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### SPINOZA'S CRITIQUE OF RELIGIOUS INTOLERANCE\*

There is quite a broad consensus that religious intolerance poses a serious threat to liberal-democratic states which are grounded in principles of liberty and equality for all. However, there is much less agreement concerning which ideas serve mostly to foster religious intolerance. Usually, based on Locke's views, two ideas are considered to engender religious intolerance. The first one is that only one's own religion is the true religion and that only within it there is a possibility of attaining salvation, while other religions are false or even morally wrong. The other one, connected to the first but much more dangerous, is that it is legitimate for the state or an ecclesiastical authority to punish a false religion and that it has a duty to protect the true faith by forcing people to accept it. But it needs to be noted that such a description of religious intolerance, however accurate, is still very general. It does not say anything about the genesis of the ideas in question, the way in which they should be understood, their social and political determinants or the consequences of accepting them. In this connection, five questions seem to be particularly relevant. First, what is the origin of the conviction that only one's own religion is true while other religions are false and morally invalid, so they must be rejected and condemned? Second, what are the grounds for the belief that a state or an ecclesiastical authority is entitled or even obligated to punish, destroy, and prosecute the practitioners of the religions which it does not acknowledge? Third, does considering one religion to be

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true always put other religions beyond the pale of what is acceptable and respectable? Fourth, what makes religious intolerance appealing to so many? Fifth, what exactly is wrong about religious intolerance and why does it pose a threat to the key values of the democratic state? All those questions seem essential for getting the grasp of religious intolerance and working out the ways of opposing it.

In this paper I shall offer Spinoza's answer to those questions as set out in his writings, especially in the *Theological-Political Treatise* (TTP).<sup>1</sup> In his view, nothing is more detrimental to the integrity and the sound condition of the political society than religious intolerance. Not only is religious intolerance inimical to the independent use of reason and the freedom of philosophizing, or, more generally, to freedom of thought (TTP, 20, § 33), but it inevitably poisons social life with distrust, suspicions, and contempt for human beings and their inherent dignity. Social atmosphere that is infected with religious intolerance favors authoritarian and high-handed policies. It provides fertile ground for the rise of monarchical or other dictatorial regimes and is profoundly incompatible with the spirit of republicanism. Worst of all, religious intolerance introduces sharp divisions within the political society which may turn out impossible to mend. As numerous examples from ancient and contemporary history show, politics based on religious intolerance splits society along confessional divides; parties arise, bitterly opposed to one another. This often results in violent strife, where the state is torn apart by the inner conflict and this process may well end in a complete disintegration of the political society (see TTP, Preface, § 10; TTP, 19, § 41; TTP, 18). Thus, any political body is threatened by destruction so long as it harbors religious conflict and enmity within itself. Therefore, as long as both religious intolerance is not eliminated, or at least effectively checked, and as long as a civil society does not come into being which will enable a peaceful coexistence of diverse religious confessions, there will be no question of a perfectly stable, secure political community and a civil society providing conditions favorable to the unhampered development of the human individual.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> All translations of Spinoza's writings are from Edwin CURLEY's *Collected Works of Spinoza*, vols. 1–2 (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2016). References to the *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus* (TTP) and the *Tractatus Politicus* (TP) are followed by the chapter and paragraph of the translation. References to the *Ethics* (E) are followed by a part and specific information based on the following abbreviations: Axiom (a), Proposition (p), Appendix (app), Corollary (c), DA (Definition of Affects, end of Part 3), scholium (s), plus a page number where applicable. References to *Epistolae* (Ep.) are followed by the letter number.

<sup>2</sup> The importance of religion for the political life of his time may have been the chief reason why Spinoza, very much concerned with intolerance in general, and well aware that intolerance

Of course, Spinoza was not the only representative of early modern philosophy who perceived religious intolerance as an exceedingly dangerous phenomenon and a profound threat to the integrity of the state. Such a view was shared by Francis Bacon, Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz, Pierre Bayle, John Locke, and the one closest to Spinoza's mindset, Thomas Hobbes.<sup>3</sup> All those thinkers, to a greater or lesser degree, associated religious intolerance with violence of a most vicious kind—the opinion starkly noticeable in the definitions of religious intolerance given by Locke and Hobbes. Nonetheless, a theme specific to Spinoza's reflections on religious intolerance is his insistence that it can be traced to the steady traits of human beings, or, more precisely, their affective disposition, pervading and shaping their existence. Hence, on Spinoza's view (which differs here from those of the vast majority of 17th-century thinkers) religious intolerance should not be understood (1) simply as a failure in human thinking or (2) as an extraordinary phenomenon imposed on humans by external circumstances or (3) simply as an institutional defect. Instead, it should be seen as a result of a highly complex interplay of various factors closely intertwined with pervasive features ingrained in the human psyche. And this further means that religious intolerance cannot be simply eliminated by means of purely educational efforts aimed at reducing ignorance—contrary to what many Enlightenment thinkers believed, adopting the then popular slogan “more education, fewer superstitions and less religious intolerance”. Yet, in Spinoza's eyes, the whole problem of combatting religious intolerance lies in the fact that it calls for efforts on many levels. First, on the *level of individual consciousness*: since every one of us is a limited being, it is only natural that in the pursuit of our interests we more or less give in to anxiety, exaggerated ambition, excessive pride, and self-esteem—that is, to the passions that tend to fuel intolerance and make us susceptible to promptings of intolerant religion. Second, on the level of *religion itself* or *religious doctrine*, for it is clear that the elimination of intolerant attitudes from religion calls for making clear the crucial difference between true religion and traditional organized religions with their merely ceremonial religious observance. Third, on the *social* and *political* level, since religious intolerance tends not only to be destructive to an individual

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in society need not arise on religious grounds, chose to focus on religious intolerance and the multiple evils it generates.

<sup>3</sup> A comparative account of Spinoza and Hobbes can be found in Edwin CURLEY, “‘I Durst Not Write So Boldly,’ or, How to Read Hobbes' Theological-Political Treatise,” in *Hobbes e Spinoza*, ed. Emilia Giacotti (Naples, 1992), 497–593; and in Noel MALCOLM, *Aspects of Hobbes* (Oxford: OUP, 2002).

life, but above all to the common ground of community life, thus posing a grave political threat against which the state and its institutions must effectively protect themselves.

The paper will be organized as follows. First, before I address intolerance itself, I shall examine the ideological climate in Holland and analyze some events from Spinoza's life which might have led him to think that religious intolerance poses the gravest threat both to individual and political life. Second, I shall discuss Spinoza's account of the origin of religious intolerance. Third, I shall discuss what it is about us, according to Spinoza, that makes us exposed to religious intolerance? Fourth, I shall consider the measures which, in his view, should be taken in order to combat or at least curb religious intolerance effectively. I shall round off my presentation by describing what I consider to be the most valuable aspects of Spinoza's contribution to the debate on religious intolerance and practical difficulties that go with it.

