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SPINOZA'S DEFENSE OF TOLERATION: THE ARGUMENT FROM PLURALISM

INTRODUCTION

In chapter 14 of the *Theological-Political Treatise* (TTP), Spinoza writes that "the real Antichrists are those who persecute honest men who love Justice, because they disagree with them, and do not defend the same doctrines of faith they do" (C II 267).[1] Spinoza's bold, spirited defense of toleration is an animating theme of the TTP and an important reason for the significant historical impact of the text. But Spinoza's arguments for toleration can be challenging to discern. True to its title, the TTP offers two main arguments for toleration, one theological, the other political.[2] This paper argues that Spinoza's theological argument for toleration is closely connected to a distinct and often overlooked argument from pluralism. This paper examines Spinoza's argument from pluralism and defends that it is more attractive to similar arguments for toleration offered by Bodin and Bayle.

Section 1 provides an overview of Spinoza's two most widely recognized arguments for toleration. Section 2 takes a closer look at the theological argument and how it emerges from Spinoza's interpretation of faith. Section 3 argues that Spinoza's interpretation of faith also supports a distinct argument

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[1] This paper cites Spinoza's TTP by page number from Benedictus de Spinoza, *The Collected Works of Spinoza*, ed. and trans. Edwin Curley, vol. 2 (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2016). Thanks to Przemyslaw Gut for editorial advice and assistance.

[2] It is standard to distinguish Spinoza's political and theological arguments for toleration in this way. See for example Edwin CURLEY, "Castellio vs. Spinoza on Religious Toleration," *The Proceedings of the Twentieth World Congress of Philosophy* 7 (2010): 94.

for toleration from pluralism. The final two sections compare this argument to arguments by Bodin and Bayle respectively.

1. SPINOZA'S TOLERATION ARGUMENTS

In chapter 20 of the TTP, Spinoza offers the political argument for toleration, which is based on his theory of the social contract.[3] According to his theory, subjects do not transfer certain natural rights to the sovereign power, including the right to judge the truth for ourselves in matters of religion.

> No one can transfer to another person his natural right, *or* faculty, of reasoning freely, and of judging concerning anything whatever…. That's why rule over minds is considered violent, and why the supreme majesty seems to wrong its subjects and to usurp their rights whenever it tries to prescribe to everyone what they must embrace as true and reject as false, and, further, by what opinions everyone's mind ought to be moved in its devotion to God. (C II 344)

Spinoza's reasoning here superficially resembles a classical, liberal argument for toleration in that it defends a kind of right to religion (the right to judge religious matters), which undermines the political grounds for persecuting people of different faiths. However, Spinoza does not accept the liberal conception of rights as normative, that is, as entitlements that others are obliged to respect. Rather, Spinoza conceives of rights descriptively as coextensive with power (C II 282). Consequently, when Spinoza claims that individuals retain a natural right to judgment this does not mean that they are entitled to make judgments without state interference. Rather it means that individuals inevitably have the power to make judgments because this lies beyond the state's control as a matter of fact. Consequently, Spinoza's political argument is ultimately a pragmatic one. Citizens retain certain right, such as the right to judge religious matters, not as a matter of principle, but because any attempt to remove or abridge such rights will ultimately end in failure. Consequently, the roots of this argument are not found in liberals like Locke, but rather in pragmatist arguments from Bodin, Bayle, and Episcopius.[4]

[3] For an extended discussion of Spinoza's political argument for toleration see CURLEY, "Castellio," 94–99.

[4] In BODIN, see *The Six Bookes of a Commonweale*, ed. and trans. Richard Knolles (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1962), 535. For a discussion of Episcopius on these issues, see Perez ZAGORIN, *How the Idea of Religious Toleration Came to the West* (Princeton,

While the political argument does not defend freedom of religion per se, it implies some form of religious freedom. Since the freedom of judgment includes judgment in religious matters, it implies a kind of "inner" freedom to believe as one chooses, what we might think of as freedom of conscience. Furthermore, Spinoza claims that our natural rights include freedom of speech because state attempts to control the speech of citizens end in disastrous consequences for the state. This freedom of speech also affords some "outer" freedom of religious practice or religious expression. Spinoza is explicit on this point when he argues that guaranteeing freedom does not threaten state power, a conclusion demonstrated by the city of Amsterdam.

> In this most flourishing Republic, this most outstanding city, all men, no matter what their nation or sect, live in the greatest harmony. When they entrust their goods to someone, the only thing they care to know is whether the person is rich or poor, and whether he usually acts in good faith or not. They don't care at all what his Religion or sect is, for that would do nothing to justify or discredit their case before a judge. Provided they harm no one, give each person his due, and live honestly, there is absolutely no sect so hated that its followers are not protected by the public authority of the magistrates and their forces. (C II 352)

According to this passage, when the state is acting in accordance with Spinoza's political recommendations, it will allow—and even protect—a variety of religious sects, provided they are not harmful to the state.

From our modern perspective, Spinoza's outer freedom of religion appears limited because he does not relegate religion to a private sphere, free from state interference and control. Rather, Spinoza upholds the Erastian view that the authority and power of the church must be subordinated to the authority and power of the state, as in the state sponsored Church of England. This means that the state is not neutral about the right or true religion and that religious practice is subject to state governance and oversight. While this may appear retrograde to liberals today, Erastian views were often defended by progressive proponents of toleration because state control of religion was seen as the best way of reigning in religious zealots, who posed an even greater threat to freedom of religion than the state. This does not mean that Spinoza and other Erastians failed to recognize the state as a

NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005), 172–78. For a discussion of Bayle on these issues, see John C. LAURSEN, "Baylean Liberalism: Tolerance Requires Nontolerance," in *Beyond the Persecuting Society: Religious Toleration Before the Enlightenment*, ed. John Christian Laursen and Cary J. Nederman (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1997), 197–215.

possible threat to religious freedom. Spinoza writes that the crackdown against Arminians was "stirred up by the Politicians and the Estates of the provinces" (C II 352). But Spinoza thinks the problem ultimately arose because the state was enlisted as a sectarian to fight for the Gomarist cause in contradiction to the state's proper role as advocates for the public good. Consequently, on Spinoza's reading, the persecution of Arminians shows that toleration is threatened when the power of the state is subordinated to the power of religion. According to Spinoza, the remedy to this problem is to make the state the ultimate religious authority (C II 352).[5]

