are to Samuel Shirley's translation: *Spinoza: Complete works*, Hackett, Indianapolis, 2002. For Spinoza's Correspondence I have also consulted Peter Millican's translation, available on line: <http://www.earlymoderntexts.com/assets/pdfs/spinoza1661.pdf>. For *Ethics'* abbreviations, I follow standard citation procedures: *Ethics* [E], proposition [P], Axiom [A], Definition [D], Corollary [C], Scholium [S], Lemma [L], Demonstration [DE], Appendix [App]. In references to the *Tractatus theologico-politicus* (TTP) I have used Michael Silverthorne and Jonathan Israel's translation: *Spinoza, Theologico-Political Treatise*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2007. For all passages of the Latin text of Spinoza I have relied on Gebhardt's critical edition, *Spinoza, Opera*, 4 vols., Carl Winter Verlag, Heidelberg, 1925; abbr. G. In order to facilitate the reading and the citations of TTP, I have put the chapter and the section (not present in the Latin text) in the notes in round brackets, according to the Subdivision indicated by Fokke Akkerman, *Traité théologico-politique*, trans. and notes J. Lagée and P.-F. Moreau, in *Spinoza, Oeuvres*, vol. III, PUF, Paris, 1999.

² R. Mason, *The God of Spinoza: A Philosophical Study*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1997, p. 129.

³ Letter, LXXIII G.

⁴ *Ivi*, LXXV G.



freedom, who have arranged and adapted everything for human use».⁵ Men, as they do not know anything more about the nature of these rulers, «in accordance with their own nature»,⁶ have forged God in their own image and likeness: an anthropomorphic God with human feelings, who has created mankind in order to receive from him praise and honors:

Hence also it follows, that everyone thought out for himself, according to his abilities, a different way of worshipping God, so that God might love him more than his fellows, and direct the whole course of nature for the satisfaction of his blind cupidity and insatiable avarice. Thus the prejudice developed into superstition, and took deep root in the human mind.⁷

Spinoza points to the root cause of the degeneration of religion in man's illusion of being free and acting with a purpose. In this way, as the purposive-teleological mindset is the cornerstone of traditional theology, in Spinoza's philosophy the critique of religion and the anti-finalistic controversy can be seen as «two aspects of a single ideological struggle that goes from the *Theologico-Political Treatise* to the *Ethics* and viceversa, without solution of continuity».⁸ In fact, even if the concept of *religio* does not have a clear meaning in Spinoza, we may assume different levels of investigation (in the *Ethics* religion coincides with a rational way of life, based on the knowledge of God-Nature and guided by freedom from passions and autonomy of reason; in the *Tractatus*, instead, the philosopher distinguishes between a vain religion which has degenerated into superstition, reduced to outward rites and practices – *cultum externum* – and a true religion, rational, universal, common to all mankind, founded on the love of God and neighbour),⁹ one can say, as clearly shown by Nancy K. Levene, that: «Both works strive to disentangle true and false ways of understandings God, true and false ways of forming relationships, true and false ways of understanding (and thus attaining) freedom».¹⁰

Having analyzed the natural genealogy of religious superstition, Spinoza is devoted to the demonstration of its falsity. From a philosophical point of view, the notion of a God who freely requires a purpose is unacceptable, as this idea is a clear contradiction in terms, since it cancels the perfection of what the Supreme Being and Perfect should be: if God acts with a purpose, it means that he is necessarily devoid of what he desires, lacks what he seeks.¹¹ A God who seeks what he wants is an imperfect God, that is to say that it is not God.

⁵ EIApp.

⁶ *Ibid.* Spinoza refers here to the classic critique of religious anthropomorphism: «But if cows and horses and lions had hands, or could draw with their hands [i.e. the hooves/paws they do have] and could make things as men do, then horses would draw pictures of the gods looking like horses, and cows like cows, and they would make the gods' bodies similar in shape to those which they each have themselves» (Xenofane, fr. 15 DK). In a letter to Boxel (LVI G), Spinoza says: «I believe that, if a triangle could speak, it would say, in like manner, that God is eminently triangular, while a circle would say that the divine nature is eminently circular. Thus each would ascribe to God its own attributes, would assume itself to be like God».

⁷ EIApp.

⁸ Spinoza, *Etica*, trans. E. Giancotti, Editori Riuniti, Roma, 1997, p. 361, n. 108.

⁹ See M. Doueihi, *Solitudine de l'Incomparable. Augustin et Spinoza*, Édition de Seuil, Paris, 2009, p. 58.

¹⁰ N.K. Levene, *Spinoza's Revelation. Religion, Democracy and Reason*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2004, p. 16.

¹¹ It is a «topic» in the history of Philosophy. See, for instance, Plato, *Simposio* 200a, where Socrates states that men want to have only what they lack: «Not as a likelihood, said Socrates, but as a necessity, consider that the desiring subject must have desire for something it lacks, and again, no desire if it has no lack».



While in the *Ethics* the philosopher traces the genealogy of religious prejudice with the neutral and impersonal tones of a scientist, in the *Theologico-Political Treatise* he assumes a hard and polemical tone, and analyzes the psychological causes of superstition, «relics of ancient bondage»,¹² and denounces the negative effects of religious cults linked to it by a socio-political point of view. Spinoza opens the Preface of the *Treatise* noting that no one can ignore that, since «superstition is engendered, preserved, and fostered by fear»,¹³ it follows that «it [superstition] comes to all men naturally». ¹⁴ There are two immediate consequences: the first is that superstition necessarily comes in an infinite variety of forms, exhibiting fickle characteristics; the second is that superstition, like all prejudices in matter of religion, has its origin not in reason (*ratio*), but only in imagination, which is the realm of human passions, especially stemming from fear, an *affectus efficacissimus* in weakening man.¹⁵ Fear is not only a *passio*, and as such reductive of *potentia*, but it is among the most annihilating passions, which weaken *vis* and curb the expansion and accumulation of *conatus*.¹⁶

Depending on imaginative knowledge, superstition gathers strength from ignorance, a condition where there is no adequate knowledge of the events and aspects of reality (God, world, man), and this is the state of *vulgus*, always easily impressed (and scared) by what they do not know.¹⁷ And the *vulgus* is precisely the target of Spinoza's criticism.¹⁸ In fact, the *multitudo* is in a situation of helplessness, of subjection and submission to external causes, of almost total determination and heteronomy and, therefore, can be easily manipulated by the most powerful people.¹⁹

We know that, for Spinoza, impotence is closely linked to ignorance, while the most powerful and free man is the sage who, having a clear understanding of the essence of particular things and hence of

¹² TTP, Pref. (8).

¹³ Spinoza speaks of *antiquae servitutis vestigia*: *ivi*, Pref. (4).

¹⁴ *Ivi*, Pref. (5). The original Latin text is, in this case, much more expressive: «*Omnes nomine natura superstitionis esse obnoxios*».

¹⁵ See *ivi*, Pref. (5): «It [superstition] is no less inconsistent and variable than other mental hallucinations and emotional impulses, and further that it can only be maintained by hope, hatred, anger, and deceit; since it springs, not from reason, but solely from the more powerful phases of emotion». See EIAp.; EIVP8 and P14DEM. See R. Mason, *Op. cit.*, p. 132.