#### THE HISTORICAL AND PERSONAL CONTEXT OF SPINOZA'S VIEW ON RELIGIOUS INTOLERANCE

In studying and discussing the ideas formulated in the TTP one needs to bear in mind that this treatise, in contrast to the *Ethics*, is not a work of pure theory, an abstract study of conceptions unrelated to topical issues of Spinoza's time; consequently, it is not a work that can adequately be understood without its own historical context. In fact, it contains a profound intellectual response to the concrete political situation of the Netherlands of that time and the intellectual discussions this situation gave rise to. Much of the debate carried out in the TTP can be fairly characterized as a polemic against the extreme conservative conceptions of state and religion affirmed at that time by the orthodox Calvinist preachers in Dutch society.

The TTP was anonymously published in 1670, yet work on it probably started in 1665 and was not finished until the end of 1669. This treatise contains a comprehensive and systematic discussion of many theological and political points that were considered crucially important in the early modern debates on religion and its political implications. These include the questions of the authorship and interpretation of the Bible, the problem of the Jewish people as God's chosen nation, and a whole range of issues concerning political tolerance, natural law, political power, and the form of government. Yet the overriding concern pervading the whole work and inspiring all these par-

ticular points was, in Spinoza's project, the defense of "the freedom to philosophize" and of reason against the "prejudices of theologians and excessive authority of preachers". Apart from this theoretical and polemical consideration that prompted him to compose this treatise on the Scriptures and the government, there was also a more personal point, which Spinoza stated in his letter to Henry Oldenburg of 1665, namely defense against charges of atheism that had been levelled against him for some time (see Ep. 30).<sup>4</sup>

Thus, given the fact that the TTP is a work that cannot be adequately understood and appreciated without reference to the historical context which inspired it, it must be conceded that Spinoza's discussion of religious intolerance as contained in that work was also, *mutatis mutandis*, firmly rooted in the definite historical situation, which was a sum of social, political and personal factors concerning himself. A complete exploration of this context and all its relevant factors calls for detailed and comprehensive explorations, which go beyond the scope of this paper. Nevertheless, I will begin by singling out three crucial component factors of this context, which must have been of particular concern to Spinoza and which will enable us to see why Spinoza came to regard religious intolerance as a source of the most painful evils both in social and individual life.

One such prominent factor, surely of much concern to the philosopher, was the rise in power and influence of the Calvinist church, which—having gained the status of the dominant church in the society and state—started to transform itself into a highly institutionalized political body, enviously guarding its monopolist position in the state and trying to impose rigorous dogmatism in the spheres of doctrine and liturgy. Let us take a closer look at this point.

In Spinoza's days, the United Provinces of the Netherlands experienced thriving economic and industrial development, as shipbuilding and commerce in particular were flourishing on an unparalleled scale. Dutch trade re-

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<sup>4</sup> The contemporary reader may be somewhat puzzled by Spinoza's sensitivity to the accusations of atheism: after all he made no secret of his rejection of the conception of the personal God of the Judeo-Christian tradition; likewise, his philosophical vision of reality contradicted in many respects the teachings of the revealed religions. Yet it has to be remembered that the meaning of the term "atheist" was different in the 17th century from what it is now. It implied, above all, a strongly pejorative moral qualification: an atheist was supposed to be immoral. It is this point that Spinoza was particularly sensitive about. This is shown by his response to the charge of atheism levelled at him by Lambert van Velthuysen, found in a letter to Jacob Ostens: "But of course, if he had known (namely Spinoza's way of life), he would not so easily have persuaded himself that I teach atheism. For atheists are accustomed to seek honors and riches immoderately. But I have always scorned those things. Everyone who knows me knows that" (Ep. 43, 386).

lations extended to most European countries and many African and Asian territories. Dutch tradesmen found their way to such distant lands as India, Indonesia, China, and Japan. But the United Provinces were at that time well ahead of other European countries not only with respect to economy, trade and industry; it was the country and state that first elaborated a model of social functioning based on very high degree of religious toleration; in fact Dutch society enjoyed the highest degree of religious freedom found anywhere in the world in that century.<sup>5</sup> Admittedly, this did not mean that all members of all churches were accorded full civil rights; for instance the right to hold higher public offices was reserved for members of the dominant church, which was the Dutch Reformed Church; nonetheless, the freedom to confess one's own religion was granted more extensively and religious toleration was far greater in the United Provinces than in any other European country of that age.

And yet, despite its undisputed economic success, its recent political independence from Spanish rule, and despite the freedoms and tolerance in social life, the country was divided by internal discord on political and religious matters. The political identity of the Dutch Republic in particular came under dispute with respect as to what form of government (republican or monarchic) the country should adopt, and what role religion should play in the running of the state.

The chief opposition political circles behind the controversy concerning the political rule of the Republic were Johann De Witt's supporters, who favored the republican form of government (the so-called "States" faction), and the Orangist faction, which strove to reintroduce the stadtholder system and more centralized rule. For our discussion it is important that De Witt's party had the support of the so-called Cocceians camp within the Dutch Reformed Church. These followers of the teachings of Johannes Cocceius, a professor of theology at the University of Leiden, represented a liberal and rationalist standpoint, they opposed "Calvinization" of both the public and individual life, opposed the theocratic conception of the state and strongly advocated Church–state separation. Philosophically, they were associated with the new philosophy of René Descartes; in the factional strife within the Dutch Reformed Church and Dutch society as a whole, they sought the alliance of De Witt's republican movement in their struggle against the growing

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<sup>5</sup> See Jonathan I. ISRAEL, *The Dutch Republic: Its Rise, Greatness, and Fall, 1477–1806* (Oxford: OUP, 1995), chap. 27, and Ronnie Po-Chia HSIA and Henk VAN NIEROP (eds.), *Calvinism and Religious Toleration in the Dutch Golden Age* (Cambridge: CUP, 2002).

influence of the so-called old orthodoxy faction represented by the followers of Gisbertus Voetius, and forming the Voetians camp.<sup>6</sup>

A rigorous Calvinist, Voetius (1589–1676), in the formulation of van den Wall, “put an indelible stamp upon the Utrecht theological faculty and its students for over forty years.” In stark contrast to the Cocceians, the Voetians were ardent opponents of the republican form of government and strong advocates of restoring the House of Orange as the hereditary holder of the office of stadtholder. They asserted that the struggle for the political independence of the Dutch Republic was identical with the defense of Calvinist orthodoxy. In their view, the relationship between the Church and the state was one of strict subordination: the state authorities should obey the will of God as revealed in the Scriptures and interpreted by the church. Philosophically, they adhered to the traditional doctrine of Christian Aristotelianism.<sup>7</sup> Towards Cartesianism and the “new philosophy” in general they showed marked hostility: their writings are full of insults against Descartes and other proponents of his method of philosophy. Their opposition to the newly arrived rationalism was grounded in the assumption that the unrestrained trust put in the powers of human reason, combined with rather cautious, if not scornful, attitude toward tradition and bookish erudition—the hallmark of Cartesianism—inevitably leads to a weakening of the position of theology and faith in general.<sup>8</sup> Voetius himself believed the Cartesian method of doubt is pernicious: once we allow doubts concerning the exist-

<sup>6</sup> See Ernestine VAN DEN WALL, “The Tractatus Theologico-Politicus and Dutch Calvinism, 1670–1700,” *Studia Spinozana* 11 (1995), 201–26; and Steven NADLER, *Book Forged in Hell: Spinoza's Scandalous Treatises and the Birth of the Secular Age* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2011), 47. It is noteworthy that De Witt himself was not a Cartesian and despite his liberal and tolerant attitude in politics he adhered to the traditional tenets of the Calvinist religion, as is shown in historical sources.