Spinoza offers the theological argument for toleration in the earlier chapters of the TTP (13–17). Whereas the later, political argument challenges the political grounds for religious persecution, the earlier text challenges the religious and theological grounds for persecution. Spinoza pursues many lines of argument here; indeed, a central task of this paper is to tease them apart. But the main argument asserts that true religion and salvation do not require taking sides on the contested doctrines and theological issues that divided Christians sects.[6] The argument defends this conclusion based on what is intended to be an ecumenical interpretation of scripture. I will refer to this argument as the theological argument. This argument has a variety of precedents in Spinoza's Dutch context, including Episcopius, Grotius, Lipsius, and Erasmus.[7]

The theological argument provides a direct response to the main Christian argument for intolerance, which traces to Augustine and ultimately to the parable of the great dinner in Luke 14. When the guests invited to the dinner make excuses to avoid attending, the great dinner is opened to the crippled, the blind, and the lame. When there is still room for more guests, the host

[5] Thus, Spinoza claims that the discord and resultant church schism of the remonstrant controversy lay at the feet not of the progressive Arminians, but rather of those who sought to control them. "The real troublemakers are those who want, in a free Republic, to take away freedom of judgment" (C II 352).

[6] Curley puts it thus: "In what sense is this an argument for toleration? The implications of Spinoza's theological argument seem to me to be deistic, in a broad sense of that term, insofar as the argument leads to a conception of religion which affirms God's existence, and the importance of obedience to God, construed as the practice of love and justice, but denies the necessity of accepting those Christological doctrines which most of the churches of Spinoza's day accepted on the basis of revelation and regarded as essential for salvation" (CURLEY, "Castellio," 106).

[7] On this argument in Episcopius and Grotius, see ZAGORIN, *Religious Toleration*, 172–78. On Castellio, see CURLEY, "Castellio," 106. On Lipsius and Erasmus (in addition to earlier thinkers like Nicholas of Cusa, and English latitudinarians), see Rainer FORST, "Toleration," *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta (Fall 2017 Edition), section 3, https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2017/entries/toleration.

insists his people must be "compelled" to come in. Augustine and later Aquinas take the story to prescribe forced conversion, which they justify on paternalistic grounds.[8] Since conversion to the true faith is necessary for salvation, forced conversion will save souls from an eternity of torment, a benefit so great that it would outweigh any loss of freedom to the individual. The concern for saving souls can be used to justify great harm to individuals as necessary to save their souls. It can even be used to justify their deaths to save the souls of others who could be influenced by them. This is the reasoning that justified persecution of Huguenots in France and the forced conversion of Spinoza's Iberian Jewish ancestors. The strategy of the theological argument is to show that no Christian sect has exclusive claim to be the one true faith. Consequently, religious conversion—and the persecution that is supposed to secure it—is unnecessary for salvation. In other words, because all or most Christian religions are sufficient for salvation, forced conversion from one to another will not save souls and, consequently, cannot be used as a justification for restricting people's freedom and harming them through persecution. The argument is limited because it extends toleration only to those faiths that subscribe to whatever doctrines of faith the argument stipulates to be the true faith required for salvation, usually an ecumenical and inclusive interpretation of Christianity.

2. THE THEOLOGICAL ARGUMENT: SPINOZA ON FAITH

This section takes a closer look at Spinoza's presentation of the theological argument in the TTP. This examination will indicate a promising line of argument, conceptually independent from the theological argument. The theological argument is supposed to provide an inclusive interpretation of the requirements for salvation, built around widely held Christian doctrines, rather than controversial theological doctrines. As such, the argument has two parts. The first part is Spinoza's account of how to interpret scripture. This part begins in chapter 1 of the TTP, where Spinoza first discusses prophecy and runs throughout the text, reaching its climax in chapter 7, "On the Interpretation of Scripture." The second part is the interpretation of scripture that results from applying this interpretive method. This part also spans widely across the text, but it picks up steam after the method of interpreting scrip-

[8] For more on this, see Edwin CURLEY, "Bayle versus Spinoza on Toleration," *Mededeelingen van wege het Spinozahuis* 95 (Leiden: Brill, 2009): 8, 19–21.

ture is defended in chapter 7 and reaches a climax in chapter 15, after which Spinoza turns to his political argument for toleration.

The critical part of Spinoza's interpretation of scripture is his interpretation of faith and the doctrines of faith required by true religion. Spinoza is clear about this. "To establish how far each person has the freedom to think what he wishes with respect to faith, and whom we are bound to consider faithful, even though they think differently, we must determine what faith and its fundamentals are" (C II 264). Spinoza's discussion of the subject begins with a definition of faith, which is quickly followed by his explanation of the relationship between faith and salvation.

In approaching the subject of faith, Spinoza is confronting perhaps the central question that divided Christian sects in the reformation, the extent to which salvation requires faith (holding the right kinds of beliefs) or works (performing the right kinds of actions). There is a prima facie scriptural basis for thinking that salvation requires both faith and works. Paul's letters emphasize the importance of faith to salvation: "For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God" (Ephesians 2:8).[9] Indeed, Paul appears to say that works are not necessary for salvation: "For by works of the law no human being will be justified in his sight" (Romans 3:20). On the other hand, James seems to require works: "You see that a person is justified by works and not by faith alone. And in the same way was not also Rahab the prostitute justified by works when she received the messengers and sent them out by another way? For as the body apart from the spirit is dead, so also faith apart from works is dead" (James 2:24–26).

The proper interpretation of these texts was a central fault line that divided Catholics and reformers and that also divided the reforming sects from one another. Reformers like Luther insisted that salvation requires faith alone. According to many reformers, claiming that we can achieve salvation through works implies that our salvation can be earned, and that it is up to us—or even worse, up to clerics—which fails to recognize that salvation is a free gift from God. The Catholic Church responded to these controversies at the Council of Trent, which examined the precise role of works to salvation. While the Catholic view is complex it leaves some role for works in salvation. Spinoza is arguably referring to this disagreement about the interpretation of scripture pertaining to faith and works when he claims that the schisms among the Christian sects can be traced to disagreements among the apostles.[10]

[9] All quotations from the Bible use the English Standard Version of the Bible, widely available in print and online.