¹⁶ For a definition of *affectus* and *passio*, see EIIID3.

¹⁷ It is not always possible to identify *vulgus* with only the ignorant masses that represent the lower and popular classes and poor masses, because this term also includes, in a derogatory meaning: «Intellectuals and men of learning, who make up their behavior to a blind opposition to the free development of knowledge» (C. Santinelli, *Pregiudizio e superstizione. A proposito della teoria spinoziana della salvezza*, in F. Mignini (a cura di), *Dio, l'uomo, la libertà. Studi sul "Breve Trattato" di Spinoza*, Japadre, L'Aquila, 1990, pp. 393–412; cit. p. 403).

¹⁸ After the careful philological analysis of Giuseppa Saccaro Battisti [“Spinoza, l'utopia e le masse: un'analisi dei concetti di plebs, multitudo, vulgus”, *Rivista di storia della filosofia* 1 (1984): pp. 61–90; 3 (1984), pp. 453–474], a deep attention to the Spinozian notion of *multitudo* is due to Antonio Negri (*Spinoza*, DeriveApprodi, Roma, 1998); Étienne Balibar (*Spinoza et la politique*, PUF, Paris, 1985; *Spinoza: la crainte des masses. Politique et philosophie avant et après Marx*, Galilée, Paris, 1997); André Tosel (*Spinoza ou le Crépuscule de la servitude. Essai sur le "Traité théologico-politique"*, Aubier-Montaigne, Paris, 1984). In the wake of these early surveys, studies have multiplied. See, for instance: L. Bove, *La stratégie du conatus. Affirmation et résistance chez Spinoza*, Bibliothèque d'Histoire de la Philosophie, Vrin, 1996; S. Visentin, *La libertà necessaria. Teoria e pratica della democrazia in Spinoza*, ETS, Pisa, 2001, pp. 261–327; F. Del Lucchese, *Democrazia, multitudo e terzo genere di conoscenza*, in F. Del Lucchese and V. Morfino (a cura di), *Sulla scienza intuitiva di Spinoza. Ontologia, politica, estetica*, Ghibli, Milano, 2003, pp. 95–127; F. Zourabichvili, “Spinoza, le ‘vulgus’ et la psychologie sociale”, *Studia Spinoziana* 8 (1992): pp. 151–169.

¹⁹ Impotence is «man's allowing himself to be led by things which are external to himself, and to be by them determined to act in a manner demanded by the general disposition of things rather than by his own nature considered solely in itself» (EIVP37S). See also TTP Pref. (15).



God, recognizes himself as a transitory mode of substance, and tries to curb – to the best of his ability – affections and to follow only the guidance of reason, contrary to the *ignarus*, who is a slave to the power of his passions. Ordinary people, therefore, always wavering between hope and fear, have a natural predisposition to superstition. At the beginning of the *Treatise*, he writes:

Men would never be superstitious, if they could govern all their circumstances by set rules, or if they were always favoured by fortune: but being frequently driven into straits where rules are useless, and being often kept *fluctuating* pitiably between hope and fear by the uncertainty of fortune's greedily coveted favours, they are consequently, for the most part, very prone to credulity.²⁰

Everyone knows – continues the philosopher – that when men are *in rebus prosperis*, they consider themselves wise and refuse advice and remarks of any kind, on the contrary, in times of trouble they do not know where to turn and beg anyone for advice, and they are willing to follow any suggestion however absurd or silly it might be. Spinoza thus identifies the primary psychological causes of superstition that grip humans in a state of constant fluctuation in the hope and fear of things and events in the outside world, and in the immoderate desire (*sine modo*) of the uncertain goods of fortune.²¹

These powerless people, awed by the instability of fortune, take refuge in those beliefs and prejudices that can provide some security, and first of all in (false) religion. Religious superstitions are all those anthropomorphic conceptions of God that make man a slave of his own passions and forced to impotence by his own insecurities. The superstitious person, because he believes that God is humanly ambitious, is convinced that, by paying honour and devotion to him, can repair any offence and gain his benevolence to obtain favours or escape difficult situations and dangers, in so doing, he lives in an instance of «hallucination and fancy»:²² *tantum timor nomine insanire facit!*²³

Therefore, natural psychological causes (*fluctuatio animi*) and ethical and theological prejudices (finalism, human freedom, anthropomorphism) are the basis of the degeneration of true religion into vain religion, i.e into a hodgepodge of superstitions:

Thus it is brought prominently before us, that superstition's chief victims are those persons who greedily covet temporal advantages (*incerta*); they who (especially when they are in danger, and cannot help themselves) are wont with Prayers and womanish tears (*lachrimis muliebribus*) to implore help from God: upbraiding Reason as blind, ... and rejecting human wisdom as vain; but believing the phantoms of imagination, dreams, and other childish absurdities, to be the very oracles of Heaven.²⁴

Now, there is an additional step of utmost importance which must be considered. Passions are inconstant, and therefore also those exploited by governments to subjugate the masses can easily backfire against the rulers themselves. The *vulgus*, in fact, «is easily led, on the plea of religion, at one moment

²⁰ TTP, Pref. (1). On the relationship between “immoderate greed” (*cupiditas*) and “sadness” (*tristitia*) in the *Ethics* and in the *Treatise*, see N.K. Levene, *Op. cit.* p. 20 ss. On the definition of “hope” and “fear”, see EIIIP18S2.

²¹ On the concept of *fluctuatio animi* see EIIIP17S. Without getting into a topic that certainly would need to be treated with a different type of expertise, it is enough to recall that Spinoza defines the fluctuation of soul as that constitution of mind that comes with two opposites, like Love and Hate, Joy and Sadness. *Fluctuatio* is rooted in the epistemological inadequacy that characterizes all human perceptions, and appears in all respects as an emotional correlate of doubt. See also EIII59sc.

²² «*Ut omnia mentis ludibria et furoris impetus*», says Spinoza in TTP, Pref. (5).

²³ *Ivi*, Pref. (3).

²⁴ *Ibid.*



to adore its kings as gods, and anon to execrate and abjure them as humanity's common bane».²⁵ Therefore,

we may readily understand how difficult it is, to maintain in the same course men prone to every form of credulity. For, as the mass of mankind remains always at about the same pitch of misery, it never assents long to any one remedy, but is always best pleased by a novelty which has not yet proved illusive.²⁶

In order to avoid these fluctuations, society has striven to organize a comprehensive and compact system of beliefs built on theological speculation and proposed in the pomp of rituals and beautiful and attractive ceremonies ("pomp and ceremony"), "superior to every shock" and object of *summa observantia* «by the whole people».²⁷ Religion has become in the hands of theologians an *instrumentum regni* able to crystallize and make irredeemable the state of misery and ignorance of the *vulgus*, feeding incessantly on its fears and hopes, thus preventing access to a degree of knowledge and experience of reality that could undermine the allegiance of monarchists and tyrannical governments. And all this thanks to a series of prejudices that superstition is an integral part of. These prejudices are deeply rooted in the mind, and for the very reason that they originate from imagination, are particularly strong and prevent people from freely judging and proceeding to a true knowledge of things. This means that «truth and falsity imply states so being, and they imply political and social stances».²⁸ In this way, one can say: «*Nihil efficacius multitudinem regit, quam superstitio*».²⁹