<sup>7</sup> To begin with, Protestant theologians tended to reject most of the Aristotelian system except dialectics and ethics, which they accepted as useful tools in disputes against the Papists and heretics. This, however, started to change at the end of the 16th century, when a new interest in Aristotelian metaphysics began. This shift in the Protestant attitude towards Aristotelian philosophy was occasioned by the theological controversies among Protestants themselves, which made it clear that the crucial theological categories stand in need of metaphysical interpretation.

<sup>8</sup> In their vociferous opposition to Descartes and his rationalist attitude, Voetius himself and his followers did not shrink from attacks and insults at a personal rather than doctrinal level; the proof thereof is the famous polemic written by Martin Schook at the insistence and under inspiration of Voetius himself: *Admiranda Methodus Novae Philosophiae Renati Des Cartes*. It abounds in accusations *ad personam* (similar attacks would before long be made against Spinoza himself): Descartes is said to be an atheist and compared to Lucilio Vanini; he is accused of hypocrisy and concealing his true views, and also of profligacy. The purpose of this pamphlet was to prejudice against Descartes the religious part of Dutch society as well as Calvinist theologians and ministers.

ence of God, skepticism inevitably sets in, followed by atheism, which is the gravest of all sins to be opposed at any cost and with all available means, including violent persecution.<sup>9</sup> Voetians laid particular emphasis on the need to conjoin knowledge and understanding with piety; and by the latter they meant an attitude of complete surrender to the will of God as revealed in Scripture. Their views can be briefly summarized as follows: (a) freedom of philosophizing poses a threat to religion, morality, and peace; (b) people cannot know themselves merely through their own capacities, therefore they cannot know how to act in the right way; (c) religion is a necessary and a sufficient condition of both self-knowledge and morality; yet religion as such presupposes mediation between man and God, which is fulfilled by a church and some kind of priestly ministry; (d) thus, according to their assumptions, religion is prior to state, and faith in the revealed truth is prior to the knowledge and understanding acquired by the human reason alone; (e) theology should be valued above philosophy, otherwise an increase in blasphemies and heresy would follow.

Apart from these two major antagonistic parties of Cocceians and Voetians, the country teemed with smaller sects of all kinds. Some were rather mystical in their spirit, such as Quakers or Chiliasts (Millennialists), while others had a more rationalist tendency, such as Socinians (who came over from Poland) or Collegiants, who were particularly close to Spinoza.<sup>10</sup> The Collegiants did not define any precise conditions for participation in their meetings, least of all did they formulate any creed apart from belief in the Bible as inspired scripture. Adherents of any Christian denominations were allowed to come and take part in prayer meetings; all participants were regarded as equals, in principle everyone could comment on the biblical text, there was no hierarchical organization nor any kind of priesthood.

Spinoza was well acquainted with the political and religious situation in Dutch society and within Dutch Calvinism. Various statements he made on

<sup>9</sup> To be precise, Voetius denied the possibility of there being true atheists—that is, people sincerely believing that no God exists. According to him the idea of God is innate in the human mind and cannot be removed from it; however, in practice, a human being can come close to atheism if he or she practices no religion and lives immorally. Such an attitude he termed immediate atheism, which is to be distinguished from mediate or implied atheism, an attitude which conceals its true nature behind some show of religious observance or piety; see the introduction by Joanna Usakiewicz in René DESCARTES, *List do Voetiusa*, trans. Joanna Usakiewicz (Warsaw: PWN, 1998), xi.

<sup>10</sup> Leszek KOŁAKOWSKI, *Świadomość religijna i wież kościelna. Studia nad chrześcijaństwem bezwyznaniowym XVII wieku* (Warsaw: PWN, 1997), 123–31; Steven NADLER, *Spinoza. A Life* (Cambridge: CUP, 1999), 139–41.



matters of contemporary interests present him as a person well aware of both the virtues and vices of the political, social, and intellectual life in the Dutch Republic of his day. This goes some way in explaining the seemingly contradictory nature of some of his statements on the country in which he lived.<sup>11</sup> On the one hand, he could write in the TTP that “he had a rare good fortune to live in a Republic in which everyone is granted complete freedom of judgment, and is permitted to worship God according to his mentality, and in which nothing is thought to be dearer or sweeter than freedom (TTP, Preface, § 12; see also TTP, 20, § 40); on the other hand, he could be severely critical of some political actions by the authorities of the Republic, and this both from the point of view of the general interest of the country and from that of the presupposed doctrinal and constitutional principles (see Ep. 30).

The example of the controversy between Cocceians and Voetians, which he closely followed, made Spinoza realize how dangerous for a republic the excessive interference of church authorities in civic affairs can be and how corrosive religious controversies can be to political stability, public peace and the economic prosperity of a state. Moreover, the methods employed by the Voetians camp, who by means of doctrinal rigor and elaborate religious ceremony attempted to extend their control to nearly all aspects of the lives of the faithful made him even better realize where the difference lay between true religious faith and the regimentation imposed by ecclesiastical institutions, whose purpose was to ensure the control of the privileged religious class over the multitude of believers.

The observations made of the current political life and the animosity between the Cocceians and Voetians allowed him to see with immediate evidence close links between freedom of thought and expression, the policy of religious toleration and the flowering of rational thought, as Spinoza himself stated in a letter to Oldenburg. The attempts of the Calvinist Church to impose on all citizens some tenets of their creed showed him what harmful social disturbances will ensue when the state authorities, unduly swayed by religion, try to establish laws concerning purely speculative matters (TTP, Preface, § 11).

Seen from this perspective, the discussion of religious intolerance carried out by Spinoza in the TTP, can be aptly described as a reaction to and a warn-

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<sup>11</sup> For different interpretations thereof see Jonathan I. ISRAEL, “Religious Toleration and Radical Philosophy in the Later Dutch Golden Age (1668–1710),” in *Calvinism and Religious Toleration in the Dutch Golden Age*, ed. Ronnie Po-Chia HSIA and Henk VAN NIEROP (Cambridge: CUP, 2002), 148–58; and Justin STEINBERG, *Spinoza's Political Psychology: The Taming of Fortune and Fear* (Cambridge: CUP, 2018), 131.

ing against the increase of the influence of orthodox Calvinism as represented by the Voetians camp, which would insistently demand more participation and influence in purely civic affairs. For Spinoza, such demands posed a threat not only to the climate of tolerance and peaceful coexistence of diverse forms of religion within the Dutch Republic but to the very integrity and well-being of the state itself. He had no doubt that the expanding influence of church authorities, and, above all, the attempts of Calvinist preachers to gain control over all forms of life, if unprevented, would in time shake the foundations of the republic and might eventually lead to its downfall.

