

SONJA LAVAERT

PASSIVE TOLERANCE VERSUS POLITICAL ENGAGEMENT.  
ANTISTIUS CONSTANS, KOERBAGH, VAN DEN ENDEN,  
AND SPINOZA

TOLERANCE OR FREEDOM OF THOUGHT AND SPEECH?

When Oldenburg, in his letter of September 1665, asks why Spinoza turns his thoughts to theological questions, the latter replies that the great turmoil and in particular the present war encourage him to philosophize and to observe human nature better.<sup>1</sup> However, the prejudices of theologians are an obstacle to this, the common people do not stop accusing him of atheism, and he wants to stand up for the freedom of philosophizing and saying what we think, a freedom that is suppressed by “the preachers with their excessive authority and aggressiveness.”<sup>2</sup> Spinoza’s ideas on tolerance are embedded in his ideas on democracy and the freedom of philosophizing, two aspects dealt with in the *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus* (TTP; 1670). Of course, religion is an important theme in a reflection linking theology and politics, yet in this work, freedom of religion is discussed only on the margins. One might even wonder whether tolerance towards religion is a theme for Spinoza at all. Either way, one should distinguish between freedom of thought and freedom of religion, as Jonathan Israel writes.<sup>3</sup> Between these two kinds of

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<sup>1</sup> Benedictus de SPINOZA, *Epistolae* XXIX and XXX in the edition of Carl GABHARDT, *Opera* IV (Heidelberg: Carl Winter Universitätsverlag, 1972–1987), 164–66; Letters 29 (A) and 30 (C) in the English translation and edition of Edwin CURLEY, *The Collected Works of Spinoza* (Princeton: PUP, 2016), 2:10–15.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 166/14.

<sup>3</sup> Jothanan ISRAEL, *Gedachtevrijheid versus godsdienstvrijheid. Een dilemma van de Verlichting* (Budel: Damon, 2007).

freedom there is a tension that has dominated the history of modern ideas and gave rise to different kinds of Enlightenment ideas: those that turned against tolerance, autonomous thought and freedom of speech from a traditional religious perspective (that we can immediately set aside as anti-ideas), those that were radically focused on freedom and emancipation and made of tolerance a political issue, not relying on religion or theology (like Spinoza's), and those that took a moderate intermediate position mainly concerned with the individual conscience (like Locke's). These differences have to do with political perspectives, relations and priorities.

For Spinoza, freedom of thought, expression and way of life is paramount. For him, it is not so important to spare religious feelings. He is convinced that differences and conflicts degenerate into violence when they are forced into one view, idea or belief, something that soon happens when religion is organized in churches along the lines of doctrines that narrow into closed sects. Truth and reason need the test of openness, variety and multiplicity. For Locke, by contrast, the demand for toleration of different faiths paradoxically necessitates restrictions that are politically enforced. Religion has the highest priority for him. Not that Spinoza opposes religion per se; on the contrary, religion means connectedness, can promote unity, is a political art. Problematic are the organized religious groups with their churches and authority structures that form shadow governments and force themselves into the place of political authority, whose exclusivity demands lead to violence both against the state and against dissenters and people of another faith. Exactly what you believe does not really matter much to Spinoza. In chapter 14 of the TTP where he distinguishes faith and reason, defends himself against popular accusations of atheism and looks for a common denominator with which all religions can agree, he redefines faith as obedience and defines in seven doctrines what each religion can accept as a principle with at its center charity, this is love of man.<sup>4</sup> There is nothing specifically Christian about these doctrines, no mention of an afterlife with reward or punishment, no Christ, trinity or resurrection. For that matter, what God is, fire, spirit, light or thought, has nothing to do with faith: "it doesn't matter, as far as faith is concerned, what anyone believes about such matters."<sup>5</sup> The tolerance he advocates appears to be religious indifference accompanied by intellectual openness and freedom that he considers necessary for peace and the common good.

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<sup>4</sup> SPINOZA, *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus*, in GEBHARDT, *Opera* III, 173–80; in CURLEY, *The Theological-Political Treatise, The Collected Works of Spinoza* II, 263–71.

<sup>5</sup> TTP 14, 178/269.

Partly on the basis of such considerations, Mogens Laerke argues that we should revise Spinoza's contribution to the modern conception of tolerance.<sup>6</sup> The ban in 1653 by the Court of Holland against Socinian texts was later, in 1674, used to censor the works of Spinoza, Hobbes, Meyer and Kuyper and is therefore an important piece of legislation to understand the political role of the struggle for freedom in the second half of the 17th century. Republican thinkers such as Spinoza, De la Court, Van den Enden and Koerbagh were forced to take a stand in the paradigmatic debate initiated in 1580 by Dirck Volckertz. Coornhert and Justus Lipsius and had to decide whether to defend freedom of conscience on a political basis (for which Lipsius argued) or on a moral basis (following Coornhert's tolerationist argument). In the *libertas philosophandi* question, Spinoza not only integrates those two concepts, academic freedom and freedom of religious conscience, but he also brings together state control over religious affairs as well as a regime of religious plurality and toleration. Laerke thus approaches the matter somewhat differently from Israel but in the end they do agree. Spinoza's view that religion should be managed politically is inherently pluralistic. All religious sects should have the same status under the law and in relation to the state. In choosing between uniformity and tolerance or plurality of religious doctrines, however, his choice is not unconditional.