Of course, Spinoza suggests it may be convenient to attribute truth and falsity to the realm of ideas alone, while attributing convention, custom and what practically works to the theologico-political realm, the realm of laws, of policy, of nation: «It's much harder to see that not only ideas do have social and political consequence. Ideas *are* social and political – they are embodied, they are made».³⁰

But if, in despotic statecraft, the supreme and essential mystery (*summum arcanum*) be to hoodwink the subjects, and to mask the fear, which keeps them clown, with the specious garb of religion, so that men may fight as bravely for slavery as for safety, [...] yet in a free state no more mischievous expedient could be planned or attempted.³¹

With the criticism of religious superstition developed in the *Treatise*, Spinoza offers the *arma rationis* by which men can defend themselves from the force of prejudice, in a perspective where knowledge and understanding are configured as the real antidote to ignorance and the fear of the unknown, radical evils both for the life of the individual and for the community.

Spinoza is convinced that we can modify this passive affective situation only if we modify our "cognitive status", that is to say our ways of representing the world and its events: living in doubt

²⁵ *Ivi*, Pref. (5).

²⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷ *Ivi*, Pref. (6). On the "double" fear "of" and "for" the *multitudo*, see É. Balibar, "Spinoza, l'anti-Orwell. La crainte des masses", *Le Temps Modernes* 470 (1985): pp. 353–398.

²⁸ N.K. Levene, *Op. cit.*, p. 17.

²⁹ TTP, Pref. (5). The citation is taken from Curzio Rufo, *Hist. Alex.*, IV, 10.

³⁰ N.K. Levene, *Op. cit.*, p. 17. This circumstance, Spinoza writes, is particularly evident in the case of the Jews: once «religion [begins] to acquire the force of law ... governments are the guardians and interpreters of religious and civil law, and they alone have the right to decide what is just and unjust, what is pious and impious» [TTP, 19 (1)].

³¹ TTP, Pref. (7).



(epistemological fluctuation), the *ignorans* is continually buffeted between hope and fear (emotional fluctuation)³² and he is easily “anesthetized” by those who promise him salvation. In this way, only the elimination of doubt and a correct knowledge of reality can prevent from falling into superstition,³³ and yet Spinoza understands that freeing religion from superstition is very difficult. This deals not only with the cultural limits of common people,³⁴ but also with the lust for power of religious leaders and with popular worship towards them.

Inquiry into the cause of this anomaly leads me unhesitatingly to ascribe it to the fact, that the ministries of the Church are regarded by the masses merely as dignities, her offices as posts of emolument—in short, popular religion may be summed up as respect for ecclesiastics.³⁵

Vulgus’ cultural limitations are responsible for corrupting religion together with the ambitions of religious leaders or theologians, who, more as *oratores* than as *ecclesiastici Doctores*, without scruples, have distorted the Scriptures (presenting their content as *profundissima mysteria*),³⁶ the thought of the Holy Spirit. Through *nova ac insolita*, they have credited “their” inventions and “their” opinions with divine authority, in this way transforming *Templum* in *Theatrum*,³⁷ *Ecclesia* in *Academia*, *Religio* in *scientia*.³⁸ Common people, by virtue of their ignorance, submit and end up worshipping them (Spinoza speaks of *admiratio*) as the true interpreters of nature and God.

In this way, Spinoza establishes a sort of complementarity between the two protagonists of religious degeneration. On the one hand, the theologians, who, animated by *ingens libido*, *sordida avaritia* e *ambitio*, and paying attention more to their success (*fortuna*) than to the salvation (*salus*) of the faithful, become spokesmen of «*profundissima mysteria*»³⁹ and do everything to «leave no room in the mind for the exercise of reason, or even the capacity of doubt».⁴⁰ They incite people to consider those who as scientists seek to learn all natural things and the true causes of miracles as “heretical and impious”, because they know that «with the removal of ignorance, the wonder which forms their only available means for proving and preserving their authority would vanish also».⁴¹

On the other hand, common people, ignorant and frightened, are dominated through dark and mysterious speeches (*absurdis arcanis*), prejudices that seem contrived on purpose to shut down the

³² See EIIP50S; and EIIP59S.

³³ See S. James, *Spinoza on Philosophy, Religion, and Politics: The Theologico-Political Treatise*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2012, pp. 14–34.

³⁴ «*Vulgus deus magis adulari quam adorare videtur*» [TTP, Pref. (9)] and that is because, as Spinoza maintains in the preface (10) of TTP, masses, prone to superstition and prizing the legacy of time above eternity itself, worship the books of the Scriptures rather than the Word of God.

³⁵ *Ivi*, Pref. (8–9).

³⁶ On the contrary, for Spinoza Scripture teaches only «*res simplicissimas*» [*ivi*, XIII (167)].

³⁷ See *ivi*, Pref. (8).

³⁸ See *ivi*, XIII, pp. 167–168.

³⁹ *Ivi*, Pref. (9). On *profundissima mysteria* that, according to the prejudice of theologians, are hidden in the Scriptures, see: *ivi*, VII. On the contrary, Spinoza is convinced that The Scriptures teach “*semplissima*” (*ivi*, XIII).

⁴⁰ *Ivi*, Pref. (6). On the link between superstition and power, see C. Fraenkel, *Philosophical Religions from Plato to Spinoza: Reason, Religion, and Autonomy*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2006, pp. 260ss.

⁴¹ EIApp.



entire *lumen* of the intellect as they prevent people from freely judging and distinguishing true from false.⁴² Common people thus end up worshipping these high *interpretes/reges tamquam deos*.

It has happened that men, from rational beings have reduced themselves to animals (*brutos*), and religion like a subtle addiction, has led them «like sheep only to learn to serve»⁴³ and has benefited and drawn its strength from the monarchy. In a parallel way, faith, that is the true religion, has degenerated into *credulitas et preiudicia* and only the external cult (*externum cultum*) has remained of the old religion.

If superstition has devastating effects, freedom of thought and expression is rather healthy in itself, for the State and also for religion.⁴⁴ But this is very rare: Spinoza knows well that he possesses «the rare happiness of living in a republic, where everyone's judgment is free and unshackled, where each may worship God as his conscience dictates, and where freedom is esteemed before all things dear and precious».⁴⁵

2. On miracles. Back and forth to rationalism

We know from the letter to Oldenburg in 1665 the reasons that forced Spinoza to write the TTP.⁴⁶ The publishing of this work – though accomplished anonymously and with the indication of a fake writer and publisher – was also determined by his friend Adriaan Koerbagh's story.⁴⁷ During the printing of his book, *Een ligt shijnende in duystere plaat*,⁴⁸ he was arrested and put into jail where he died the following year. Unlike Spinoza, who inclined towards the principle of *sole Scripture*, Koerbagh had a straight rationalistic approach to religion.