However, the general restlessness of Dutch politics at the time was not the only fact that brought home to Spinoza how destructive the evils of religious intolerance could be. Another such fact was the case of his friend and fellow freethinker Adriaan Koerbagh and the way he had been treated by the magistrates of Amsterdam.<sup>12</sup> Koerbagh, a lawyer and a medical doctor, a member of the so-called Spinoza's circle, published in Dutch a book titled *A Flower Garden Composed of All Kinds of Loveliness*. In this book he set out many anticlerical views in a very sarcastic way. Besides, he denied that Jesus was literally divine. He argued that God is substance which is identical with nature, that miracles, considered as divinely-caused departures from the laws of nature, are impossible, and that divine Providence is just the ordinary course of nature. It is hardly surprising that church authorities found Koerbagh's views and his attack on organized religion offensive and blasphemous. After a series of interrogations, Koerbagh was tried and sentenced for blasphemy. Imprisoned in poor conditions, he fell ill and died soon after being released.

Spinoza was profoundly moved by Koerbagh's death. As Nadler aptly observed, he was all the more shaken as this represented for him not only a personal tragedy and the loss of a close friend and an ally in his campaign against superstition, sectarianism and fanaticism. More importantly, he saw in the Koerbagh affair a betrayal of the ideals of the Dutch Republic and an alarming indication that even a state as tolerant as the Dutch Republic—which permitted its citizens more freedom in religious matters than any other state then in Europe—could nevertheless backslide into sectarianism if it unduly allowed too much say in civic affairs to religious authorities.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> The Koerbagh affair is generally believed to have precipitated the completion and publication of the TTP (see STEINBERG, "Spinoza's Curious Defense of Toleration," in Melamed and Rosenthal, *Spinoza's Theological-Political Treatise*, 221).

<sup>13</sup> NADLER, *Book Forged in Hell*, 40.

Naturally, the Koerbagh affair was not the only experience of religious intolerance that touched Spinoza personally in a painful way. Let us not forget that the philosopher himself fell victim to harsh intolerant treatment when, aged 23, he was expelled and excommunicated from his native Jewish community of Amsterdam by a rabbinical authority, probably motivated by excessive religious zeal. The details of this crucial event in Spinoza's life have always remained obscure, he himself never recalled this fact of his young age in his literary output. So we do not really know why he was expelled and why the leaders of the Amsterdam synagogue put a curse, the so-called *herem*, on him. All we know for sure is that the terms of his *herem* were the harshest ever imposed on a member of the Sephardic Jewish community of Amsterdam.<sup>14</sup> The text of the *herem*, which we happen to know, states among other things that Baruch de Espinoza taught and practiced "evil opinions and acts" and "abominable heresies". The *herem* proclaims that Baruch de Espinoza "cursed be by day and cursed be by night; cursed be when he lies down and cursed be when he rises up," and concludes that "no one is to communicate with him, orally or in writing, or show him any favor, or stay with him under the same roof, or come within four cubits of his vicinity, or read any treatise composed or written by him."

The fact that Spinoza remained silent about this dramatic experience of his youth only confirms the surmise that he must have felt very deeply about it; probably its most painful aspect was the fact that such a pitiless condemnation should have been issued by his own native community, the congregation that had raised and educated him, that had held his family in high esteem. This in itself was a graphic illustration of the fact, that even peaceful, decent and friendly people, when influenced by excessive religious zeal, an enthusiasm supported by an obscurantist reading of Scripture, become capable of irrational acts stemming from passions such as hatred, blind anger and superstitious fear: that the violent feelings engendered by fanaticism can go so far as destroying the bonds of friendship and family ties.

To sum up the observations made so far in this paper: religious intolerance, far from being an indifferent subject to Spinoza (on which to theorize with suitable academic reserve), was in fact something he must have felt very strongly about and for more than one reason. His concern about the religious freedom in his home country, which appeared to have come under threat from some zealots, was probably one such reason; the painful experiences of his youth and the loss of his friend and associate was another. Of

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<sup>14</sup> NADLER, *Spinoza. A Life*, 120ff.

course, his admirable clarity of mind and his rationalist attitude made sure that his discussion of this topic was free from undue bias resulting from personal inclinations. Yet it is important to realize that the philosopher's insight into the problem of intolerance, clear and precise as he usually was, must have been reinforced by his most personal experiences and that his conviction that intolerance is a deadly threat to everything human beings tend to value and care about, was far from a merely academic conviction.

#### THE ORIGINS OF RELIGIOUS INTOLERANCE

It is generally assumed that Spinoza explains the origins of intolerance in two ways. The first can be found in his *Ethics*. It starts from the analysis of one of human affects, namely, ambition, which Spinoza defines as a specifically human natural disposition, which consists in the desire, present in each of us, that all the other human beings should live according to our temperament (E3p31c). The other way of explaining the roots of intolerant attitude towards other humans is expounded in the TTP, based to a large extent on an examination of the opposed passions of fear and hope and their function in both religion and political affairs.<sup>15</sup>

In principle, I share this generally assumed interpretation of Spinoza's theory of the origins of intolerance, yet in what follows I would like to modify and supplement this account. The modification I wish to propose rests on the observation that implied in Spinoza's discussion of the nature and sources of religious intolerance is the subtle distinction between the explanation of the deep, psychological causes of religious intolerance (whence religious intolerance follows) and the elucidation of why religious intolerance appears to have so much appeal to so many people. I will discuss the former aspects of Spinoza's conception first, and then move on to the other one.

Taking the text of the TTP as the frame of reference, one finds that for Spinoza the essence of religious intolerance has two constituents. One, which we might call the positive aspect of religious intolerance, consists in excessive confidence in one's own religion. The other component, which we might describe as the negative aspect of religious intolerance, consists in contempt towards all those who do not share this sort of religion, "even

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<sup>15</sup> See Alexandre MATHERON, *Individu et communauté chez Spinoza* (Paris: Minuit, 1969); Michael ROSENTHAL, "Spinoza's Republican Argument for Toleration," *Journal of Political Philosophy* 11 (2003), 321–26; STEINBERG, *Spinoza's Political Psychology*, 134–43.

though they are very honest and obedient to true virtue" (TTP, 14, § 4). The former component is closely related to the idea that one's own religion is the only true religion, and it alone opens for humans the path to salvation. The latter component in turn goes hand in hand with the idea that one has been "elected" or "chosen" by God to teach others; and if one has been called or elected by God to enlighten the rest of humanity, this means that one is not only entitled but also obliged to coerce others to accept his religion, which is the only true religion (see TTP, 14, § 4; and 7, §§ 1–3). However, the problem Spinoza is particularly concerned with is the origin of each of these two components: Where does this excessive confidence in one's own religion originate? What brings contempt towards all those who do not share in this kind of religion?

Let us consider Spinoza's answers to these two questions in turn. The roots of excessive confidence in one's own religion are to be sought in deeply ingrained prejudice concerning God and the nature of the universe. As Spinoza explains in the Appendix to *Ethics*, Part 1, these prejudices about God and the world can ultimately be reduced to one: the personal, human-like nature of God. People commonly suppose that God is a person—a person like a human being—like each of them, and that he orders all things of nature to an end.