[10] This is how Velthuysen reads Spinoza in his summary of the TTP in letter 42 (C II 380).

> There is no doubt that the fact that the Apostles built religion on different foundations gave rise to many disputes and schisms, which have tormented the church incessantly from the time of the Apostles to the present day, and will surely continue to torment it forever, until at last someday religion is separated from philosophical speculations and reduced to those very few and very simple doctrines Christ taught his followers. (C II 247)

As the end of the passage indicates, Spinoza attempts to resolve the disagreement by providing an inclusive interpretation of what scripture teaches about faith. This interpretation is based on Spinoza's theory of scriptural interpretation in chapter 7. This theory appears to be crafted specifically to lay the groundwork for Spinoza's eventual interpretation of faith. Spinoza's method of interpretation emphasizes the importance of definitions—such as his definition of faith—but stresses that definitions must be inferred from biblical narratives because scripture does not provide explicit definitions (C II 172). How, then, does one derive definitions? Spinoza claims that the meaning of scripture cannot be determined through reason and, thus, not from theological speculation, because scripture is based on the testimony of prophets rather than arguments from philosophers (C II 171). Consequently, one's interpretation and definitions should be based on what is the clear and evident meaning of scripture, rather than on obscure and speculative readings, which are likely to be erroneous (C II 173). Furthermore, Spinoza claims that the interpretation of scripture should be based on the common message running throughout the text. In this respect, he claims that the method of interpreting scripture is like the method of interpreting nature.

> In examining natural things, we strive to investigate first the things most universal and common to the whole of nature: motion and rest, and their laws and rules, which nature always observes and though which it continuously acts. From these we proceed gradually to other, less universal things. In the same way, the first thing we must seek from the history of Scripture is what is most universal, what is the basis and foundation of the whole of Scripture, and finally, what all the Prophets commend in it as an eternal teaching, most useful for all mortals. (C II 176)

This interpretive method leads Spinoza to conclude that the fundamental message of scripture—the clearest message, most consistently articulated throughout the text—is the practical directive to be obedient to God. This is readily grasped by all and does not depend on philosophy or on any deep intellectual or theoretical knowledge. "The doctrine of Scripture does not contain lofty speculations, or

philosophical matters, but only the simplest things, which anyone, no matter how slow, can perceive" (C II 257). Based on this interpretation, Spinoza defines faith in practical terms as the beliefs required for obedience to God.

> [Faith is] thinking such things about God that if you had no knowledge of them, obedience to God would be destroyed, whereas if you are obedient to God, you necessarily have these thoughts. (C II 266)

While Spinoza presents this definition as based on the most clear and uncontroversial interpretation of scripture, it is important to recognize how radical this definition of faith is. Faith was usually understood as holding *true* beliefs about God and religious matters. On Spinoza's definition, faith requires holding *correct* beliefs about God and religious matters, where the correctness of beliefs is measured not by their truth, but rather by whether they motivate the right actions. "Faith requires not so much true doctrines, as pious doctrines, i.e., doctrines which move the heart to obedience, even if many of them do not have even a shadow of the truth" (C II 267).

Spinoza's definition of faith stakes out a strong and controversial position in the debate over the respective value of faith and works for salvation.[11] Because Spinoza defines faith as a practical matter, he is inclined to defend the value of works and right action for salvation. "Faith is not saving by itself, but only in relation to obedience" (C II 266). Unsurprisingly, Spinoza appeals to James to make this point, though true to his method of interpreting scripture, he shows that it is grounded in a variety of texts (with the notable exception of Paul). This view is controversial because it rejects the notion that faith alone is sufficient for salvation. "Faith is not saving by itself, but only in relation to obedience" (C II 266).[12] Indeed, it's hard to see that Spinoza thinks faith matters at all, given the usual understanding of faith. Spinoza is entitled to claim that salvation requires faith only because he defines faith controversially in practical terms as the beliefs required for right action. If one upholds the usual view of faith as the holding of true beliefs and doctrines, then Spinoza flatly denies that faith is required at all, since he de-

[11] In Curley's words, "Spinoza's conception of faith is a radical one, which he could not have expected his readers to accept without considerable argument. One purpose of his biblical criticism in the TTP is to motivate that acceptance" (CURLEY, "Castellio," 99).

[12] Spinoza does not mention Paul's letters. Presumably he could take them at face value, given his definition of faith. According to Spinoza's reading of scripture, Paul's claim that faith alone is not treated as definitive because it does not assert a claim that generalizes well across all scripture.

nies that scripture requires having true beliefs.[13] Thus, Spinoza's position is the exact opposite of the reformers' position, found in Luther. The reformers tended to regard faith alone as required for salvation, while works were regarded merely as evidence of faith. For Spinoza, it appears that works alone are required for obedience, while holding beliefs matters only insofar as doing so motivates the right works. In Curley's words, "Spinoza's theological argument for freedom tries to show that the true religion does not require having the right belief, but only doing the right thing" (C II 51).

In possible anticipation of reformers' objections, Spinoza emphasized that his interpretation of scripture makes faith indispensable. According to Spinoza, a fundamental message of scripture is that we are saved by obedience. Unlike so many other biblical teachings, which agree with reason, this one cannot be discovered by reason and, consequently, depends on faith alone: "I maintain unconditionally that the natural light cannot discover this fundamental tenet of Theology—or at least that no one yet has demonstrated it. So revelation has been most necessary" (C II 278). However, if this argument was intended to appease his critics, it was unlikely to succeed. For the argument only shows the importance of faith vis-à-vis reason, whereas his critics would have been concerned with the importance of faith vis-à-vis works.