We also read this same reservation about the basis for Israel's radical Enlightenment thesis from Theo Verbeek. Many believe that toleration is one of the issues of the TTP but few have tried to reconcile this view with the statement in the 19th chapter "which seems to aim at subjecting all theological and pastoral activity to the sovereign," or have attempted to bring together the chapter on miracles with that on prophecy or his interpretation of Scripture.<sup>7</sup> Spinoza himself wants his book to be read in relation to two claims: what is traditionally called faith should not be considered according to criteria of truth but rather in relation to the behaviour produced by it, and the behaviour produced by his own philosophy is moral and consequently it can be classified as faith or is practically equivalent to faith. This means that one should not only be tolerant of any religion as long as it leads to moral behaviour but also that Spinoza's own philosophy should be tolerated and for the same reason.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>6</sup> Mogens LAERKE, *Spinoza and the Freedom of Philosophizing* (Oxford: OUP, 2021).

<sup>7</sup> Theo VERBEEK, *Spinoza's Theologico-Political Treatise. Exploring 'The Will of God'* (London: Routledge, 2003), 1. Verbeek is referring to chapters 6 (on miracles), 2 (on prophecy), and 7 (for an interpretation of Scripture).

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 6.

## TOLERANCE IS A POLITICAL ISSUE

In his immediate circle, Spinoza had several examples that may have encouraged him to work out his ideas on political freedom. In 1662, Franciscus van den Enden published, albeit anonymously, the *Kort verhael van nieuw-Nederlants Geleentheit* in which he outlined the social principles for a new colony in Delaware.<sup>9</sup> In function of a democratic politics inspired by native Indian society, he advocates intellectual openness and freedom of speech; theologians and ecclesiastics should best be banned from entering the colony, because he considers them responsible for the loss of religion and everything that goes wrong in the Indian countries of America. It is precisely on this point that he deviates from Plokhoy's utopian colony project that had led him to write the *Kort verhael*.<sup>10</sup> In 1665 Van den Enden publishes, again anonymously, the *Vrye Politijke Stellingen* in which he advocates freedom of expression as essential for a continuous and necessary improvement of political life.<sup>11</sup> More than that, the greatest danger to a free republic based on the principle of equal freedom is deception, when untruths and prejudices are spread. This kind of practice is the work of pseudo-religions which, through their "lieutenants", theologians and preachers, instil fear in people or raise unreasonable hopes for the hereafter and reduce them to a passive slave condition. Untruth and prejudice are perpetuated by pseudo-scholars who talk big about tradition, establish hierarchies they appropriate and replace knowledge with docility. Finally, deception and

<sup>9</sup> Franciscus VAN DEN ENDEN, *Kort verhael van Nieuw-Nederlants Geleentheit, Deughden, Natuerlijke Voorrechten, en byzondere bequaemheid ter Bevolkingh....* (1662). Frank Mertens has devoted his doctoral dissertation to this pamphlet, *Franciscus van den Enden's Brief Account* (2016). Also from Mertens is *Van den Enden en Spinoza* (Voorschoten: Uitgeverij Spinozahuis, 2012); "Van den Enden and Religion," in *The Dutch Legacy*, ed. Sonja Lavaert and Winfried Schröder (Boston: Brill, 2017), 62–89. See also Sonja LAVAERT, *Vrijheid, gelijkheid, veelheid. Het moderne democratie-denken van Machiavelli tot Spinoza en zijn kring* (Brussels: VUBPress, 2020), 111–39.

<sup>10</sup> Pieter Cornelisz PLOKHOY, *Kort en klaer ontwerp* (Amsterdam, 1662). The *Kort verhael* is the result of a petition envisaging the establishment of a colony in Delaware directed to the Colonial Office that Van den Enden was requested to compose by order of Plokhoy, who was a revolutionary utopian and Collegiant from Zeeland. Finally, Plokhoy himself published the *Kort en klaer ontwerp*, a recruitment pamphlet for the prospective colonists which is quasi identical to Van den Enden's ideas in its social-political disposition but with different views on religion — Plokhoy's aim was to establish this colony to secure all freedom of conscience. For details, see LAVAERT, *Vrijheid, gelijkheid, veelheid*, 124–28.

<sup>11</sup> VAN DEN ENDEN, *Vrye Politijke Stellingen, en Consideratien van Staat...* (Amsterdam, 1665); VAN DEN ENDEN, *Vrije Politijke Stellingen*, ed. Wim Klever (Amsterdam: Wereldbibliotheek, 1992). We will refer to the latter modern edition.

prejudice flourish on improper use of language. In the same year, an anonymous author calling himself Lucius Antistius Constans published *De jure ecclesiasticorum*, which also puts political authority above that of religious lieutenants.<sup>12</sup> In 1666 it is Lodewijk Meyer's *Philosophia S. Scripturae interpres*, published anonymously, that causes a huge outcry which does not prevent the author from providing a translation into Dutch a year later, the *Philosophie uitleghster der H. Schrifture*.<sup>13</sup> Not his language-critical insights, not even his Cartesianism and his interpretation of Scripture per se are alarming, but rather the consequences of his exposé: Scripture basically becomes superfluous, and with it the institution of the church and religious authorities who, as substitutes for God, usurp political power. In 1668 then Adriaan Koerbagh's dictionary of loanwords, *Een Bloemhof van allerley lieflijkheyd sonder verdriet*, appeared, which was followed a few months later by the systematically elaborated *Een Ligt schijnende in duystere plaatsen*.<sup>14</sup> The deconstruction of Christian theology, religion-based politics and traditional metaphysics is radical, the Hobbesian critique of language abuse and philosophical naturalism are deployed in function of free democratic politics. *Een Bloemhof* is banned, *Een Ligt* is taken off the presses and destroyed, the author is arrested and imprisoned in Amsterdam's prison Rasphuis. Koerbagh too sees political authority as a priority, intellectual openness and religious plurality as necessary protection against the degeneration of civil life into violence, deceit and oppression.