However, in the case of miracles, Spinoza abandoned his method of *sole Scripture* to embrace a rationalistic stance which he had previously criticized. A comparison between chapter XVI of *A light Shining* and chapter VI of TTP allows for a better understanding of the two approaches and possible influxes between the two contemporary thinkers.

Koerbagh's goal is to destroy the theologians' arguments,⁴⁹ above all their belief in miracles.

⁴² See TTP, Pref. (6).

⁴³ *Ivi*, V (4).

⁴⁴ See I. Berlin, *Libertà*, trans. G. Rigamonti and M. Santambrogio, Feltrinelli, Milano, 2005, pp. 259ss.

⁴⁵ TTP, Pref. (8).

⁴⁶ In the Fragment 2 of the Letter 30 (XXX G), Spinoza wrote: «I am currently working on a treatise giving my views about scripture. I am led to do this by the following considerations: (1) the prejudices of the theologians; for I know that they are the greatest obstacle to men's being able to apply their minds to philosophy; so I am busy exposing them and removing them from the minds of the more prudent; (2) the opinion the common people have of me; they never stop accusing me of atheism, and I have to rebut this accusation as well as I can; and (3) my desire to defend in every way the freedom of philosophising and saying what we think; the preachers here suppress it as much as they can with their excessive authority and aggressiveness».

⁴⁷ The most fully detailed study on Adriaan Koerbagh is still K.O. Meinsma, *Spinoza et son cercle*, Vrin, Paris, 1983, pp. 355–385.

⁴⁸ The only available edition of the book is in English: A. Koerbagh, *A Light Shining in Dark places, to illuminate the main questions of Theology and Religion*, M. Wielema (ed.), Brill, Leiden-Boston, 2011.

⁴⁹ See F. Mignini, *Een ligt shijnende in duystere plaat sen. Adrian Koerbagh tra averroismo e libertinismo*, in G. Licata (a cura di), *L'averroismo in età moderna*, Quodlibet, Macerata, 2013, pp. 167–200. As regards miracles, see M. Morini, «La dottrina del miracolo crocevia tra immanenza e trascendenza: il caso Adriaan Koerbagh», *Leusso* 3 (2013): pp. 149–154.



Christian theological speculation on the issue of miracles reaches its most accomplished degree of elaboration with St Thomas,⁵⁰ and the same thing can be said for the Jewish tradition with the work of Maimonides.⁵¹ Little new and interesting, from a theoretical point of view, was written on the subject between the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. The medieval and super naturalistic conception of miracles became widespread in Europe, both at a popular and educated level. Spinoza, during his intellectual education, was able to become acquainted with the Jewish tradition and to become familiar with Christian theology, which allowed him to address the problem of miracles from a privileged point of view.⁵²

Koerbagh defined miracles as «such effects as are produced by God above or against Nature according to his infinite, absolute and independent power».⁵³ The five theses of the miracle supporters are refuted through two main axioms. The first one says that «God's power is unchangeable since his essence is unchangeable and his essence includes power».⁵⁴ This axiom serves to refute the second proof of the miracles' supporters «that God's power remains unchanged even though it changes nature in producing miracles».⁵⁵ It is a subversive thesis, that is God acts through his essence and it is not separated from his power. In other words: God cannot do what he will and it is not comparable to a kingdom power.⁵⁶

The second axiom says that «God must always maintain in existence a simple thing produced by him so long as its existence is not impeded by any external causes that must be distinct from God and the thing itself».⁵⁷ This axiom serves to refute the first thesis of the miracle supporters that «God can change a simple thing produced by him even though it is not moved out of its state by any external cause distinct from God and the thing itself».⁵⁸ It is followed by a demonstration in which Koerbagh shows that God

⁵⁰ St. Thomas insists particularly on this point: miracle is something that happens in contrast with nature (*Summa Theol.*, I, q. 114, a. 4. c.). See also *Summa Theol.*, I, q. 105, a. 8. c. More impressive is the violation of natural order, greater and more exalted is the miracle. St. Thomas classifies miracles into three distinct categories: *miraculum contra naturam*, *miraculum super naturam*, *miraculum praeter natura*; in all three cases, the miracle is configured as an event that unequivocally exceeds the power of nature (see *Quaestiones Disputatae. De Potentia*, 6, 2. ad. 3).

⁵¹ For Maimonides miracles appear to be events pre-determined by God at the time of creation, and therefore do not involve any change of his will or his wisdom (see *Guide for the Perplexed*, III: 25). Miracles are therefore the result of a pre-ordered suspension of the law of nature already established at the time of creation. Many miracles described in the Bible, for Maimonides, also are intended only allegorically, and many others can be interpreted rationalistically, or explained by reference to purely natural phenomena (see *Guide for the Perplexed*, II: 46; 47). See on this issue the interesting study of David Lemler, «Entre éternité et contingence: la Loi chez Maïmonide. Une étude comparée du 'Guide des égarés' et du 'Livre de la connaissance'», *Revue des études hébraïques et juives* 15 (2010): pp. 57–91.

⁵² See D.H. Frank, *The Politics of Fear: Idolatry and Superstition in Maimonides and Spinoza*, in J.A. Jacobs (ed.), *Judaic sources and western Thought: Jerusalem's Enduring Presence*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2011, pp. 177–189.

⁵³ A. Koerbagh, *Op. cit.*, p. 479.

⁵⁴ *Ivi*, p. 481.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

⁵⁶ Spinoza expresses this in EIP34 by saying that God's power is its own essence. See on this topic F. Mignini, *Le Dieu-Substance de Spinoza comme potentia assoluta*, in G. Canziani, M.A. Granada and Y.C. Zarka (eds.), *Potentia Dei. L'onnipotenza nel pensiero dei secoli XVI e XVII*, FrancoAngeli, Milano, 2000, pp. 387–409.

⁵⁷ A. Koerbagh, *Op. cit.*, p. 481.

⁵⁸ *Ivi*, p. 479.



is not separable from his essence so that if the world cannot exist without God, God cannot exist without the world.⁵⁹

Two issues are particularly strong: on the one hand the claim that physics is true theology; on the other hand, if one admits something above nature, it must simultaneously be against nature. Koerbagh's demonstrations have an ontological character, resting on the same foundations of Spinoza's doctrine. The difference with Spinoza emerged clearly in the second part of the Chapter in which the author shows a greater open-mindedness in the exposition of the arguments that would cost him imprisonment and life itself. Koerbagh argued that miracles do not exist and have never existed. Reason is

the only and most incontrovertible word of God that there is and which in all eternity will not and cannot diminish by a jot, so that it is not necessary for such miracles as are described literally in Scripture to happen, and that God has always made himself known among the people through reason, that is, that people have always been able to arrive at a knowledge of God through reason, as that it has never been necessary to make up such fictitious histories, or rather to use such inappropriate ways of writing.⁶⁰