3. THE PLURALISM ARGUMENT

How does Spinoza's account of faith in the previous section advance the tolerationist cause? To begin with, it grounds Spinoza's theological argument for toleration. Spinoza's interpretation of faith shows that salvation does not require having true beliefs and, consequently, does not require successfully navigating the disputed, divisive issues of theology and doctrine that usually turned Christians against one another. Spinoza expresses the argument nicely in chapter 14:

> From this it follows that no doctrines belong to the catholic, *or* universal, faith which can be controversial among honest men. Since doctrines must be judged only by the works [they encourage], controversial doctrines can be pious in relation to one person and impious in relation to another. Only those doctrines belong to the catholic faith, then, which obedience to God absolutely assumes, and ignorance of which makes obedience absolutely impossible. As for the rest, since each person

[13] Velthuysen recognizes these points in his summary of the TTP in letter 42 (C II 380).

> knows himself better [than anyone else does], he must think as he sees will be better for him, to strengthen himself in his love of Justice. In this way, I think, no room is left for controversies in the Church. (C II 268)

This argument effectively neutralizes Augustine's argument for intolerance. If nobody is going to hell because of their commitment to contested theological beliefs, then there is no Augustinian justification for forced conversion or persecution of non-believers over these issues.

It is worth noting here that Spinoza's version of the theological argument is more tolerant than the usual version of the argument in the Dutch context prior to Spinoza, including those from Episcopius, Erasmus and Grotius. This is because the beliefs that Spinoza regards as required for salvation—expressed in the doctrines of the universal faith—were so widely held. Indeed, it is not clear that the beliefs even require a commitment to Christianity. Other Abrahamic or monotheistic religions also accept the doctrines of the universal faith, which is evident from Spinoza's remarks on the Turks in a letter to Ostens (letter 43).[14] Taking up the question of whether Mohammed was a true prophet, Spinoza writes, "as far as the Turks and other nations are concerned, if they worship God with the practice of justice and with a loving-kindness toward their neighbor, I believe they have the spirit of Christ and are saved, whatever, in their ignorance, they may believe about Mohammed and the oracles" (C II 389).

Spinoza's interpretation of faith is also especially tolerant not only because the doctrines of universal faith are widely shared across religions, but also because the doctrines are not even strictly required. Spinoza claims throughout the TTP that people and their motives are diverse. This implies that the articles of faith that motivate obedience to God could also be diverse and, consequently, that they need not be shared. While the doctrines of the universal faith are the beliefs that commonly lead to pious action, it's clear that these are not held by everyone who obeys the divine law. Spinoza's free person provides a good example. Since the free person follows reason, they would accept the metaphysics of the *Ethics*. Consequently, they would conceive of God as impersonal (not like a person), which would lead them to reject many of the doctrines of the universal faith, for instance, that "God par-

[14] In contrast, Bayle takes up the objection that tolerance is absurd because it would lead to tolerance of non-Christians, specifically naming the Turks. Pierre BAYLE, *A Philosophical Commentary on These Words of the Gospel, Luke 14.23, "Compel Them to Come In, That My House May Be Full*, ed. John Kilcullen and Chandran Kukathas (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 2005), part 2, chap. 7, 211.

dons the sins of those who repent" (C II 269). Yet the free person still acts with piety and obedience to God entirely from rational beliefs without dogma. Consequently, according to Spinoza's view in the TTP, the free person has faith and would earn salvation, despite rejecting doctrines of the universal faith.

In addition to the theological argument, Spinoza's claims about faith imply a second argument for toleration that has received far less attention in the literature, what I will call the argument from pluralism. The theological argument revolves around Spinoza's view on the requirements for the true faith and salvation. It argues that true Christianity and salvation require only uncontroversial doctrines. The pluralism argument, in contrast, revolves around Spinoza's view about the basis for the authority of religion. The argument is pluralistic because it concludes that different faiths—including even non-Christian faiths—have equal authority. To set the stage for this second argument, it is important to recognize how Spinoza's interpretation of faith discussed in the previous section is connected to his views on various sorts of religious authority.

Recent work by Laerke has shown that Spinoza offers complex views on authority, which are contained entirely in the TTP.[15] Spinoza offers distinct accounts of different religious authorities, including the authority of prophets, priests, scripture, and so forth. For our purposes, Spinoza's view on the authority of scripture is particularly important. In approaching this topic, one should distinguish Spinoza's views on the authority of the form of scripture from the authority of its content.[16] The authority of the former is determined by the historical authenticity of the text, which is established through historical criticism and biblical philology.[17] The content of scripture—in other words, the meaning conveyed by scripture—has authority because it communicates God's word.[18] Spinoza draws this distinction when he defends that

[15] Mogens LAERKE, *Spinoza and the Freedom of Philosophizing* (Oxford: OUP, 2021), chap. 5.

[16] See LAERKE, *Freedom*, 68.

[17] "In terms of *form*, the authority of Scripture is a function of the historical authenticity of the text, to be established by historical criticism and biblical philology which aim at restoring the text to its original state, as closely as possible to the original prophetic revelation" (LAERKE, *Freedom*, 68).

[18] "In terms of *content*, the authority of Scripture rests on the consideration of the divine origin of what it says, i.e., it has authority to the extent that it communicates God's word or gives voice to divine law, in whatever form. When understood in this sense, Spinoza affirms the authority of the Scripture by showing that it everywhere teaches a doctrine that conforms to the divine law as it is also taught by the natural light, namely the simple message that our salvation depends on 'good works', i.e., the practice of justice and charity. Scripture as a whole is said to be divine

the meaning or content of scripture maintains divine authority even though the actual historical text may come to us altered and corrupted from its original form.[19]

> I claim only that the meaning—the only thing in a statement which gives us a reason for calling it divine—has reached us without corruption, even though we may suppose that the words by which it was first signified have frequently been changed. (C II 255)

Spinoza explains that the divinity or authority of scripture's content derives from the fact that its message conforms to the divine law.[20] More specifically, scripture everywhere teaches to love and obey God by loving one's neighbor as oneself, which is a divine law that is written in our hearts and known through reason. "In this we're even more confirmed when we pay attention to the fact that they [the prophets] taught no moral doctrine which does not agree fully with reason. It's no accident that the word of God in the Prophets agrees completely with the word of God speaking in us" (C II 280). Consequently, Spinoza's view on the authority of the content of scripture dovetails with his view of faith. Just as the correct doctrines of faith are determined by practice—whether they lead us to act with obedience—the authority of scripture's message is determined by its practical message. "Scripture is sacred and its statements divine just as long as it moves men to devotion toward God" (C II 251). For Spinoza, then, scripture possesses *moral* authority in virtue of its practical directives.