Around 1665, Spinoza interrupted his work on the *Ethics* to also get involved in the debate and address the political-theological problem. Koerbagh and

<sup>12</sup> Lucius ANTISTIUS CONSTANS, *De Jure Ecclesiasticorum, Liber Singularis* (Alethopoli [Amsterdam], 1665); *Du Droit des Ecclésiastiques*, ed. Hans Blom et al. (Caen: Université de Caen, 1991). On the relation between Spinoza's TTP and this treatise, see Pierre-François MOREAU, *Spinoza. État et la religion* (Lyon: ENS Éditions, 2005), particularly the chapter "Spinoza et le jus circa sacra", 63–70. See also Sonja LAVAERT, "'Lieutenants' of the Commonwealth: A Political Reading of *De jure ecclesiasticorum*," in LAVAERT and SCHRÖDER, *The Dutch Legacy*, 150–64.

<sup>13</sup> Lodewijk MEYER, *Philosophia S. Scripturae interpres, Exercitatio paradoxa* (Eleutheropoli [Amsterdam], 1666); *De philosophie d'uytleghster der H. Schrifture. Een wonderspreuckigh tractaet* (Vrystadt [Amsterdam], 1667).

<sup>14</sup> Adriaan KOERBAGH, *Een Bloemhof van allerley lieflijkheyd sonder verdriet, geplamt door Vreederyk Waarmond / ondersoeker der waarheyd* (Amsterdam, 1668); KOERBAGH, *Een Ligt schijnende in Duystere Plaatsen* (Amsterdam, 1668); KOERBAGH, *A Light Shining in Dark Places, to Illuminate the Main Questions of Theology and Religion*, ed. Michiel Wielema (Leiden: Brill, 2011). We will refer to this bilingual edition. See also WIELEMA, "Adriaan Koerbagh: Biblical Criticism and Enlightenment," in *The Early Enlightenment in the Dutch Republic*, ed. Wiep van Bunge (Leiden: Brill, 2003), 61–80; and Sonja LAVAERT, "Entre clandestinité et sphère publique. Le cas Koerbagh," *La Lettre clandestine* 26 (2018): 33–48; LAVAERT, *Vrijheid, gelijkheid, veelheid*, 141–65.

Van den Enden show that he is not alone in his claims: they share his view of religion as a political art that can provide the necessary connection of many different forms and variants provided it does not itself try to replace political authority. Spinoza also shares with them the same dramatic fate. The publication of the TTP provokes a fierce counter-reaction that leads to a ban in 1674. While the controversy rages, Spinoza finishes the *Ethics* but eventually refrains from publication. Afterwards, in the *Tractatus Politicus*, he tries again to set out his views clearly, now abstracted from the theological-religious problem. Nevertheless, the posthumous publication of the unfinished TP (and the *Ethics*) (1677) has the same effect as the TTP, as a bolt from the blue.

There are political reasons for these vehement counter-reactions; this is our thesis. Spinoza's defence of freedom of expression is based on the idea that society can be organized on the basis of freedom and the power of multitude, or rather, his idea is that this cannot be otherwise, it is a necessity. In this, he joins Koerbagh, Van den Enden and Antistius Constans, who all argue that freedom of speech is a necessity for peace and well-being. And so, there is the right to resist a tyranny. With this idea, at first glance, they align themselves with the Calvinist ideas prevalent in the United Provinces regarding what is necessary for political stability: a contract by popular vote in which the people cede their power to someone else.<sup>15</sup> With the myth of Batavian origins, the example of the Venetian mixed government, the image of good government and the idea of a "free republic" in the form of the right to resist a tyranny, the United Provinces form an anomaly within the Europe of the time. However, Spinoza, Koerbagh, Van den Enden and the author of *De jure ecclesiasticorum* form an anomaly within that anomaly and contradict the Calvinist view point by point.<sup>16</sup>

The two texts considered to be breaking points in the Low Countries' freedom struggle, the *Acte van verlattinghe* (1581) and *Een trouwe Waerschouwinghe* (1583), draw heavily on Protestant monarchomachist literature,

<sup>15</sup> See Marilena CHAU, "La plèbe et le vulgaire dans le *Tractatus politicus*," in *Spinoza et la politique*, ed. Humberto Giannini, Pierre-François Moreau, and Patrice Vermeren (Paris: L'Harmattan, 1997), 95–118.

<sup>16</sup> For the idea of Spinoza's anomaly, see Antonio NEGRI, *L'anomalia selvaggia. Saggio su potere e Potenza in Baruch Spinoza* (Milano: Feltrinelli, 1981). See also Sonja LAVAERT, *Het perspectief van de multitude* (Brussels: VUBPress, 2011); LAVAERT, "Radical Enlightenment, Enlightened Subversion, and Spinoza," *Philosophica* 89 (2014): 49–102.

in particular the *Vindiciae contra tyrannos* (1579).<sup>17</sup> Hubert Languet (who probably hides behind the pseudonym Stephanus Junius Brutus) formulates his defence of the right of resistance against the tyrant as a critique of Machiavelli whom he interprets and even transforms according to the common stereotype of Machiavellism, applying thereby a typical procedure of the anti-Machiavellian literature of both Catholics and Protestants. It results in an anti-democratic conservative political position: against the tyrant but in favour of monarchy. Spinoza, on the other hand, finds in Machiavelli the arguments for a democracy of the multitude. Specifically, in the TP, he denies that opposition to the tyrant is caused by the illegitimacy of tyranny; according to him, the right to overthrow tyranny depends on the power to do it, the *jus sive potentia*.<sup>18</sup> He denies that the institution of the political body arises from a contract between people and ruler since every contract depends on the political body; the contract is an effect, not a cause. He also counters the idea of good government because a state that depends on the virtue and goodness of a casual ruler is inherently unstable. He counters the myth of mixed government and questions whether such a government even exists (or can exist). And he does not entirely agree with the proud view of Dutch history as told by the *Acte van verlattinghe, Een trouwe waerschouwinghe*, and Grotius against which he emphasizes the problematic institutional fragility and the imminent danger of civil degeneration.<sup>19</sup> Each of Spinoza's reasons is related to the fundamental argument that all human beings are equal: "everyone shares a common nature".<sup>20</sup> We find the same arguments and basic idea in *Een Bloemhof, Een*