Yet, why do human beings have the tendency to produce teleological and anthropomorphic explanations of nature? In the *Ethics*, Spinoza proposes three reasons to explain this tendency. The first reason is habit: people have got accustomed to viewing everything they do from the point of view of their own advantage and whatever they find desirable. In this way, they always try to explain whatever happens in nature from the point of view of its supposed end and the good it is supposed to cause; and they always feel satisfied if they think they have found such an end and the advantage it is thought to serve.

The second reason is the apparent fact that a lot of things in the surrounding world (the part of the universe available to our immediate experience) actually do seem to serve a definite purpose, which is precisely our (human) advantage, and to have been made to do so: "eyes for seeing, teeth for chewing, plants and animals for food, the sun for light, the sea for supporting fish" (E1app, 440). Therefore, people start to look at all other things as "means to their own advantage". Thinking that they have found those means and at the same time being conscious that they did not create them themselves, they come to believe that somebody else designed those means and

made the latter to be used by them. They do not think that such wonderful means could have been created by nature itself.

The third reason for humans to believe that all things are directed by God is based on the assumption that if something happens, it has some deeper sense than only that which is suggested by nature. If, for example, someone was killed by a stone that fell from the roof, they will argue that it had fallen with the aim of killing that person.

All three reasons identified by Spinoza for humans to attribute human-like purposiveness to God and teleological causality to nature confirm in his eyes his initial surmise that the persuasive force of teleological and anthropomorphic thinking in humans derives from ignorance and a failure to comprehend the true nature of God and the place occupied by man in the whole universe. These prejudices about God and the world not only stand in the way of gaining adequate knowledge of nature and adhering to it, but they are inimical to the independent use of reason, or, more generally, to the freedom of philosophizing. Worse still, they provide a fertile ground for the rise of institutionalized religions which bear scant relation to real piety (the love of God and of one's fellow human beings).<sup>16</sup>

However, the point that I wish to stress here is that, in Spinoza's view, this erroneous conception of God and nature is not, on its own, sufficient reason to explain the excessive trust in one's own religion. In the Appendix to Part 1 of the *Ethics*, he states that the prejudice of viewing God anthropomorphically and Nature teleologically in some human beings "was changed into superstition and struck deep roots in their minds" (E1app, 441). This statement is not perhaps entirely clear, yet it seems to suggest that the mere prejudice of viewing God anthropomorphically and Nature teleologically alone does not, as such, generate excessive confidence in one's own religion brought to the point of regarding all other religions as false and morally wrong. In other words, the twin prejudices of anthropomorphism and teleologism (unscientific and simplistic as they can be) are, by themselves, far from breeding the pernicious and socially disruptive evil of religious intolerance, unless they are transformed into what Spinoza terms "superstition".<sup>17</sup>

<sup>16</sup> A more detailed account of prejudice in Spinoza's thought can be found in Mogens LAERKE, *Spinoza and the Freedom of Philosophizing* (Oxford: OUP, 2021), chap. 6.

<sup>17</sup> See Daniel GARBER, "Anthropomorphism, Teleology, and Superstition: The Politics of Obedience in Spinoza's *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus*," in *Spinoza in Twenty-First-Century American and French Philosophy*, ed. Jack Stetter and Charles Ramond (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2019), 303ff.; Herman DE DIJN, "Spinoza and religious emotions", in *Religious Emotion. Some Philosophical Exploration*, ed. Willem Lemmens and Walter van Herck (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2008), 105–19; Chantal JAQUET, "A Response: Logic of the Su-

There are a number of passages in Spinoza's work that appear to confirm this point. In his TTP he states that even if human beings be completely mistaken in their beliefs about the nature of God, they need not by the same token become evildoers and sinners (TTP, 3, § 24). Likewise in the *Ethics*, having affirmed that human beings "rarely live from the dictates of reason", he concludes that "prophets, who considered common advantage, not that of the few", were right in enjoining "Humility, Repentance and Reverence" on the common people (E4p54c). This is clear also from Spinoza's doctrine of the universal faith (*fides universalis*).

There is a universal religious faith, shared by all humans who care about religion. This universal faith comprises the dogmas that will not and cannot be disputed by any honest person and that anyone must acknowledge in order to exhibit obedience to God (TTP, 14, §§ 25–29). These dogmas are, in brief, as follows: there is one God, present everywhere, just and merciful, always acting freely and of his own accord; he should be worshipped and obeyed, and the only way to show him obedience is to love one's neighbor and always act according to justice; those who obey God will be saved and he will forgive the repentant sinners their transgressions.

At least some of these dogmas, when literally interpreted, presuppose an anthropomorphic conception of God and a teleological conception of nature, no matter how reduced a meaning we may ascribe to them. Spinoza was of course aware of this and refused to read them literally; instead, he attributed an exclusively practical sense to them. To him their true and the only relevant meaning was as practical injunctions, even though formulated in the indicative. Nevertheless, he was also keenly aware that common people would understand these dogmas literally and interpret them in terms of their received religious upbringing. Thus, he appears to have found it perfectly acceptable that the non-philosophically minded would share the traditional anthropomorphic conception of God and this in itself is perfectly compatible with tolerant attitudes within religion itself and religious tolerance as a principle of social organization. The anthropomorphic presentation of God and the teleological conception of nature only become a vehicle for religious intolerance when transformed into a superstition.

What makes superstition so harmful and destructive? Unfortunately, Spinoza gives no general definition of it in any of his writings. Neither does he indicate by what mechanism the transformation of a mere, more or less

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perstitious, Logic of the Pious" in *Spinoza in Twenty-First-Century American and French Philosophy*, ed. Jack Stetter and Charles Ramond (London: 2019), 213ff.

harmless, prejudice into a pernicious superstition takes place. On the other hand, in his TTP he presented a comprehensive and detailed characterization of superstition, which to a large extent makes up for the lack of a precise definition. Superstition, in Spinoza's eyes is a fairly complex phenomenon, comprising a number of constitutive elements.<sup>18</sup> At this point I focus only on one crucial aspect of superstition, namely, what makes it so much more harmful a phenomenon than mere prejudice.

In contrast to prejudice, superstition consists not just in replacing true knowledge with sham knowledge; in fact, it is a delusion which has gained considerable control over an individual's thinking and conduct; in Spinoza's words, it consists "in apparitions, the delusions of a sad and fearful mind" (TTP, Preface, § 6). Being driven by powerful irrational emotions, superstition is impervious to all reasonable arguments. No reasoning, however refined and well grounded, is able to overcome a superstitious conviction. What is more, Spinoza argues, superstition "teaches men to scorn reason and nature, and to admire and venerate only what is contrary to both of these" (TTP, 7, § 4); it induces human beings to call reason "blind" and human wisdom "vain", while "the delusions of the imagination ... dreams and childish follies" are thought to be "divine answers" (TTP, Preface, § 4). The net result of all this is the fact that superstitious people cling blindly and tightly to their convictions; in particular, they tend to attribute an absolute power and value to their own religion, while despising all other faiths as so many sinful errors.<sup>19</sup>

These observations suggest that the crucial element in a superstitious attitude which sets it apart from mere religious prejudice is a certain stubbornness of the mind (TTP, 5, § 28 and § 42; 8, §3). This feature of the superstitious mindset is responsible for the attitude of fanatical believers, who not only uphold their anthropomorphic and finalist conception of God and the

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<sup>18</sup> See Susan JAMES, *Spinoza on Philosophy, Religion, and Politics: The Theologico-Political Treatise* (Oxford: OUP, 2012), 14–25; JAMES, *Spinoza on Learning to Live Together* (Oxford: OUP, 2020), 43–57.