Koerbagh stated that miracles, if ever there were any, must still be explained through reason, the only reality to be infinite, eternal and unchangeable: thus it can not be excluded in things pertaining to God so «divine reason must be judge in everything».⁶¹ So, after saying that God manifests his power by precisely not performing miracles (thus confirming the assumption of divine immutability as explicitly stated by Spinoza), Koerbagh argued, in an imaginary dialogue with the Reformed Church, that miracles do not happen simply because they have never happened. The only word of God (that has always existed) is reason. From the point of view of the exegesis of Scripture we find an important difference. While Spinoza wants to prove that the Scriptures confirm the immutable and eternal order of nature, Koerbagh proceeded directly to a rationalist interpretation showing how the Apostle did not intend to abandon reason.⁶²

Spinoza opens the Chapter VI of TTP dedicated to miracles by first addressing the *quaestio philosophica*. In this regard, the connection between the *Tractatus* and the *Ethica* is very close to the extent that one could say that the approach of the *Tractatus* on this particular point depended completely on the first part of the *Ethica*, that Spinoza had almost finished writing in 1663.⁶³ In short, when Spinoza writes the sixth chapter of the *Tractatus*, he is already convinced that: «*Deus est omnium rerum causa immanens, non vero transiens*»⁶⁴ and that «Things could not have been brought into being by God in any manner or in any order different from that which has in fact obtained».⁶⁵ It follows that:

All the decrees of God have been ratified from all eternity by God himself. If it were otherwise, God would be convicted of imperfection or change. But in eternity there is no such thing as when, before, or after; hence it

⁵⁹ In the corollary which follows the demonstration Koerbagh adds some *reductio ad absurdum* to reinforce two ontological theses of the first two theses.

⁶⁰ *Ivi*, p. 493.

⁶¹ *Ivi*, p. 495.

⁶² See *ivi*, p. 499.

⁶³ See the letter VIII of Simone de Vries to Spinoza on February 24, 1663.

⁶⁴ EIP17.

⁶⁵ *Ivi*, 33.



follows solely from the perfection of God, that God never can decree, or never could have decreed anything but what is; that God did not exist before his decrees, and would not exist without them.⁶⁶

The widespread belief in omens, prophecies, and miracles is the direct consequence of the fact that men do not know how things really are, and, for this reason, when there is something that does not fit in with their desires, that puts man in a state of emotional instability. Therefore, it happens that:

Anything which excites their astonishment (*insolitum*) they believe to be a portent (*prodigium*) signifying the anger of the gods or of the Supreme Being, and, mistaking superstition for religion, account it impious not to avert the evil with prayer and sacrifice. Signs and wonders of this sort they conjure up perpetually, till one might think Nature as mad as themselves, they interpret her so fantastically.⁶⁷

In this situation of ignorance, misery and fear in which people live or are forced to live in, the passion for hope of liberation ends up by being the hub of a system of theological and political oppression, in which belief in miracles plays a role of primary importance. Through a rationalist analysis with polemical and sometimes violent tones, Spinoza implements a process of demystification and downsizing of some popular religious prejudices, including the belief in miracles, understood by the masses (*vulgus*) as *opera insolita naturae*, «especially if such events bring them any profit or convenience».⁶⁸ But, since «nature cannot be contravened, but she preserves a fixed and immutable order»,⁶⁹ and «all that God wishes – that is to say determines – involves eternal necessity», the real idea of any suspension or violation of the laws of nature is «an evident absurdity».⁷⁰ Now, if they actually occur, hence they do not imply any modification of the natural order, and the conception of a God who creates and orders according to the nature of the laws what then he is forced to revoke or suspend to better achieve its drawings is judged by Spinoza *a ratione alienissimum*.⁷¹

For Spinoza the term “miracle” only indicates an event that is «only intelligible as in relation to human opinions, and merely means events of which the natural cause cannot be explained by a reference to any ordinary occurrence, either by us, or at any rate, by the writer and narrator of the miracle» or, more precisely, it is «an event of which the causes cannot be explained by the natural reason through a reference to ascertained workings of nature».⁷²

One could not imagine a more drastic reversal of the Thomist definition. Not only does a miracle not violate any law of nature, but if it happens in contrast with the natural order, it would be an event that pushes us to disbelief rather than to faith, to atheism rather than to God. Spinoza then attacks the distinctions between the various degrees of miracle proposed by St Thomas declaring them inconsistent and captious; it is hardly worth mentioning *miracula super, contra or praeter naturam*. And for Spinoza, the distinction proposed by St Thomas⁷³ between natural and supernatural levels does not even make

⁶⁶ *Ivi*, 33S2.

⁶⁷ TTP, Pref. (2).

⁶⁸ *Ivi*, VI (1). See also *ivi*, II (19) and S. Nadler, *A Book Forged in Hell: Spinoza's Scandalous Treatise and the Birth of the Secular Age*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 2011, spec. chap. 5.

⁶⁹ TTP, VI (2).

⁷⁰ *Ivi*, VI (3).

⁷¹ See G.H.R. Parkinson, “Spinoza on Miracles and Natural Law”, *Revue Internationale de Philosophie* 31 (1977): pp. 145–157.

⁷² TTP, VI (5).

⁷³ See *Summa Theol.* I, 150; 151.



sense, which allowed him to say that in the strict sense God, working on *ordo secundarum causarum* produced miracles, from his point of view, *praeter hanc ordinem*, and not in an absolute sense *contra naturam*.⁷⁴

There is a second point that Spinoza intends to prove, namely that

we can gain no knowledge of God's essence, or existence, or indeed anything about God or nature; whereas when we know that all things are ordained and ratified by God, that the operations of nature follow from the essence of God, and that the laws of nature are eternal decrees and volitions of God, we must perforce conclude that our knowledge of God, and of God's will increases in proportion to our knowledge and clear understanding of nature, as we see how she depends on her primal cause, and how she works according to eternal law.⁷⁵

After proving the inherent contradictions of the traditional concept of miracles, Spinoza addresses the religious *quaestio*: since «for whatsoever we understand clearly and distinctly should be plain to us either in itself or by means of something else clearly and distinctly understood», and since «the miracle is a result which cannot be explained by its cause, that is a phenomenon which surpasses human understanding», thereby, from such a phenomenon, and certainly from a result surpassing our understanding, we can gain no knowledge.⁷⁶

In other words, the miracle cannot be understood either by itself or by other events (if it were possible to correlate it significantly with other phenomena the “miracle” could in fact be explained naturalistically). How do you go back to God, of whom (hypothetically) you know nothing, starting from miracles, in other words from something of which (by definition) you know nothing? Moreover, if God is one with the perfect and immutable order of nature, an event that subverts the laws of nature could not give any knowledge of God, but rather suppress that knowledge which we have from nature and would force us to doubt God and all reality.

Spinoza also refuses the distinction between *miraculum mendax* and *miraculum vero*, countering the theological tradition that had developed it: if miracles can be accomplished by false prophets and men can turn through them also to idolatry, it follows that the miracle itself is absolutely unusable for the purpose of a correct knowledge of God. As well as the autocrat can, at will, withdraw laws and regulations to introduce new ones, so God, the Pantocrator, may, if he chooses, ignore, suspend and violate the order by itself impressed upon creation. Therefore, to recognize extraordinary events, which are believed to violate the laws of nature, as the clearest demonstration of the activity of God is for Spinoza not only *stultitia*, but a sign of a condition of servitude and impotence. If superstitions have in common the root of fear, prejudices are rooted in a finalist prejudice welding political and theological imaginary into a single concept:

All such opinions spring from the notion commonly entertained, that all things in nature act as men themselves act, namely, with an end in view. It is accepted as certain, that God himself directs all things to a definite goal (for it is said that God made all things for man, and man that he might worship him).⁷⁷

⁷⁴ See TTP, VI (9).