<sup>17</sup> Anonymus [Hubert Languet], *Vindiciae contra tyrannos: sive, de Principis in Populum, Populique in Principem legitime potestate...* (Edinburgh [Basel], 1579); IDEM, *De la puissance legitime du prince sur le peuple, et du peuple sur le prince...* (1581); facsimile: Genève: Droz, 1979. See also LAVAERT, *Vrijheid, gelijkheid, veelheid*, 16–17, 20–21; 65.

<sup>18</sup> In the listing of Spinoza's reasons, I am following the presentation of CHAUI, "La plèbe et le vulgaire dans le *Tractatus politicus*," 101–2. The *jus sive potentia* is central in all of Negri's work on Spinoza, see, among others, NEGRI, *L'anomalia selvaggia*. See also the Spinozist literature by Etienne BALIBAR, Laurent BOVE, Chantal JAQUET, Alexandre MATHERON, Stefano VISENTIN, and see Sonja LAVAERT and Pierre-François MOREAU, eds., *Spinoza et la politique de la multitude* (Paris: Kimé, 2021).

<sup>19</sup> See Jonathan ISRAEL, *The Dutch Republic: Its Rise, Greatness, and Fall 1477–1806* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995); Catherine SECRETAN, *Les privilèges berceau de la liberté. La Révolte des Pays-Bas: aux sources de la pensée politique moderne (1566–1619)* (Paris: Vrin, 1990); LAERKE, *Spinoza and the Freedom of Philosophizing*; Stefano VISENTIN, *La libertà necessaria. Teoria e pratica della democrazia in Spinoza* (Pisa: ETS, 2001).

<sup>20</sup> SPINOZA, *Tractatus Politicus* VII, §27, GEBARDT, *Opera* III, 319; *The Political Treatise*, CURLEY, *The Collected Works of Spinoza* II, 559.

*Ligt*, the *Kort verhael*, the *Vrye Politijke Stellingen* and *De jure ecclesiasticorum* (which I will try to demonstrate in what follows). In the context in which these texts appear, there is a tension between on the one hand legal prohibitions and judicial persecution and on the other informal social practices of exclusion due to the multitude (the people, the plebs) seen in the aforementioned texts as the political subject of a democratic polity. Among the four authors, this tension is palpable; it makes the freedom of expression and democracy of the multitude a theoretically and politically-practically complex problem with different aspects.

NO EQUALITY WITHOUT FREEDOM,  
NO FREEDOM WITHOUT EQUALITY

In *De jure ecclesiasticorum* as well, right is understood as power. It is totally meaningless to talk about the right to do something if you do not have the power to do it. People have the right to freedom of thought because it is impossible to transfer their natural power over their own mind to someone else. Conversely, the state cannot claim the right to control people's minds because it does not have the power to do so. This thesis is captured in a complex line of reasoning that at first glance seems inspired by Hobbes or Calvinist contract theory. The starting point is natural law which says that "all people are born in the same condition and are for that reason equal."<sup>21</sup> On the basis of this axiom, equality and freedom are defined as mutually related and inter-dependent. To be free means to be under one's own right and power, not subjected to the right and power of any other person. To be equal means "to have one's own natural right and power, and not to belong to any other person in any other way" (9). Equality therefore does not mean that people do not have different qualities, ideas, desires or ways of life, but it does mean that when two or more people are compared to each other, "they each have the same right and power" (9). Naturally speaking, all human beings are equal and free but they can lose their freedom/equality by violence, by a greater power oppressing them or by mutual agreement. Agreement lies at the basis of civil life: to cope with the chaos, violence and oppression that can occur in the state of nature, people can decide together to transfer their natural power, to all, to a few, or to a single person. From the moment they do so, it is those to whom they hand over power, the deputy

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<sup>21</sup> ANTISTIUS CONSTANS, *De jure ecclesiasticorum*, 8.



lieutenants, who make the decisions, for example also regarding breaking the contract. So far, there is no difference with the Hobbesian reasoning structure, and there is also the same logical difficulty of how plurality relates to the “lieutenants or placeholders [*prodi*]”, a difficulty emphasized by the use of this word. Even so, the inner faculties—the faculty of judgement, reason—“cannot be transferred or taken over by others,” they can only disappear when we die or lose them without them being acquired by others (20). Reason and judgment “are not subject to the right and power of lieutenants from which they by their very nature escape” (22). Moreover, the contract is a transfer of the will and it is “only by this will and not by the words, except in so far as they signify the will, that right and power are transferred. They are therefore no less transferred than they would be if they were transferred only in the facts and not in words” (35). It is intricately put but seems to suggest freedom of speech in addition to the freedom of thought. The lieutenants do not think nor speak for others. Explicit and analogous to Spinoza’s idea is the next step: natural equality does not change with the transition to the civil state but remains intact. Regards and privileges are contingent things that are determined temporarily by the political rulers, and consequently the same applies to the right (and power) of ecclesiastical ministers, who are no different from other citizens: their rights are determined exclusively by political authorities. In connection with the claims of the ecclesiastics, the question of the right of resistance then arises. If one questions the power of political lieutenants and claims that one should not always obey them, then the new question arising is: who will decide when one does or does not obey the political government? Should one leave this decision to each citizen? To which the surprising answer is that this is “in any case more reasonable than to claim that the citizens endowed with an ecclesiastical office can make this decision for all” (75–76).