<sup>19</sup> The difference between prejudice and superstition is not easy to define. For Spinoza, prejudice is not simply false belief which someone regarded as true. The difference between prejudice and superstition can't lie in the fact that superstition has an affective component and the prejudice doesn't since all ideas, true and false, have an affective component. According to Learke, superstition is "a 'deeply rooted' and 'longstanding' form of prejudice." The prejudices pass into superstition when prejudices—in this case, prejudice regarding the nature of God—seep into the ordinary use of words and take residence in the imaginary structures of language, giving rise to a kind of parallel reality where things are turned upside down'—Mogens LAERKE, *Spinoza and the Freedom of Philosophizing* (Oxford: OUP, 2021), 100.



universe, but “do not allow themselves to be corrected about this, but stubbornly defend what they have embraced under the guise of religion” (TTP, 8, § 3). This leads them, in consequence, to regard their own religion as holy and the followers of other faiths as condemned to eternal perdition for the sole reason that they uphold different views and “do not defend the same doctrines of faith as they do” (TTP, 14, § 19). Spinoza named the Pharisees as an example of a superstitious attitude to their own religion, for they extolled “with their usual stubbornness” their own interpretation of Scripture while rejecting and condemning all the others. In his contemporary world, Spinoza saw the orthodox Calvinist preachers as representing an obstinately fanatical attitude to religion, as they have blind confidence in their own creed and seek to eliminate all the freedom of philosophizing and the freedom to express one’s own views (see Ep. 30).

At this point we can sum up Spinoza’s ideas concerning the first component of religious intolerance, which he described as “excessive confidence in one’s own religion”. This element itself comprises two constitutive elements: (a) the widespread prejudice concerning God, which attributes a human-like personality and motives for action to God—in other words, the anthropomorphic and teleological conception of God and nature; (b) the unreasonable obstinacy with which this doctrine is adhered to. Essential to Spinoza’s thought is his assertion that it is ultimately an unreasonable attitude to one’s beliefs, described as stubbornness or obstinacy and grounded in blind passions, that makes the twin mistaken views about God of anthropomorphism and teleologism into a vehicle for religious intolerance.

Let us now move on to the other of the two components of religious intolerance as identified by Spinoza, namely the “contempt towards all those that do not share one’s own religion”. In the Preface to his TTP, Spinoza famously formulates the following question:

How it is that men who boast that they profess the Christian religion—i.e. love, gladness, peace, restraint, and good faith toward all—would contend so unfairly against one another and indulge daily in the bitterest hatred toward one another, so that each man’s faith is known more easily from his hatred and contentiousness than from his love, gladness etc. (TTP, Preface, § 14)

He continues that after a long consideration of this question he finally came to the conclusion that the root cause of this state of affairs is the universally ingrained view that “religion ... consisted in regarding the ministries of the Church as positions conferring status, its offices as sources of income, and its clergy as deserving the highest honours” (TTP, Preface, § 15).

Since the rise and spread of this view, “a desire to administer the sacred offices” had seized “the worst men”; as a result “divine religion degenerated into sordid greed and ambition” (ibid.). A further outcome was that

the temple itself became a Theater, where one hears not learned ecclesiastics, but orators, each possessed by a longing not to teach the people, but to carry them away with admiration for himself, to censure publicly those who disagree, and to teach only those new and unfamiliar doctrines which the common people most wonder at. (ibid.)

In other words, the deep cause of the degenerative process, which, according to Spinoza, had long set in within religion and resulted in the general corruption of religious life, is the excessive influence gained by ecclesiastics who substituted their own ambitions and desires for true moral concerns which are the hallmarks of an authentic religion. The word to designate this pernicious cause of the evils corrupting religion that immediately springs to mind is “clericalism”.<sup>20</sup> Therefore, it is clericalism that Spinoza singles out as responsible for the religious and social crisis of his time. Clericalism, in particular, appears as the direct source of the spiritual enslavement and coercion which characterize religious intolerance. This is because social relations dominated by clericalism tend to confirm both the ministers and the faithful in the belief that the clergy are a special category of human beings, endowed with special wisdom and powers, and therefore entitled to decide what ought to be believed and revered and what not, who is to be regarded as a true believer, and who has fallen into error (TTP, 14, § 4). This absurd arrogation by the clergy of the wisdom and the function which in reality are not theirs is responsible for many of them falling victim to the delusion of having been “elected” or “chosen” by God to teach others true religion. This brings us closer to an even more absurd conclusion that if they have been called and elected by God, they are entitled, even obligated, to compel others to accept their creed—in their eyes the only “true” or “salvific” one—and to persecute dissenters.

As for the extent of the concept of a clergy-dominated religion, Spinoza held a sweeping view (close to that accepted in the milieu of the Dutch Collegiants<sup>21</sup>) that all known traditional monotheistic faiths (the so-called Abra-

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<sup>20</sup> These matters are interestingly and comprehensibly discussed in Justin STEINBERG, “Spinoza’s Curious Defense of Toleration,” in *Spinoza’s Theological-Political Treatise*, ed. Yitzhak Y. Melamed and Michael Rosenthal (Cambridge: CUP, 2010).

<sup>21</sup> See KOŁAKOWSKI, *Świadomość religijna i więź kościelna*, 130; Wiep VAN BUNGE, *Spinoza Past and Present. Essays on Spinoza, Spinozism, and Spinoza Scholarship* (Leiden: Brill, 2012), 51–65.

hamic faiths) fall within that category. The most extreme form of the enslavement of human reason and free judgment by the clerical tradition is found among the Turks, who “consider it a sacrilege even to debate religion; they fill everyone’s judgment with so many prejudices, that they leave no room in the mind for sound reason, not even for doubting” (TTP, Preface, § 9). This does not mean, however, that other monotheistic creeds (Judaism and Christianity) are free from the evil of spiritual compulsion (Ep. 76). In each of these faiths, clerics play the role of spiritual commanders rather than shepherds or guides and teachers. What we see in these religions is the excessive growth of liturgy, ceremonies, and theological and juridical speculation rather than the authentic life of faith and obedience to God-given moral precepts. It is as if the leaders of the established religions were more concerned with combatting the influence of other creeds, silencing dissenters, and the discovery and persecution of alleged heresies than with propagating the precepts of divinely inspired morality and living the life of simplicity, sincerity, and obedience to God.

Yet in the light of Spinoza’s discussion of religious intolerance in the TTP, clericalism on its own does not wholly account for the rise of the contempt and hatred towards the followers of other religions. Nor is the ubiquity of clericalism in religious life sufficient to explain the tendency to institutionalize religion, or, vice versa, to regard as sacred social institutions related to religion.