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only to the extent that this simple lesson is equally taught in all of the different books and narratives. This is why 'those who want to demonstrate the authority of Holy Scripture are bound to show the authority of each book; proving the divinity of one is not enough to establish the divinity of all'" (LAERKE, *Freedom*, 69).

[19] Spinoza's historicist approach qualifies as a kind of skepticism about the authority of the form of scritpure. Steinberg has argued that Spinoza's arguments for toleration are generally not skeptical. "It is clear that Spinoza's defense of toleration is not grounded on epistemic humility. Indeed, one can hardly image a less skeptical philosopher when it comes to our knowledge of God's nature and of the prescripts of the ethics." Justin STEINBERG, "Spinoza's Curious Defense of Toleration," in *Spinoza's Theological-Political Treatise: A Critical Guide*, ed. Yitzhak Melamed and Michael Rosenthal (Cambridge: CUP, 2010), 213. While I agree that Spinoza generally is not skeptical, his historicist approach to scripture does imply skepticism about whether scriptures has come to us in an unaltered, uncorrupted form, which undermines the authority of the form of the text. In Curley's words, "Spinoza's application of these principles to the Hebrew Bible is devastatingly skeptical" ("Castellio," 101).

[20] I should mention an important qualification here. The authority of the content of scripture is only partially corroborated by reason. While the prophets' moral doctrines agree with reason and the divine law (C II 280), reason doesn't teach that obedience provides salvation (C II 278).

This view on the authority of scripture reveals the pluralistic argument for toleration. Spinoza's views on faith and the authority of scripture imply that *any* scripture or faith qualifies as equally divine and authoritative insofar as it directs us to act in accordance with divine law and, thus, in accordance with reason and morality. Thus, the scripture and faiths of Judaism, Islam, literally any faith, are authoritative and divine insofar as they prescribe these actions.[21] The pluralism argument is tightly connected to the theological argument, both in the text and conceptually. Textually both arguments revolve around Spinoza's interpretation of scripture, and conceptually both arguments are based on Spinoza's inclusive (or, one might also say, pluralistic) account of true religion. Nevertheless, the arguments can be distinguished. At the textual level, the theological argument is based primarily on Spinoza's account of the universal faith and, consequently, on the *beliefs* required for salvation, which are discussed primarily in chapter 14 of the TTP. Meanwhile the pluralism argument is based on Spinoza's view of the *authority* of scripture, discussed primarily in chapter 12. At the conceptual level, the theological argument identifies a set of inclusive or pluralistic beliefs that are required for salvation. The pluralistic argument, on the other hand, isn't about beliefs or the requirements for salvation. In fact, it makes no difference to the pluralism argument whether there even is such a thing as salvation. Consequently, unlike the theological argument, the pluralistic argument does not directly respond to Augustine's argument for intolerance. The theological argument challenges Augustine by showing that controversial theological doctrines aren't required for salvation, which removes Augustine's justification for persecuting those who do not share the correct beliefs. The pluralism argument, on the other hand, offers a general account of scriptural authority that regards many faiths as equally divine, which doesn't directly imply anything about the beliefs required for salvation and, consequently, doesn't answer Augustine.

[21] I depart here very slightly from Steinberg, who argues that Spinoza rejects arguments for toleration from pluralism: "Moral pluralism claims that the *central features* of one's flourishing may vary significantly between individuals and that the sources of value between individuals are incommensurable. If this is the case, it is not at all clear that Spinoza would qualify as a pluralist" (STEINBERG, "Curious," 215). Steinberg is responding to the view that Spinoza's defense of toleration rests on moral pluralism. I agree with Steinberg that Spinoza is not much of a pluralist about the right ways of living, but I maintain that he is pluralist about the religions that meet Christian requirements for salvation.

4. SPINOZA PLURALISM ARGUMENT AND BODIN'S MULTIFACETED TRUTH

To appreciate what is distinctive (and attractive) about Spinoza's pluralism argument, it is helpful to contrast it to a more familiar pluralistic argument for toleration found in Bodin's *Colloquium of the Seven about Secrets of the Sublime.* The text, which was widely circulated in manuscript form after 1588, is a dialogue between the representatives of seven schools of thought about their religious beliefs: Catholic, Lutheran, Calvinist, Jew, Muslim, natural religion, and skepticism. The dialogue is remarkable because the representatives do not ultimately reach consensus or find some shared truth. On the contrary, the dialogue seems only to harden the religious convictions of the participants. *Colloquium* indicates that such religious dialogue is nevertheless beneficial because it provides people of faith with a clearer sense of their own commitments, rather than revealing common ground. The dialogue is seen to provide a pluralistic argument for toleration because it indicates that religious truth is complex and multifaceted. All the speakers are correct in their religious beliefs, the dialogue implies, because all their beliefs are a part of a complex religious truth.[22] The disputants in *Colloquium* offer the analogy of musical harmony, which is achieved through different notes. In the same way, the universe achieves harmony through the practice of different faiths. "The variant natures of individual things combine for the harmony of the universe."[23]

Spinoza's pluralistic argument is sufficiently similar to Bodin's to share what many regard as a strength of his argument. Bodin's earlier work, the *Six Books of the Republic*, offered a limited, pragmatic view on toleration. Written during the French wars of religion, it defended the Erastian view that religion should be governed by the state for the purpose of peace and political stability. The *Six Books* encourages the state to enforce a single religion, except in cases where there is already a powerful religious minority,

[22] Bodin's *Colloquium* "differs, however, from other religious dialogues of the period: while the interlocutors in the dialogues ultimately agree on the true religion, the speakers in *Colloquium* do not reach a religious consensus. They do not agree on the truth, *Colloquium* suggests, because truth—especially religious truth—is complex, and each speaker represents a different facet of that multifaceted truth." See Gary REMER, "Bodin's Pluralistic Theory of Toleration," in *Difference and Dissent: Theories of Tolerance in Medieval and Early Modern Europe*, ed. John Christian Laursen and Cary J. Nederman (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield, 1996), 120.