While the power of church ministers is dismantled for and assumed by the political authority, the power of the political government, whenever and for how long it applies, is made dependent on the decision of each and every citizen. This idea is further argued throughout the treatise. The moment a citizen refuses to obey, his refusal is legitimate. “Lieutenants are then considered as equals and not as leaders, that is as lieutenants/substitutes, every time obedience is denied to them” (78). Or also, “every person is always justified to doubt” about what another requires of him or her (82–83). Every time we doubt, it is rightly and with good reason that we refuse to do what someone requires of us. “For to the one who doubts, it is as if he were asked

to do something that is unlawful and unjust” (ibid). Like natural equality, disobedience is part of the civil condition. Political authorities should know that they get their right and power from citizens, on whose actions and will they depend, and not the other way around.

#### AGAINST THE ABUSE OF POWER

Spinoza makes the point explicit: it is natural (and therefore necessary) for people to want to express their thoughts, even if this goes against the authority of the state or what it has determined may and may not be expressed. Consequently, punishing people because of the ideas they have expressed— as long as they have not been expressed, in a sense they do not exist—will threaten the stability of the state. Spinoza performs a reversal, his arguments are both practical-political and theoretical-philosophical, and they also always relate to themselves. The equalization of right and power signifies the rejection of the idea of transcendent norms (or of norms *tout court*) and opens up an enquiry into what kind of society we can, and thus have the power to, create. For Koerbagh and Van den Enden too, philosophical naturalism and criticism of traditional metaphysics go hand in hand with the political idea of equality and freedom, and the consequence is a critique of oppression, persecution, exile and violence in the name of religion. They believe that religion at the base of politics leads to those abuses and so, the antidote is to give priority to political authority. With Van den Enden, the emphasis is on the political-practical aspect and philosophical insights form the foundational background. In this, religion is not really an issue unless it is an obstacle to the common good and destroys freedom spreading myths and prejudices, deceiving or settling conflicts through violence. Theologians and ecclesiastics are held responsible for such practices, they stand for pseudo-religion, bringing division instead of connection. Koerbagh, on the other hand, speaks only indirectly about the political cause, focusing in particular on the meaning of Scripture and religion. Both authors address the common public in the vernacular—Van den Enden publishes his pamphlets in Dutch and defends the use of the mother tongue in education that should address everyone (women and men, young and old).<sup>22</sup> Koerbagh does exactly the same thing with the same arguments: if art and science are expressed in the mother tongue, one saves time that one

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<sup>22</sup> VAN DEN ENDEN, *Kort verhael*, 29.

no longer has to use to learn dead languages, but can use it to raise knowledge to a higher level.<sup>23</sup> For that, however, one needs concepts in the mother tongue, hence his dictionary. Moreover, it is a bad thing if knowledge that concerns everyone is not disseminated in a language understandable to the common people. He too underlines the importance of education in arts and sciences for all, in the mother tongue and without concealing and weighing down knowledge with untranslated loan words. Educators, especially those who spread the word of God, are meanwhile being exposed: they do their work for the sake of money. But they need not fear for their money precisely because no one is born possessing science and art and everyone, including them, has to learn and exercise it.<sup>24</sup>

With irony and a total lack of awe for the sanctity of religion, intellectual and judicial-political authorities, Koerbagh criticizes in *Een Bloemhof* the improper use of language aimed at deceiving and oppressing people. And he not only criticizes but proclaims the new naturalistic philosophy that was seen by his contemporaries as atheism. Through lemmas such as “Bibel” [Bible], “Creator”, “Duyvel” [Devil] or “Transsubstantiatie” [Transsubstantiation], he contests the idea of a creation of the world out of nothing, the Trinity, revelation, the idolatry of Christ, the existence of hell and evil spirits and the conception of a God with human traits.<sup>25</sup> He indicts the bellicose or, at best, fallacious logic of the Church, Christianity and all revelatory religions, an indictment that culminates in a political reading of religions tout court. By “Religie” he means a religion, a service by means of which everyone tries to honour God (or Nature, everything that is) and this is done in many different ways, with each people always thinking that their faith is better than that of others.<sup>26</sup> Koerbagh misses no opportunity to link the intolerance of theologians and churchmen, their abuse of power and the degeneration of religious differences into violence, see “Bisschop” [Bishop], “Excommuniceerde” [Excommunicated], “Heresie” [Heresy], “Inquisitie” [Inquisition], “Orthodox”.<sup>27</sup> He proposes a historicizing Bible reading and overturns the creation story. Through lemmas like “Metaphysica” [Metaphysics], “Subject” or “Substantie” [Substance], he deconstructs Western metaphysics and ridicules it.<sup>28</sup> His radical republican affiliation speaks

<sup>23</sup> KOERBAGH, *Een Ligt/A Light*, 56–57.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 124–27.