⁷⁵ *Ivi*, VI (7).

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷⁷ EIAp.



This idea, according to which the whole of nature was created for the purpose and benefit of man, is in itself comforting and it is the theorem from which the belief in miracles draws its vitality:

This idea seems to have taken its rise among the early Jews who, to dominate the Gentiles of that time, narrated their miracles, trying further to show that the God whom they worshipped arranged the whole of nature for their sole benefit: this idea was so pleasing to humanity that men go on to this day imagining miracles, so that they may believe themselves God's favourites, and the final cause for which God created and directs all things.⁷⁸

In Spinoza's philosophy, where nothing can happen contrary to the laws of nature, necessary and immutable consequences of the very essence of God, the belief in miracles, instead of strengthening faith in God, would inevitably lead to atheism.⁷⁹

As in the case of superstition, Spinoza's polemic against miracles must be seen in the broader context of his intellectual struggle: «Spinoza fights on two fronts, trying to behead the double-headed eagle of the theological political empire: against fear as passion hostile to reason,⁸⁰ and against hope, as usually escape from the world, alibi of life, the instrument of resignation and obedience».⁸¹ For Spinoza, in fact, the concept of the miracle is not only nonsense from a philosophical point of view, but it is a very important piece of the complex mosaic that creates the conceptual structures of millennial oppression.⁸² We can also say that miracles retroactively help to strengthen and revitalize the scandalous analogy *God: World = King: Kingdom*:

The multitude understand by the power of God the free will of God, and the right over all things that exist, which latter are accordingly generally considered as contingent. For it is said that God has the power to destroy all things, and to reduce them to nothing. Further, the power of God is very often likened to the power of kings.⁸³

With his critique of the belief in miracles, Spinoza wants to prove that: 1. Scripture, when it speaks of the decrees and the will of God (and therefore of providence) speaks only about the laws of nature; 2. the "miracles" of which it is said in Scripture are always either natural events or simple allegories: «Scripture [...], does not aim at explaining things by their natural causes, but only at narrating what appeals to the popular imagination, and so in the manner best calculated to excite wonder, and consequently to impress the minds of the masses with devotion».⁸⁴

⁷⁸ TTP, VI (1).

⁷⁹ See *ivi*, VI (9).

⁸⁰ «*Qui metu ducitur ..., is ratione non ducitur*» (EIVPLXIII).

⁸¹ R. Bodei, *Geometria delle passioni*, Feltrinelli, Milano, 1992, p. 76.

⁸² For two recent first-rate monographs on the TTP that situate Spinoza's critique of the Scriptures in a historical context, see S. Nadler, *Op. cit.* and S. James, *Op. cit.*

⁸³ EIIP3S.

⁸⁴ TTP, VI (12). Spinoza offered a series of scriptural passages excerpted especially from the Old Testament and showed that many of the miracles narrated in it, such as the plagues of Egypt (*Exodus* 10:14,19) and the passage in the Red Sea (*Exodus* 14:21) can easily be explained as natural phenomena. On this point, the influence of Maimonides' thought on Spinoza is clear. The opening of a passage in the Red Sea as an event caused by a strong wind seems taken almost verbatim from the *Guide of the Perplexed*. Also from reading the Gospels Spinoza finds a confirmation of his thesis: many of the healings performed by Jesus clearly depend on a number of psychological and physical circumstances without which they would not have occurred.



On the other hand, Spinoza realizes that not all of the events described in the Bible can be explained in this way, and formulates a principle of radical interpretation that would cause a huge scandal:

We may, then, be absolutely certain that every event which is truly described in Scripture necessarily happened, like everything else, according to natural laws; and if anything is there set down which can be proved in set terms to contravene the order of nature, or not to be deducible therefrom, we must believe it to have been foisted into the sacred writings by irreligious hands; for whatsoever is contrary to nature is also contrary to reason, and whatsoever is contrary to reason is absurd, and, ipso facto, to be rejected.⁸⁵

In this way Spinoza suspends his method of interpreting Scripture with the sole Scripture by returning to a rationalistic approach. The justification of this suspension is not consistent with his general argument, as miracles are not different from any other topics.⁸⁶ It seems as if Spinoza wants to distance himself from a strict use of the method of sole Scripture in order to pay tribute to his friend Adriaan Koerbagh.⁸⁷

The acceptance of what is contained in Scripture is entirely subject to the unquestionable scrutiny of reason, which becomes the true and only *norma normans non normata* presiding over the interpretation of Scripture.⁸⁸

The *Treatise* submitted the Holy Scripture to a free rational examination in order to establish new and strong principles for the exegesis of the text (Chapters VII–XI). The polemic against biblical reading practiced by traditional theology is found in chapter seven: the theologians, motivated by vainglory actually more than the desire to reveal the truth of the sacred text, take delight in every way to distort the meaning of Scripture in order to find evidence of their doctrines and fanciful opinions, inventing in it very deep and incomprehensible hidden mysteries. To avoid the danger of blindly accepting this fiction as divine teachings, it is necessary to establish a method made up of clear and universally valid rules. Thus comes a new method of interpretation of the Bible, whose fundamental principle is the interpretation of Scripture by Scripture itself, in order not to attribute to it anything that is not clear from the history of the text itself. Spinoza is the first to propose and implement a similar method, in some ways revolutionary and scandalous, since, by raising the question of the historicity of the biblical text, he de facto rejects its divine origin.⁸⁹

A necessary consequence of this thesis is the negation of the theoretical-speculative value of the Scripture that cannot provide any contribution to the search for truth, but – just like the prophecies that are part of it – has only a moral and practical value. The method inaugurated by Spinoza is thus based

⁸⁵ TTP, VI (13–14).

⁸⁶ In order to justify his detour, Spinoza adds an appendix at the end of Chapter VI.

⁸⁷ On this problem, with particular reference to the debate over the rationalist method during the XVI century and an evaluation of Spinoza's approach, see J.S. Preus, *Spinoza and the irrelevance of the Biblical Authority*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2001.

⁸⁸ Manifold are the Critical studies on Spinoza's biblical hermeneutics. See, for example: Y. Yovel, "Bible interpretation as philosophical Praxis: a study of Spinoza and Kant", *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 1 (1973): pp. 189–212 and P.-F. Moreau, "Les principes de la lecture de l'Écriture Sainte dans le TTP", *Travaux et documents du Group de Recherches Spinozistes* 4 (1992): pp. 119–131.