[23] Jean BODIN, *Colloquium of the Seven about Secrets of the Sublime*, ed. Marion Leathers Kuntz (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press: 1975), 149.

as in France at the time, in which case the state should extend limited toleration to the minority for the sake of peace. Bodin's later pluralism argument provides a more robust defense of toleration—and what now appears to be a more attractive defense—because it regards religious diversity as a positive good, rather than something to be tolerated for the sake of peace. The reason for Bodin's change of heart between the two works is his evolving view on religious disputation. The *Six Books* argued that religious disputation between different faiths should be discouraged because it feeds skepticism about religious beliefs and fuels conflict between faiths. While the *Colloquium* maintains Bodin's earlier view that religious disputation does not generate religious agreement, it answers his earlier views by claiming that religious disputation strengthens rather than weakens religious belief and leads to greater concord among faiths. Spinoza's argument does not make the case that religious diversity is a positive good, but it does imply the value of diverse beliefs. Spinoza argues that religion is valuable for promoting right action and that human motivations are diverse, which implies that diversity of religions is beneficial because it can motivate a wider variety of people to act correctly.

Spinoza's argument is also importantly different from Bodin's pluralistic argument. Bodin's pluralistic argument is theoretical or epistemic in the sense that it is based on the notion that all religious beliefs are true. Spinoza's pluralistic argument, on the other hand, is practical, based on the notion that diverse religious beliefs may be correct in the practical sense that they motivate obedience. Thus, Spinoza's pluralistic argument is not committed to claiming that all religious beliefs are equally true or interconnected parts of a larger religious truth. In other words, Bodin's argument holds that different religious beliefs are correct in the sense that they are true, whereas Spinoza's holds that different religious beliefs are correct in the sense that they motivate right action.

The practical nature of Spinoza's pluralistic argument provides him with two key advantages over Bodin's. First, Spinoza's argument provides a more attractive account of the justification for religious belief. Bodin's theoretical argument is in a tough position on the nature of religious belief. The seven traditions represented clearly have inconsistent beliefs. Bodin is only able to maintain that all these beliefs are true by conceiving of religious beliefs as nonrational, in other words, not justified on the basis of reason and not evaluable by rational standards such as the law of noncontradiction. The *Six Books* is explicit about Bodin's conception of religious belief as nonrational,

when it asserts that religion rests "not so much upon demonstration or reason, as upon the assurance of faith and belief only."[24] This is a problem because this view would be accepted by few of the representatives of the religions and traditions in the dialogue (except perhaps the skeptic). Religious belief was usually held to be supported by both reason and faith. This problem is inevitable for any pluralism that regards competing and contradictory religious views as all true. Spinoza's argument, however, does not regard all religious beliefs as true. Rather, it defends that multiple, even contradictory faiths, can all be correct, insofar as they provide correct practical prescriptions. This allows that religious beliefs can be justified by reason in the sense that reason justifies religion's practical prescriptions. Consequently, Spinoza's argument is better able to deliver on the traditional view that faith is consistent with and supported by reason.[25]

Second, Spinoza's argument provides a more attractive view of religious disputation. While the *Colloquium* provides a more positive view of disputation than the *Six Books*, it still offers bleak prospects for using religious disputation to achieve consensus among different faiths. The representatives of the different traditions have different starting assumptions, which means that there is no common ground from which to build arguments and draw conclusions. Consequently, religious disputation has the consequence of entrenching the differences between faiths. While Bodin valorizes this diversity as part of a universal harmony, the religions (notwithstanding how they are represented in the dialogue) generally do not see themselves in this way, and Bodin offers little to show that the ideal of universal harmony is grounded in their respective religious beliefs. Spinoza's argument, on the other hand, identifies a common ground among religious beliefs, a shared commitment to practical principles, namely the principle to obey God by loving one's neighbor as oneself. Because Spinoza holds that these principles are justified by reason, they can also be shared not only by the Abrahamic faiths, but also by natural religion. They may even be accepted by the skeptic because skepticism often accepts practical principles as guides to action even if they cannot be rationally demonstrated. This provides a basis for different religions to provide arguments from shared premises and, consequently, to use reason to reach consensus. For example, the different faiths could use their shared commitment to these practical principles to agree on the right course of action

[24] BODIN, *Six Books*, 535.

[25] Admittedly though, Spinoza's argument would satisfy few religious views because he does not allow a rational justification for the truth of theoretical religious beliefs.

on moral and political issues of the day. Thus, Spinoza's pluralism argument provides a more optimistic picture of the prospects for religious disputation.

5. SPINOZA'S PLURALISM ARGUMENT AND BAYLE'S DOUBLE-EDGED SWORD

A further strength of Spinoza's pluralism argument is that it provides a less problematic way of capturing certain intuitively appealing aspects of Bayle's influential argument for toleration. While Bayle offers many overlapping arguments for toleration, I am concerned with what I will call the "double-edged sword argument."[26] The argument begins with Bayle's notion that people have an obligation to follow their conscience. This is because actions are obligatory in virtue of their moral value, which is based on the sincerity of one's beliefs rather than their truth. "An Action done in consequence of a false Persuasion, is as good as if done in consequence of a true and firm Persuasion."[27] Bayle offers many examples to illustrate this claim, but the most famous is the case of Martin Guerre, who was impersonated by a con artist, who fooled everyone, including Martin's wife.[28] Bayle reasons that the wife had the same duties to the false husband because she sincerely believed him to be Guerre. Since people must have a right to do what is morally required, the obligation to follow one's conscience, in turn, implies the right to do so, what Bayle calls the "right to erroneous conscience." The rights of erroneous conscience apply universally: "the Rights of an erroneous Conscience attended with Sincerity, are exactly the same as those of an Orthodox Conscience."[29] Consequently, if religious conscience implies the right to persecute other faiths, then all religions would have the right to persecute the others, which would be absurd.

[26] For a discussion of this argument, see CURLEY, "Bayle," 23–27.

[27] BAYLE, *Commentary*, pt. 2, chap. 11, 234.