<sup>25</sup> KOERBAGH, *Een Bloemhof*, 95–97, 206–207, 258–259, 630.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 556–557.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 99–100; 285–88; 337–39; 366–68; 476.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 444–45; 607; 609.

directly from lemmas like “Democratie” [Democracy], “Leviathan”, “Republijc” [Republic], “Souverain” [Sovereign] or the revealing “Tyran”, that is a “tyrant, aggressor, one who commits violence and tyranny. *Tyran* is also to say, *king*, and that for the reason that the kings have commonly been so violent.”<sup>29</sup>

Most of the ideas dealt with fragmentarily in *Een Bloemhof* are systematically taken up in *Een Ligt schijnende in Duystere Plaatsen*. Again, he applies a critical-philological analysis and interprets Scripture not as the theologians do but according to reason and what it really means. His target is the intolerance towards so-called heretics and God-deniers because of power-hungry ecclesiastics—if the word “God-denier” has any meaning at all, it refers to theologians.<sup>30</sup> He denounces the “errors and fallacies of the divines in theology and religion which cause such intense hatred ... among them, especially those that are the most powerful and have the most followers or supporters, do quite the opposite of the Saviour’s teachings [i.e., love] in both words and deeds.”<sup>31</sup> The essence of his critique is the discovery of the procedure theologians use in their interpretation of Scripture to keep simple people in ignorance. They explain a concept that is an expression of an idea about general properties as a thing that exists in time and space. They turn an adjective into a noun, confuse prepositions, leave words untranslated, speak in metaphors and metonymies. This is how they then arrive at the fiction of God as a passion-ridden being who made the world out of nothing. Koerbagh, on the other hand, reads, dissects and translates the first sentences of the Genesis on the basis of linguistic knowledge and common reason. This leads him to a reflection on power and what it means when power degenerates into violence and oppression. He distinguishes between the use of legitimate power and the abuse of power by despots and tyrants. “The use of power is when the government uses the power vested in it by the people in all matters relating to the condition of the country, to protect the freedom, prosperity and interest of the people. And these men are truly powerful, though not above the power of the people” (pp. 70–71). Political authorities have legitimate power granted to them by the people, their power is not above the power of the people. Abusive power is power that sets itself above the power of the people and is not aimed at their welfare as we find many examples of in history: violent tyrants who terrorize the people for their own

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 230, 403–4; 565; 600; 636.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 78

<sup>31</sup> KOERBAGH, *Een Ligt/A Light*, 46–47.

gain or to maintain their aggressive armies—armies they need to defend their excessive power. The history of the Netherlands with its “long-standing republican form of government” shows not an oppressed people, but a brave, courageous, “free-born” people who have been able to govern themselves and defend themselves against those who wanted to take away their freedom (ibid.). But now danger looms for that freedom and the question is how this comes about and what to do about it. Abused power is when a government uses the power it was given by the people “to the detriment and disadvantage of the people (that is, to the impairment of the people’s freedom)”, “when a government, unsatisfied with the power bestowed on it ... seeks to seize even more power beyond that power, whether by devious means or by the force of foreign allies” (ibid.). To defend themselves against this abuse, it is necessary for the common people to be educated, to learn and come to knowledge and understanding. After all, “the more ignorant and simple people are, the greater and more illimited is the unlawful power that such a government can wield, but the more knowledgeable and intelligent a people are, the smaller and more limited is the government’s potential to abuse its power” (ibid.). The imminent danger comes from religious authorities substituting themselves for political government, which should not happen, and from the theologians’ disputes over Bible interpretation, in effect a mask for abuse of power (pp. 252–53). To sustain itself, a political order based on the pillar of a religion constantly needs to “ban, curse, hang, burn, and beat to death.”<sup>32</sup> This causes distrust among people, and where there is distrust, there can be no love, and where there is no love, there can be no unity, and where there is no unity, there can be no stable state, and where the state is not stable, everyone is in fear of each other and is unhappy.<sup>33</sup> The danger comes from those who, for their own benefit, openly declare that they hate the truth, and from “the clergy, with their factions, conflicts and horrific violence, as well as the governments that help them in this”.<sup>34</sup>

#### DEMOCRACY OF THE MULTITUDE

When a state is badly governed, it leads to chaos and fear that finally turns into the desperate courage of those who “do not dare to speak with

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<sup>32</sup> KOERBAGH, *Een Bloemhof*, 285–88.

<sup>33</sup> KOERBAGH, *Een Ligt/A Light*, 274–75

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

their mouth, use their fists”.<sup>35</sup> It is when people cannot speak freely that they reach for arms to end the chaos that according to Van den Enden is always the result of bad government and abuse of power. Armed uprisings and civil war are not the result of freedom of speech, it is the other way around. Freedom of speech prevents degeneration into chaos and violence. As he says in the epilogue to the *Kort verhael*: the most damaging thing to a state is “that no proper freedom is left”.<sup>36</sup> Moreover, the suppression of free speech is not based on anything. Not being allowed to speak about political alternatives would only make sense if everything is going perfectly and there is no need to change anything. But experience shows that this is never the case, that improvement is and will always be needed. In addition, Van den Enden is convinced that this is possible; through reflection and reason the world can be improved and with a good and free government the Dutch people can make an important contribution to that improvement. It seems to be a major and overconfident ambition but it is in fact a necessity; after all, the alternative is catastrophe. Based on the natural and necessary change people are subject to, it is necessary that they constantly try to improve. If they do not, they will perish. His writing is not motivated by a utopian pursuit of perfect order but it is necessary because perfect order is impossible (and consequently undesirable). This motif, analogous to Spinoza’s, relies on a reversal of perspectives. Van den Enden also assumes that political authority should be based on human nature. It comes down to distinguishing the natural and necessary from what can be changed and improved so that one knows the range of action and intervention. The determinism he assumes does not give rise to apathetic fatalism but is the basis for an engaged political theory and activism. To prevent abuse of power and weak government from ruining the Dutch people, it is necessary to develop a free (read: critical) political theory, and he does so in the *Vrye Politieke Stellingen*, with which he addresses the “Dutch common people”, that depends on a free popular government for its survival and prosperity.<sup>37</sup>

In doing so, he follows Hobbesian naturalism and determinism but not contract theory. Bad passions stem from people living under a violent government, being cheated or prey to superstition by their education. People all strive for self-preservation and are each other’s equals, their well-being motivates their actions, yet by nature they are not each other’s enemies, nor

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<sup>35</sup> VAN DEN ENDEN, *Kort verhael*, 80.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 68–69.