⁸⁹ Jean Lacroix says: «This attitude [Spinoza's rejection of the traditional doctrine of revelation] implies, in order to understand both the Old and New Testaments, an original method, which Spinoza defines as the interpretation of Scripture by Scripture [...] His reading does not want to be philosophical, but scientific [...] He inaugurates a historico-critical method which was to renew the way of studying» ["La salut par la foi selon Spinoza", *Giornale di metafisica* 25 (1970): pp. 65–73; cit. pp. 65–66].



on the assumption of a clear separation between faith and reason, having totally different principles and fields:⁹⁰ faith (purified by *superstitio*) is based on the love of God and one's neighbour and conforming to its precepts commoners can regulate their conduct according to virtue; reason instead is based on the natural light of intellect and through its mathematical-geometrical demonstrations it leads the philosopher to the truth. Since the study of the interpretation of the biblical text is a survey based on a historical and scientific method, for this purpose Spinoza adopts the tools of reason, not those of faith.

This method, which includes both what we would call today historical criticism and literal criticism, «doesn't differ from the method of interpretation of nature, but agrees completely with this»,⁹¹ for it is based on a systematic and dispassionate critical survey, from which one can draw – *ex certis dati et principis* – through logical and necessary steps, the thought of the authors.

The process of interpretation prescribes above all the knowledge of the original language of the sacred texts (Hebrew is necessary not only in order to understand the Old Testament, but also the New Testament, whose books are often rich in Hebraisms;⁹² secondly, it recommends obtaining information on the “history of the text”, on its formation, its different redactions, when it was included among the sacred texts, to whom it was written, and so on; finally, it advises scholars to obtain information about the authors of each book, assessing not only their identity, but also their lives, customs and even the intentions that led them to write. The concept of “sacred” itself is returned by the philosopher to its conventional nature, according to which an object, a place or a building is *sacrum* only by virtue of the fact that this is considered such by a community. In Chapter XII it is said:

A thing is called sacred and Divine when it is designed for promoting piety, and continues sacred so long as it is religiously used: if the users cease to be pious, the thing ceases to be sacred: if it be turned to base uses, that which was formerly sacred becomes unclean and profane.⁹³

Spinoza's intention is, on the one hand, to show how the term “sacred” did not describe what an essential property or attribute implicit in the object was, but simply designated a use of it, and, on the other hand, delivered the religious cult back to its social and communitarian origins, to anything supernatural or divine. But there is one thing the claims of reason and the statements of the prophets and apostles agree on, that is:

Divinely is inscribed in human hearts, that is, in the human mind, and that this is the true original of God's covenant, stamped with His own seal, namely, the idea of Himself, as it were, with the image of His Godhood.⁹⁴

⁹⁰ Spinoza deals with this issue in the chapters XIV and XV of TTP. Carla Gallicet Calvetti has summarized Spinoza's Theory in a sort of «ostracism of the faith from the research of truth» [“I presupposti teoretici della tolleranza in Spinoza”, *Rivista di filosofia neoscolastica* 57 (1965): pp. 420–447; pp. 623–649; cit. p. 625].

⁹¹ TTP, VII (6).

⁹² Spinoza is an expert on Hebrew: this competence is proved by the several and subtle textual analyses that we can read in TTP and also by the *Compendium grammatices linguae Hebraeae* (uncompleted work).

⁹³ TTP, XII (5).

⁹⁴ *Ivi*, XII (1).



3. The *Fides universalis* and the tenets of faith

The second aspect is to establish the principles which underpin true religion. Spinoza doesn't want to introduce new doctrines, but to correct those which are flawed: if superstition is based on fear, religion is grounded in wisdom. So he writes in order to purify true religion from the sediments that weighed it down and that made it the object of exploitation. The strategy consists in outlining a series of tenets that, before being natural or deriving from the exercise of right reason, are considered to be teachings that come directly from Scripture. The critical literature has not then sufficiently emphasized that these tenets of faith, within the same treaty, are listed differently.

In the first list, placed within chapter V relating to ceremonies, the teachings of the Scriptures that are concerned only with philosophical matters can be summed up in three points: 1. God exists; 2. God cares for the people who live "pie et honeste"; 3. God punishes the others.⁹⁵

In the second one in Chapter XII it is explained why Scripture has to be called holy, the omnipotence of God and the salvation (depending solely on his grace) are added to the previous three fundamental teachings.⁹⁶

Note, in this regard, a slight correction in the quality of God: in the first formulation we have a punishing God; in the second one God is regarded in a more neutral way.

The third list, that includes the seven best known decrees, is set out at the end of Chapter XIV in which Spinoza affirmed that it is necessary to determine *fides* and its *fundamentalia* and, at the same time, distinguish between faith and philosophy, that is the main object of this entire treatise («*fidem a Philosophia separare, quod totius operis paecipuum intentum fuit*»)⁹⁷. In this list Spinoza added two more dogmas about the unity of God and the commandment to love one's neighbour through the practice of justice (*iustitia*) and care (*caritas*). This commandment is «the one and only guiding principle for the entire common faith of mankind, and through this commandment alone should be determined all the tenets of faith that every man is in duty bound to accept».⁹⁸ Indeed, through the practice of justice and care, men serve God and can be saved.

Again, as in the second list, there is the rewriting of two dogmas expressed before.⁹⁹

⁹⁵ See *ivi*, V (77).

⁹⁶ «God exists, [...] He provides for all things, [...] He is omnipotent, [...] by His decrees the good prosper and the wicked are cast down, and [...] our salvation depends solely on His grace. For all these are doctrines which are plainly taught throughout Scripture, and which it was at all times bound to teach if all the rest of its teachings were not to be vain and without foundation» [*ivi*, XII (165)].

⁹⁷ *Ivi*, XIV (177–178).

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹⁹ Spinoza adds in this passage that «*qui autem hoc firmiter credit, videlicet Deum ex misericordia, et gratia, qua omnia dirigit, hominum peccata condonare, et hac de causa in Dei amore magis incenditur, is revera Christum secundum Spiritum novit, et Christus in eo est*» which betrays a profound knowledge of Christian theology.



| Tenets of <i>Fides universalis</i> in the <i>Theologico-Political Treatise</i> | | |
|--|--|--|
| <i>TTP V, 77 (441)</i> | <i>TTP XII, 165 (509)</i> | <i>TTP XIV, 177–178 (517–518)</i> |
| There is a God or Being | God exists | God, that is, a Supreme Being, exists |
| | | God is one alone |
| He takes the utmost care of men, that is, those of them who live moral and righteous lives | He provides for all things | God is omnipresent and all things are open to him |
| | He is omnipotent | God has supreme right and dominion over all things |
| | | Worship of God and obedience to him consists solely in justice and charity, or love towards one's neighbour |
| | Our salvation depends solely on His grace | All who obey God by following this way of life, and only those, are saved; others, who live at pleasure's behest, are lost |
| He severely punishes the others and cuts them off from the good | By His decrees the good prosper and the wicked are cast down | God forgives repentant sinners |

The inclusion of the tenets of universal faith taught by Scripture solves some problems, but creates others. The main problem is that they seem to contradict the general plan about the division between theology and philosophy.

The tenets, however minimal and reduced to simple formulations and understandable, are knowledge but Spinoza argues in several passages that Scripture does not provide speculations.¹⁰⁰ They are awkward both for philosophers, who do not accept knowledge that comes from religion, and theologians, who do not want limitations in their realm of knowledge from outer intrusions.