[28] Bayle offers other examples: "This appears from hence, that Obedience to a suppos'd Father, to a suppos'd Husband; Affection for a suppos'd Child, are Dutys, neither more nor less obliging, than if the Subjects were really what they are taken to be. On the other hand, an Action done against a false Persuasion is as sinful as if done against a true Persuasion. This appears from hence, that disobeying a suppos'd Father, abusing him, killing him; doing the same to a suppos'd Husband; hating a suppos'd Son, are Actions no less criminal than if committed against Persons who were in reality what they are only suppos'd to be. There's not the least disparity in the cases," *Commentary*, pt. 2, chap. 11, 234.

[29] BAYLE, *Commentary*, pt. 2, chap. 11, 233.

> It's plain, that if Jesus Christ had meant Persecution in a strict sense, and the constraining Men to sign a Formulary, when he exprest the words, *Compel 'em to come in;* the Orthodox Party wou'd have a Right of forcing the Erroneous as much as they judg'd convenient: There's no doubt of this. But as each Party believes it self the Orthodox, it's plain, if Jesus Christ had commanded Persecution, that each Sect wou'd think it self oblig'd to obey him by persecuting all the rest with the utmost rigor, till they constrain'd 'em to embrace their own Profession of Faith: And thus we shou'd see a continual War between People of the same Country, either in the Streets or in the open Field, or between Nations of different Opinions; so that Christianity wou'd be a mere Hell upon Earth to all who lov'd Peace, or who happen'd to be the weaker side.[30]

According to this argument, intolerance cuts both ways. If Protestants are justified in persecuting Catholics, then Catholics would also be justified in persecuting Protestants, and even Muslims would be justified in persecuting Christians.

Spinoza's pluralism argument captures two attractive elements of Bayle's argument while avoiding the notorious difficulties with it. Firstly, Bayle's argument supposes that sincerity of belief matters, rather than being right. In other words, it holds that we have a right to our beliefs and to act on our beliefs so long as they are sincerely held, entirely independently of whether the beliefs are true. This line of argument is attractive because it is ecumenical. In other words, it provides grounds for toleration that do not require taking sides in or proving any contested, divisive issue of doctrine or theology. But Bayle's focus on the sincerity of belief also creates a problem. According to a common objection, Bayle's argument implies that people are obliged to—and, thus, have a right to—persecute different faiths, so long as the persecution is motivated by sincere conscience.[31] Thus, Bayle's double-edged sword argument is also a double-edged sword in the sense that it justifies intolerance as much as errant conscience.

Spinoza's pluralism argument agrees with Bayle's that being right is irrelevant to toleration, in other words, that our grounds for tolerating beliefs are entirely independent of their truth value. "The definition [of faith] does not explicitly require true doctrines" (C II 267). But whereas Bayle grounds toleration instead in the sincerity of belief, Spinoza grounds toleration in whether the beliefs lead to correct action. "The faith of each person should be considered as pious or impious only on account of his obedience or stubbornness, not

[30] BAYLE, *Commentary*, pt. 1, chap. 10, 133.

[31] The criticism is discussed in CURLEY, "Bayle," 26, and LAURSEN, "Baylean Liberalism," 207.

on account of its truth or falsity" (C 267–68). Thus, Spinoza is more discerning about which beliefs of faith are necessary for salvation and, thus, about which beliefs are entitled to toleration. Beliefs of faith need not be true, according to Spinoza, but they still need to be justified in a practical and moral sense, unlike Bayle's sincere beliefs of conscience. Because of this difference, Spinoza's argument is better able to avoid the pitfall of justifying intolerance that is based on sincere belief. For Spinoza, faith requires beliefs that lead people to act with piety and obedience to God by loving their neighbor. Since loving your neighbor is inconsistent with coercion and religious persecution, Spinoza's argument rules out the possibility that faith requires persecution, even if the beliefs motivating persecution are sincerely held.

Spinoza's argument shares a second attractive commitment of Bayle's argument, while avoiding problematic consequences of Bayle's version of the commitment. Bayle's argument revolves around the idea that all religions are on an equal footing. This idea is contained in its conclusion that allowing intolerance and persecution for one religion would imply allowing intolerance and persecution for all. Spinoza's pluralism argument makes a similar move because it holds that all religions are equally divine and authoritative so long as their beliefs lead people to act with piety. No religion can claim to be superior on the grounds that its doctrines and theology are true. Again, this is attractive to those who want ecumenical or secular grounds for toleration.

But Spinoza's argument captures this equality among faiths in a different and more attractive way than Bayle's. To illustrate this point, it is helpful to consider the celebrated parable of the ring from Lessing's *Nathan the Wise*. The parable concerns an heirloom ring that bestows a magic ability to renders its wearer pleasing to God. When a father with three sons must bequeath the ring, the father cannot decide which of his sons shall receive it. He commissions two replicas and dispenses the three rings to his sons. The sons quarrel over which ring is the original, which they cannot determine. According to the allegory, the three sons represent the Abrahamic religions of Christianity, Judaism, and Islam. All believe that they have the true ring—that their faith renders them pleasing to God—but they cannot determine which ring and which faith is true.

The allegory suggests a variety of arguments for tolerance. For instance, it implies the skeptical argument that we are not justified in persecuting different faiths because we cannot be sure that we have the correct faith. More relevant to my purposes, the allegory can be used to illustrate the differences between Bayle's argument and Spinoza's pluralism argument. Bayle's double-

edged sword argument charges that it would be wrong for one brother to persecute another for the following reason. Lacking any certainty about which faith is correct, such persecution would have to be justified by any brother's sincere belief that his faith is the correct one. Since all the brothers are sincere in their faith, they would all be justified in persecuting the others. Thus, the brothers—and the faiths that they represent—are on equal footing in the sense that the justification for their faith rests not on the knowledge of the one true ring (since nobody knows which ring is the true), but rather on their sincerity of conscience, which the brothers have in equal measure.