<sup>37</sup> VAN DEN ENDEN, *Vrye Politieke Stellingen*, 128.

are they each other's friends. They are naturally inclined to connect with each other, out of need, and after discovering the taste of connection, out of lust and amusement. The state of nature is a kind of neutral zero state in which no norms or values are inscribed and things can go in different directions. This view marks a radical break with the Christian tradition and classical natural right thinking. People are ambiguous, oscillating back and forth, between shy and social, between good and bad. They are good and bad, neither good nor bad, sometimes good, sometimes bad, and the vision of what is good and bad changes. When Van den Enden translates this anthropological view politically, he arrives at the same basic axiom as Spinoza states—people are all equal, nature is one and common to all—and that means the same rupture with the Calvinist vision which makes him politically unpalatable in the Dutch republic.

A political order is based on the principle of “equal liberty”, that means that “such evenness of ordinances, laws and rights between the more and less intelligent, the more and less gifted, the male and female, the elderly and the children, the served and the servers, the governors and the governed” should be invented so that everyone is not only not weakened or disadvantaged by it, but strengthened.<sup>38</sup> It is imperative that everyone gets the opportunity to participate in political life. The commonwealth is the bringing together of “each one's particular best” and no one can be excluded from it without “offending the common”.<sup>39</sup> For Van den Enden, too, right is power and consequently resistance power depends on the strength to resist the abuse of power. More than once, he sets out a concrete political alternative—a constitution for the colony in the *Kort verhael*; the draft of basic rules for a democratic republic after the revolt he plots against Louis XIV in the manuscript *Finis est in Holandia*—for which he personally commits himself but loses out each time.<sup>40</sup> All his theses in the *Vrye Politieke Stellingen* as well as the concrete political constitution articles and the revolutionary government rules, are agreements that explicitly depend on the political

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., 146. For this concept of “equal liberty”, see Etienne BALIBAR, *La proposition de l'égalité. Essais politiques 1989-2009* (Paris: PUF, 2010).

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., 149.

<sup>40</sup> Ms *Finis est in Holandia, Procès Rohan* (Paris: Archives Nationales, V/4/1474, 1674, pp. 342r-344v). For a facsimile and transcription, see LAVAERT, *Vrijheid, gelijkheid, veelheid*, pp. 285–96. For a description of the intended uprising, see the chapter on Van den Enden, *ibid.*, 111–39, and also LAVAERT, “Considérations politiques d'un libre penseur: Franciscus van den Enden,” in volume *Les Libertins néerlandais / The Dutch Libertines of Libertinage et philosophie à l'époque classique (XVIe-XVIIIe siècle)* 19 (2022): 173–92.

body of the multitude. The idea of good government that depends on the virtue of a single human being is dismissed as dangerous from his perspective in which the human condition is central. The human condition is the multitude: an internally differentiated plurality of people, each with their own particular aspirations, desires and characteristics. A democratic society makes laws that are good for the commonwealth, ensuring that “everyone’s particular, and natural equal liberty is safeguarded without distinction.”<sup>41</sup> The political subject is the multitude which is always collective and at the same time particular and individual. The individual (particular, unique, different) and the collective (general, equal) are mutually constitutive. The individual is the effect of a network of relations, events, interactions between bodies and their environment, and (sad and happy) passions whose principle, the human condition, is general and equal for all.

Van den Enden denies the usual counterarguments against a popular government such as that the “many-headedness and diversity of senses” would lead to bad political decisions or to delay and paralyze decision-making (171). All mischief in political life stems from the conceit and “single-mindedness” of individuals, never from the multitude (172–73). Also he reverses the burden of proof. If someone claims that people are by nature unruly and aggressive and therefore need to be led by a strong hand or be misled and deceived, he has to prove it. Not the one who claims, as Van den Enden does, that human beings are born free, the wisest of animals, gifted with speech by which they can communicate their thoughts to others, flexible, docile and amenable to reason, and consequently capable of governing themselves (174).

A radical democracy with freedom of speech in which everyone participates is what we need. For this reason, Van den Enden opposes mixed government. Although his political positions are indebted to the writings and spirit of Machiavelli, he seems to have misunderstood his message. In his criticism of a “one-headed tyranny” and aristocracy, he vilifies Machiavelli as an advocate of mixed government who failed to understand that all the good that supposedly came from the mixing of the three forms should in fact be attributed solely to the “government and authority of the people” (163). Van den Enden is opposed to the myth so dear to the Dutch.<sup>42</sup> And as for the

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<sup>41</sup> VAN DEN ENDEN, *Vrye Politieke Stellingen*, 147.

<sup>42</sup> On the myth of the mixed government and the example of Venice, see Eco O.G. HAITSMAN MULIER, *The Myth of Venice and Dutch Republican Thought in the Seventeenth Century* (Assen: Van Gorcum, 1980).



proud Dutch history of freedom, he never disputes that, but one cannot keep looking back to a glorious past if meanwhile the free republic is facing the abyss.