In order to fully grasp Spinoza’s philosophical explanation of the negative component of religious intolerance—that is, contempt for all those who do not share one’s faith—we must refer to his conception of human nature and its permanent dispositions. One such disposition of human nature is the tendency to develop certain affects, which to a large extent are responsible for the way human beings tend to behave. The affect Spinoza singled out as particularly pertinent to the question of religious intolerance is ambition.

In the *Ethics* he defines ambition as “striving to do something (and also to omit doing something) solely to please men” (E3p29s). To understand how this affect arises and why in the long run it may drive one to hatred and persecution of others, it is necessary to consider two points of Spinoza’s doctrine. One point is his theory of *conatus*. According to it, the mainspring of human behavior is striving to preserve one’s being and, consequently, to pursue everything which would increase one’s power of action and avoid everything that could diminish one’s potential. For this reason, “[w]e strive to further the occurrence of whatever we imagine will lead to Joy, and to

avert or destroy what we imagine is contrary to it or will lead to Sadness” (E3p28).

The other point to bear in mind in considering Spinoza’s account of the human tendency to regard others with contempt is his conception of the “mechanism of imitation of affects”, whereby we may share an affect experienced by another person without being affected by the same kind of stimuli, just because this person is in some respect like ourselves. For instance, we may feel compassion for another person not because we are afflicted by the same sort of misfortune, but solely because we consider them to be like us in some way.

Thus, as we take into account both the concept of *conatus* and the theory of the “mechanism of imitation of affects”, we easily understand why “we shall strive to do ... whatever we imagine men look at with Joy, and on the other hand, we shall be averse to doing what we imagine men are averse to” (E3p29). The fact that we are often moved by what others think about ourselves and our action may induce us either to act or hold back from action.

Spinoza invites us to imagine the following situation: suppose we take immense joy in some activity. Suppose also that somebody like us takes a very different view of our action and regards it with aversion. Once we become aware of the dislike that person experiences to our action, “we shall undergo vacillation of mind” (E3p31)—on the one hand, we will wish to continue the action and the joy it brings, according to the law of *conatus*; on the other hand, however, stimulated by the mechanism of imitation of affects, we will feel an urge to desist from our activity. Thus, we will find ourselves in a situation of inner conflict and experience uncertainty and discomfort it is likely to generate. Since, according to the law of *conatus*, “we strive to destroy what ... will lead to Sadness,” we will naturally try to put an end to this painful and incapacitating situation. In principle, two ways are open to us: we might either follow the urge to imitate another’s affect and stop our questionable action, thus bringing our behavior into line with the expectations of others, or—following the drive to further our pleasure, in accordance with the *conatus*—to continue with our activity in an attempt to change the aversion others feel towards it. According to Spinoza, the latter course of action is more likely to appeal to us: rather than change ourselves in conformity with the opinion others hold about ourselves, we would attempt to change others and their opinions so that we might continue as we are without being censured by them. In Spinoza’s own terse statement: “each of us by his nature, wants the others to live according to his temperament”

(E3p31c). The trouble is, however, that everybody wishes to change everybody else, and “if all alike want this (i.e. change the others according to their temperament), they are alike an obstacle to one another, and when all wish to be praised, or loved, by all, they hate one another” (ibid.).

Admittedly, it is possible to argue that if the desire for all others to live according to one's own temperament is characteristic of all humans, this proves that it is a perfectly natural desire and there is nothing wrong with it (E5p4c). But this is not the case. As Spinoza argues, only in the case of a person who lives according to the dictates of reason the desire for others to share one's mode of life is justified and does not threaten to bring about deleterious consequences, but is identical with “the action, or virtue, called Morality” (E4p37). In the case of a person “who is not led by reason,” this desire is “the passion called Ambition, which does not differ much from Pride” (E5p4s). Thus, it is by no means surprising that in the case of a person who is not guided by reason, the desire that “others love what he loves, and live according to his temperament” (E4p37s1) results in high-handedness, attempts to pressurize others or even in outright hatred and persecution, especially of those “to whom other things are pleasing” (E4p37s1).

Spinoza also offered an alternative definition of ambition as an “excessive desire for esteem” (E3DA44). Defined in this way, ambition comes close to the concept of the primordial vice, the root of all moral evil in man. Ambition is thus conceived as an affect which “encourages and strengthens” almost all other affects. Ambition in this sense, being the primordial vicious drive and making itself felt in nearly all affects, is almost impossible to overcome. People possessed by ambition become blind to the objective order of things, they ignore the true value and meaning of the object of his desires, pay no attention to the natural ends and appropriate means. They strive to possess the object of their desire regardless of its objectively correct use and the natural advantage for which it ought to be pursued. All they are concerned with is the possession of the object of their striving at any price and the illusory glory they vainly hope to gain by successfully carrying out their designs. Frustrated in this pursuit, ambitious individuals fall prey to frantic outbursts of blind anger, unreasonable hatred, and desire for revenge. Spinoza concludes that even if ambition is not, strictly speaking, a disease, it nevertheless must be regarded as a “species of madness” (E4p44s).

The long passages devoted to the vice of ambition in Spinoza's work cast new light on the phenomenon of religious intolerance. After a long consideration of the complex nature of religious intolerance and its diverse aspects,

Spinoza appears to have found an answer to his questions in the notion of ambition. It is ambition that inspires in humans the contempt of other human beings, the desire to control minds of others, the hatred and the desire to persecute all those who resist the attempts mentally to enslave them, and all these vicious attitudes are salient characteristics, or hallmarks, of intolerant religious leaders. The grasp of the essence and the strength of ambition sheds light on other pejorative features of intolerant behavior and vices of intolerant people. Knowledge of the nature of ambition helps us to explain why intolerant people tend to be envious, to revel in the misfortunes of others and suffer because of their happiness; why they are always willing to detract from the status and good name of their opponents; also, why they always surround themselves with flatterers and parasites while shunning the company of honest and noble men (E4p57; TTP, 17, § 15).

Spinoza was deeply convinced that ambition is also the key to explain the evils of clericalism. In the seventh chapter of the TTP he argues that it is ambition and pride that brought religion to its fall. Driven by ambition, preachers and theologians seek to support their inventions and fancies with the authority of Scripture. If, in indulging in this procedure they are worried by anything, it is not by the possibility they might ascribe a false meaning to Scripture or misrepresent “the mind of the Holy Spirit”, but by the fear that someone might point out their error and undermine their authority (TTP, 8, § 2). The predominance of ambition and pride has brought about the current deplorable state of religion, which no longer is thought to consist in obedience to the divine law, but in spreading and quarrelling about human inventions. The Biblical virtues of loving kindness, justice and obedience to divine commandments are supported in words, but not in practice. Instead, dissension, rivalry, and bitter hatred between different denominations form the content of religious life, while intolerance and persecution parade as religious zeal and passionate devotion (TTP, 7, § 4).