Spinoza's pluralism argument also puts the different faiths on equal footing but in a different way. According to Spinoza's argument, the brothers, not knowing the identity of the true ring, can only determine the quality of their faith practically, that is, by the actions to which it leads them. Thus, the brothers are on equal footing in that their faith is measured according to the same standards, that is, whether the brothers act with obedience to God. In Spinoza's words, "the person who displays the best arguments [of one's faith] is not necessarily the one who displays the best faith; instead it's the one who displays the best works of Justice and Loving-kindness" (C II 270). The allegory articulates this Spinozistic argument when the brothers ask a judge to determine the identity of the true ring. The judge rules that the only way to know the true faith is to judge by the actions of the brothers. The brother with the true ring will act in ways that please God. The allegory suggests that all the brothers have the power to act in this way, regardless of whether they possess the true ring, which implies the Spinozistic conclusion that the true test of faith is right action not true beliefs.[32]

Using the ring allegory to explain the differences between Bayle's argument and Spinoza's argument shows what is attractive about the way that Spinoza puts different faiths on the same footing. For Bayle, the faiths are all on equal footing because all faiths sincerely believe that their faith is the true one, but they lack knowledge of this. Thus, the faiths are equally justified because the justification for faith is sincere belief. This creates problems because it is too pluralistic. It admits as justified the sincere beliefs of persecuting zealots, which contradicts Bayle's condemnation of intolerance. It would also admit as justified any sincere beliefs, even those of, say, Satan-

[32] This way of thinking is hardly unique to Spinoza. For instance, Charles Blount includes among the five universal articles of religion that virtue, goodness, and piety are the best ways of worshipping God. See Charles BLOUNT, *Religio Laici: Written in a Letter to John Dryden* (London: R. Bentley and S. Magnus, 1683), 49.

ists, which would make this line of reasoning completely unacceptable to Christians, Jews, and Muslims. Spinoza's pluralism argument, on the other hand, regards all the religions as equally justified without granting any special authority to sincerity of belief or conscience. Furthermore, Spinoza's argument is less pluralistic in an attractive way. It does not hold that all sincerely held religious beliefs—no matter how objectionable—are justified. Rather, for Spinoza, only some faiths are justified, those that lead the faithful to right action. Consequently, he would not be forced to accept Satanism or intolerant zealots as holding beliefs that warrant toleration, since neither beliefs justify acting with obedience to God.

6. CONCLUSIONS

Spinoza's theological argument for toleration revolves around his interpretation of faith and the doctrines of faith required by salvation. This same interpretation implies a distinct line of argument from pluralism. The theological argument shows that the doctrines of faith required for salvation are widely shared by Christians and perhaps may even be held by non-Christians. This undermines Augustine's argument that persecution and forced conversion is required to save souls. In contrast, the pluralism argument shows that the divinity and authority of scripture derives from its motivating right action, which allows that multiple faiths are equally authoritative insofar as they motivate pious action. The pluralism argument is different because it provides grounds for toleration independent of any view on salvation, of any concern for saving souls, and of any response to Augustine's argument for intolerance.

The paper has shown that the pluralism argument is more attractive than Bodin's similar pluralism argument because Spinoza's allows that religious beliefs and doctrines of faith have a rational justification. More specifically, they are justified because they motivate actions that are commanded by reason. Consequently, Spinoza's pluralism argument identifies a shared rational basis for doctrines of faith, which makes possible a more optimistic picture of the prospects for religious disputation based on reason. Spinoza's pluralism argument is also more attractive than Bayle's argument because Spinoza's does not regard religious beliefs as justified by sincerity, which means that he does not need to recognize any problematic rights of erroneous conscience, nor is he forced to accept as justified sincere beliefs in persecution or obviously immoral or irreligious beliefs.

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SPINOZA'S DEFENSE OF TOLERATION: THE ARGUMENT FROM PLURALISM

Summary

Spinoza's bold, spirited defense of toleration is an animating theme of the *Theological-Political Treatise* (TTP) and an important reason for the significant historical impact of the text. But Spinoza's arguments for toleration can be challenging to discern. True to its title, the TTP offers two main arguments for toleration, one political, the other theological. This paper argues that Spinoza's theological argument for toleration is closely connected to a distinct and often over-

looked argument from pluralism. This paper examines Spinoza's argument from pluralism and defends that it is more attractive to similar arguments for toleration offered by Bodin and Bayle. It is more attractive than Bodin's pluralism argument because Spinoza's allows that religious beliefs and doctrines of faith have a rational justification, which makes possible a more optimistic picture of the prospects for religious disputation. Spinoza's pluralism argument is also more attractive than Bayle's argument because Spinoza's does not regard religious beliefs as justified by sincerity, which means that he does not need to recognize any problematic rights of erroneous conscience, nor is he forced to accept as justified sincere beliefs in persecution or obviously immoral or irreligious beliefs.

Keywords: Spinoza; toleration; Bayle; Bodin; faith; *Theological-Political Treatise*.

SPINOZY ARGUMENTACJA NA RZECZ TOLERANCJI: ARGUMENT Z PLURALIZMU

Streszczenie

Odważna i zdecydowana obrona tolerancji stanowi ważny wątek *Traktatu teologiczno-politycznego* (TTP) Spinozy i jeden z powodów znaczącego historycznego wpływu tego tekstu. Nie jest jednak łatwo sprecyzować argumenty Spinozy na rzecz tolerancji. Zgodnie z tytułem, TTP zawiera dwa główne argumenty na rzecz tolerancji: polityczny i teologiczny. Autor niniejszego artykułu argumentuje, że teologiczny argument Spinozy za tolerancją jest ściśle związany z odrębnym i często pomijanym argumentem z pluralizmu. Artykuł zawiera analizę Spinozjańskiego argumentu z pluralizmu i broni tezy, że argument ten jest bardziej atrakcyjny niż zbliżone do niego argumenty na rzecz tolerancji podane przez Bodina i Bayle'a, ponieważ Spinoza dopuszcza możliwość, że przekonania i doktryny religijne mają racjonalne uzasadnienie, co pozwala z większym optymizmem patrzeć na przyszłość sporów religijnych. Spinozjański argument z pluralizmu jest również bardziej atrakcyjny niż argument Bayle'a, ponieważ Spinoza nie uznaje przekonań religijnych za uzasadnione na mocy ich szczerości, co zwalnia go od konieczności uznania problematycznych praw błądzącego sumienia. Ponadto Spinoza nie jest zmuszony do traktowania jako uzasadnionych szczerych przekonań prześladowców ani przekonań jawnie niemoralnych czy niereligijnych.

Słowa kluczowe: Spinoza; tolerancja; Boyle; Bodin; wiara; *Traktat teologiczno-polityczny*.