### CONCLUSION

The advantage of Spinoza's theory of the passions as he elaborated it in the *Ethics* and on which his reflections in the TTP and TP are based is that he provides an explanation for why people are prone to superstition and vulnerable to the oppressive power of one alone or an elite.<sup>43</sup> He is not outraged by the play of the sad passions that lead to and confirm bondage but provides an explanation for people's tendency to go against freedom of expression and counter their self-interest. With his idea of human freedom and the conception of natural right as power, he provides a theory of democracy that is not based on inequality and property. What he is trying to make clear—the political is about perspectives, relations and priorities—also applies to his own contribution: he has been shaped by the ideas of his allies—we see similar ideas, each with their own specificity, in *De jure ecclesiasticorum*, the *Kort verhael*, the *Vrije Politijke Stellingen*, *Een Bloemhof* and *Een Ligt*—and by the reactions of his opponents—the counter-texts, controversies, up to the persecution have played a role in radicalizing his ideas and in the insight that engagement in political life and debate is necessary.

When writing this text, I was guided by the question of what Spinoza, Antistius Constans, Koerbagh and Van den Enden were actually about: tolerance or freedom of speech? Gradually the question shifted and had to be reformulated. Is Spinoza talking about tolerance or about active participation in political life? Each of the authors mentioned anticipates the refutations and slander in a preface or afterword of their publication; each of them fears the persecution and asks for understanding and tolerance for their publication claiming the freedom of expression. Each of them fears not so much or at least not only their own fate but for the future of the republic. They believe they must send out a warning, take action now and urgently, they can no longer sit idly by.

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<sup>43</sup> Cf. Alexandre MATHERON, *Anthropologie et politique au XVIIe siècle. Études sur Spinoza* (Paris: Vrin, 1985), and the contributions of Kiarina KORDELA and Dimitris VARDOULAKIS, eds., *Spinoza's Authority*, vol. 1, *Resistance and Power in Ethics* (London–New York: Bloomsbury, 2018).

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PASSIVE TOLERANCE VERSUS POLITICAL ENGAGEMENT.  
ANTISTIUS CONSTANS, KOERBAGH, VAN DEN ENDEN, AND SPINOZA

This article investigates the contribution of Spinoza and authors of his circle (Antistius Constans, Van den Enden and Koerbagh) on the modern conception of tolerance. In his *Tractatus*

*theologico-politicus* (1670), Spinoza launches the *libertas philosophandi*-question integrating two kinds of freedom between which there is a tension: freedom of thought and speech and freedom of religious conscience. As freedom means living and acting in society in light of one's own interests, tolerance becomes a political issue that depends from political perspectives and priorities. This insight leads Spinoza to bringing together the control of political authority on religious affairs and a political regime of religious plurality and toleration. These ideas seem to be reminiscent of texts published in his immediate circle: the anonymous *De jure ecclesiasticorum* (1665); the political pamphlets *Kort verhael* (1662) and *Vrye Politijke Stellingen* (1665) of his teacher Van den Enden; the subversive dictionary *Een Bloemhof* (1668) and the systematic philosophical *Een Ligt* (1668) of Koerbagh. In these texts the question of religion and religious authority shifts to the question of the nature and origin of political authority. The authors all criticize the abuse of power in light of the idea that there is no freedom without equality and no equality without freedom. Together with Spinoza's *Tractatus politicus* (1677), they thereby form an anomaly within the anomaly of the Calvinist Low Countries that regards specifically this radical democratic view. They are not so much talking about tolerance but about everyone's active participation in political life which is necessary for the rescue of the republic.

**Keywords:** Spinoza; Koerbagh; Van den Enden; Antistius Constans; Radical Enlightenment; freedom of thought and speech.

#### BIERNA TOLERANCJA A POLITYCZNE ZOBOWIĄZANIE: ANTISTIUS CONSTANS, KOERBAGH, VAN DEN ENDEN I SPINOZA

Artykuł bada wkład Spinozy i autorów z jego kręgu (Antistius Constans, Van den Enden i Koerbagh) w nowoczesną koncepcję tolerancji. W swoim *Tractatus theologico-politicus* (1670) Spinoza podejmuje zagadnienie *libertas philosophandi*, łącząc dwa rodzaje wolności, między którymi istnieje napięcie: wolność myśli i słowa oraz wolność sumienia religijnego. Ponieważ wolność oznacza życie i działanie w społeczeństwie zgodnie z własnymi interesami, tolerancja staje się kwestią polityczną, która zależy od politycznych perspektyw i priorytetów. To sprostowanie prowadzi Spinozę do powiązania ze sobą kontroli władzy politycznej nad sprawami religijnymi z kwestią religijnego pluralizmu i tolerancji. Idee te zdają się przypominać teksty opublikowane w jego najbliższym otoczeniu: anonimowy *De jure ecclesiasticorum* (1665); polityczne pamflety *Kort verhael* (1662) i *Vrye Politijke Stellingen* (1665), pisma jego nauczyciela Van den Endena; wywrotowy słownik *Een Bloemhof* (1668) i systematyczny filozoficzny *Een Ligt* (1668) Koerbagha. W tych tekstach kwestia religii i władzy religijnej przesuwa się w stronę pytania o naturę i pochodzenie władzy politycznej. Wszyscy autorzy krytykują nadużycia władzy w świetle idei, że nie ma wolności bez równości i nie ma równości bez wolności. Wraz z *Tractatus politicus* Spinozy (1677) teksty te stanowią anomalię w obrębie anomalii kalwińskich Niderlandów, która dotyczy właśnie tego radykalnego poglądu demokratycznego. Mówią one nie tyle o tolerancji, ile o aktywnym udziale każdego człowieka w życiu politycznym, niezbędnym dla ocalenia republiki.

**Słowa kluczowe:** Spinoza; Koerbagh; Van den Enden; Antistius Constans; Radykalne Oświecenie; wolność myśli i wypowiedzi.