Several assumptions have been made in order to interpret these tenets. One of them, which later became well known in literature, comes from Leo Strauss who, by distancing esoteric teaching from exoteric teaching, saw in them the use of a language *to captum Vulgi loqui* intended to separate the salvation of the learned from the salvation of the ignorant. It is no coincidence, in this regard, that Spinoza says that those who want to make a philosophical discourse must address theological speech: in this way the truth of reason must be covered by the truth of theology.¹⁰¹

Recently, critical literature seems to interpret Spinoza in a way aimed at the reform of Christianity.¹⁰² Others have argued that these tenets appear to be much more conventional than they really are and that they do not support a specific Christian view: the strategy of listing some principles of faith is due to the

¹⁰⁰ See TTP, II (29–30); XIII (171).

¹⁰¹ See *ivi*, V (77).

¹⁰² See S. Frankel, “Spinoza’s Dual Teachings of Scripture: His Solution to the Quarrel between Reason and Revelation”, *Archiv für das Geschichte der Philosophie* 84 (2002): pp. 273–296. In recent years two studies have particularly underlined Spinoza’s religious motivations: N.K. Levene, *Op. cit.*; G. Hunter, *Radical Protestantism in Spinoza’s Thought*, Ashgate, Aldershot, UK–Burlington, VT, 2005.



reason that, in their absence, theologians would fill the space left empty by their doctrines. More recently tenets of faith were explained not as a way to eradicate superstition, which is an ineradicable element of the human soul, but to govern it.¹⁰³

According to a viewpoint that has elements of affinity with the Straussian reading, we can see not only that there is nothing specifically Christian in them, but that the same *fides universalis* is structured in such a way that Spinoza himself would be the first to reject because the language used is too close to anthropomorphism. Problems also seem to emerge from the division between philosophy and theology: even if it was known and practised within the Cartesian Dutch community, Spinoza shifted the border which traditionally separated philosophy and theology by assigning a greater role to the former.¹⁰⁴

Beyond all these interpretations lies the difficulty, which could easily lead to conflict, of establishing knowledge after having argued that Scripture does not provide knowledge. Regarding this contradiction Spinoza claimed that these teachings would be embraced by any honest man and that the criteria for their introduction are others, particularly the fact that they are beneficial to the State, not only because it is possible to believe in them without danger but also because by adhering to them everybody can reach salvation which otherwise would be reserved only for the wise and impossible for ordinary people. It has also been said, that «the rhetoric of separation (between faith and philosophy, prophecy and truth, obedience and understanding) in the TTP easily overwhelms the more subtle point Spinoza is making, which is that separation is the key to relation».¹⁰⁵

The point is that the strategy of dividing philosophy and theology on the one hand, and restoring true religion on the other hand, contains two conflicting goals. The decisive argument that saves Spinoza's argument is a practical paradox:

A man's beliefs should be regarded as pious or impious only insofar as he is thereby induced to obey the moral law, or else assumes from them the licence to sin or rebel. Therefore if anyone by believing what is true becomes self-willed, he has a faith which in reality is impious; and if by believing what is false he becomes obedient to the moral law, he has a faith which is pious.¹⁰⁶

Philosophers or theologians who do not respect it would be discredited. The tension is settled by referring to the praxis. Now, if it is clear that science alone can eradicate superstition, it is also clear that severe forces hinder it, because not only should we root out superstition by winning over the popular passions that feed it (fear and hope), but also stifle the passion for power of the religious leaders. This was an arduous task, that Spinoza seemed to conceive of only as an individual practice, since, in order to educate people to religion free from superstitions the public and free use of reason is necessary, something that Spinoza believed is not yet feasible, as clearly stated in the letter in which he renounced his professorship and in the latter part of the Preface of the *Treatise*.

In addition, the practice of philosophy even restricted to a few is impeded. In fact, the prejudices of theologians – he wrote to Oldenburg – «maximally prevent that men can devote themselves to

¹⁰³ See E. Curley, *Spinoza's Exchange with Albert Burgh*, in Y.Y. Melamed and M.A. Rosenthal (eds.), *Spinoza's Theological Political Treatise. A critical Guide*, Cambridge University Press, New York, 2010, pp. 11–28.

¹⁰⁴ See S. James, *Op. cit.*, pp. 216–217 and more specifically A. Douglas, “Spinoza and Dutch Cartesians on Philosophy and Theology”, *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 51, 4 (2013): pp. 567–588.

¹⁰⁵ N.K. Levene, *Op. cit.*, XV.

¹⁰⁶ TTP, XIII (172).



philosophy».¹⁰⁷ The destruction of superstition, which has the strength of human passions, is therefore very faraway, almost unattainable. In fact, if that were possible, that is if the masses were set free from the passions and superstition lost its force, what would be left of the historical religions? Would masses still need religion that educated them to obedience? With extreme clarity and sharpness of mind, Spinoza noted that:

If men were so constituted by nature that they desired nothing but what is designated by true reason, society would obviously have no need of laws: it would be sufficient to inculcate true moral doctrines; and men would freely, without hesitation, act in accordance with their true interests.¹⁰⁸

Therefore, if men, in mass, were set free from their negative passions, the State and religions might disappear due to the inversely proportional process of liberation.

If men were to reach a level of rational “free necessity”, totally free from the slavery of passions, then the state, the coercive force of its laws and even the educational power of religion would not make any sense.¹⁰⁹ But this is an ideal world, not the real one. Man is part of nature and Spinoza knows that an *absoluta* autonomy and rationality are not possible.¹¹⁰

What Spinoza has in mind is instead a great political revolution whose ultimate goal is the ethical liberation of man, i.e philosophical education, if not of all men, at least of those who have the inner potential to live *sub specie aeternitatis* and, therefore, happily. It is, as Epicurus already said (the only Greek philosopher, along with Democritus, for whom Spinoza had words of praise), for free men who are destined to wisdom far from the fear of death and from the futility of desire, from the superstitious fear of Gods and from the ignorance about the real nature of things, including human nature. Spinoza’s project for a liberal democracy was sketched out, in the climate of his time, in the politics of the brothers De Witt. Thus, the *Treatise* had the “ethical” aim of educating philosophers first of all, and then the emerging politicians of a new liberalism.

¹⁰⁷ Lett. 30 (G).

¹⁰⁸ TTP, V (8).

¹⁰⁹ See A. Negri, *L'anomalia selvaggia. Saggio su potere e potenza in Baruch Spinoza*, Feltrinelli, Milano, 1981, where the author, as Norman O. Brown notes: «Installs [Spinoza] in the revolutionary pantheon as the last of the bourgeois Renaissance pantheist and the first to anticipate the revolt of the masses (or at last the advent of mass politics) [...] out of joint with his environment, an ‘uncouth anomaly’» (*Apocalypse and/or Metamorphosis*, University of California Press, Berkeley, 1991, p. 118).

¹¹⁰ «I know how deeply rooted are the prejudices embraced under the name of religion; I am aware that in the mind of the masses superstition is no less deeply rooted than fear; I recognize that their constancy is mere obstinacy, and that they are led to praise or blame by impulse rather than reason» [TTP, Pref. (15)]. See also *ivi*, V (8).