Thus, after a long discussion of the nature of the phenomenon of religious intolerance, which certainly worried him very much, Spinoza believed to have discovered the essential component elements and the principal cause thereof. As we have seen, ignorance and prejudice play a significant role in shaping this complex social, psychological, and ideological phenomenon. However, the ultimate explanation of the bitterest evil of religiously inspired hatred is not to be found in the lack of appropriate knowledge, accompanied, as is often the case, by sham knowledge: Spinoza believed to have found it in obstinacy which is manifested in cognitive rigidity and, above all, in am-

bition, the affect, whose pernicious influence pervades almost the whole of human activity and is responsible for many evils in both social and individual dimension of human life.

#### THE APPEAL OF RELIGIOUS INTOLERANCE

Let us now move on to the question of why human beings in general tend to surrender to the influence of intolerant religions—and to Spinoza's efforts to explain this phenomenon. In his theory, the key factor behind the human almost unanimous adherence to irrational and superstitious beliefs is the affect of fear.<sup>22</sup> Fear is the feeling people experience when faced with a loss of something they love and value; a particularly strong feeling of fear is aroused by sudden and unexpected misfortunes. This passion comes in many forms and degrees, yet what is essential is the fact that fear is a direct outcome of the human ontological situation—it is a necessary concomitant of what we, humans, ontologically are, or more precisely, of “man's lack of power and inconstancy” (E4p18s).

In his *Ethics*, Part 4, Spinoza pointed out a number of causes for human beings “lacking power” and being inconstant. The first and foremost among them is the ontological status of man as a finite mode of nature. As finite natural beings, it is not possible for humans to undergo only the causes which their own finite nature can produce and understand; being only part of Nature, they necessarily undergo the effects and influence of the action produced by external causes, which occasionally may be stronger than their own nature. Moreover, the force which human beings can bring into play to effect their own perseverance in being is less than the combined powers of all other things in Nature, so necessarily they must undergo not only the action of causes which assist their preservation in being, but also the action of those whose effect is the destruction of humankind (E4p4d). Thus, whatever their

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<sup>22</sup> Spinoza frequently associated fear with cognitive weakness and superstitious beliefs. In the opinion of Susan James, Spinoza intends to eliminate fear as a constitutive factor in faith. In principle, I agree with it. However, we must bear in mind that, for Spinoza, fear, under certain conditions, can be also a positive factor for obedience. See Daniel GARBER, “‘A Free Man Thinks of Nothing Less Than of Death’: Spinoza on the Eternity of the Mind,” in *Early Modern Philosophy: Mind, Matter, and Metaphysics*, ed. Christia Mercer and Eileen O'Neill (Oxford: OUP, 2005), 112; Jo VAN CAUTER, “Spinoza on Revealed Religion and the Uses of Fear,” *Journal of Early Modern Studies* 9, no. 1 (2020): 99–120.

efforts, human beings always remain exposed to harmful and even destructive influences coming from the external world.

Another cause of man's frailty is his being subject to passions. Passions are drives which arise within human nature under the influence of external things and which are difficult to control by reason. It is of the essence of passions that their force is not determined by human natural tendency to self-preservation, but by the power of external agents, which lies beyond human control. Therefore, it often happens that "the force of any passion, or affect, can surpass the other actions, or power, of a man, so that the affect stubbornly clings to the man" (E4p6).

Still, another cause of man's "lack of power and inconstancy" is his natural inclination to trust his senses and the cognition grounded on them, which goes hand in hand with his inability to exceed the limits of human imagination. Spinoza acknowledges that imagination may play a positive role in political life. Nevertheless, the problem is that imagination makes people likely to succumb to all sorts of passions, which—being irrational themselves—always threaten to disturb human balance and reasonable conduct. A passion, even if experienced as something agreeable and positive, may in the final analysis turn out to be harmful, as, for instance, the joy someone experiences at the destruction of a person they hate, affects themselves adversely by intensifying the feeling of hatred which is detrimental to themselves.

If these are the causes of the human "lack of power and inconstancy", it follows that it is not possible for human beings entirely to be free from fear. Human beings could only get rid of fear, Spinoza speculated, if "they could manage all their affairs by a definite plan, or if the fortune were always favorable to them" (TTP, Preface, § 1), and they could gain complete control over changes that arise from external causes. However, for these conditions to be met, people would have to transform themselves ontologically, become entirely different beings from what they actually are; as a matter of fact, they would have to become Substances (i.e. a sort of divine beings) instead of mere modifications of the Substance. Naturally, such a transformation is absolutely impossible, therefore subjection to various forms of fear is inseparable from human existence: all human individuals are conditioned by it.

Yet the fact that fear is an inseparable feature of human existence does not imply that human beings cannot control in some measure the strength and extent of its influence on their thinking and conduct. However, this being in principle a possibility open to humans, very few of them effectively make use of it: most human beings, Spinoza believed, do not know how to



cope with their fears. Typically, they tend to fall into excessive pride and self-assurance when fortune favors them, they even tend to believe themselves so wise, that “they think themselves wronged if anybody wants to give them advice” (TTP, Preface, § 2). Yet in adversity they often become entirely helpless; they do not know where to turn for advice and usually seek it from the first person to come their way, and there is none so foolish, absurd, and groundless that they would not readily accept. If such people, blinded by fear, chance upon something “which reminds them of some past good or evil, they think it portends either a fortunate or an unfortunate outcome, they call it a favorable or unfavorable omen, even though it may deceive them a hundred times” (TTP, Preface, § 2). In such a state of mind it is no surprise that most of these people take an incentive from the slightest occurrences to expect something good to come or fear something evil to occur and thus fall into the state of mind which Spinoza characterizes as a constant “vacillation between hope and fear”.

Both fear and hope are fleeting, inconstant states of mind—and with good reason, for both affects are “born of the idea of a future or past thing whose outcome we to some extent doubt” (E3DA12–13). What is important for our present considerations is the fact that it is such inconstant, vacillating people, “shaken by hope and fear,” that tend to fall prey to all sorts of prejudices and superstitions.<sup>23</sup>

It is at this point that religion enters Spinoza’s discussion. In the eyes of fear-ridden humans religion appears as the only aid they can count upon in their experience of adversity. Yet this is only the beginning of the story, for, as Spinoza observes in the Preface to the TTP, people of such mindset are never satisfied for long with just one kind of superstition. They eagerly look for new assurances and promises that might fuel their illusory expectations. This is something the clergy is well aware of. In order to contain this restless search for novelty and yet satisfy the need for hope and security in their flock, they make considerable efforts to impart splendor to religion by adorning it with ceremony and pomp, so that they may appear as something glamorous and noble and inspire respect in people. On the other hand, they seek to represent God as a powerful and beneficent ruler, a perfectly equitable lawgiver, and a compassionate and just king, who cares about the well-being of every human individual and brings relief and consolation to all the

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<sup>23</sup> See Susan JAMES, *Spinoza on Philosophy*, 17ff.; Herman DE DIJN, “Spinoza and Revealed Religion,” *Studia Spinozana* 11 (1995): 39–52; Justin STEINBERG, *Spinoza’s Political Psychology*, 80–100.

afflicted. Under the influence of these exertions by manipulative ecclesiastics, human beings become increasingly inspired with confidence in God and the belief that God is the only person able and willing to alleviate their fear. There is a condition, however, for obtaining God's assistance: to win his benevolence, one must wholly and unreservedly submit to the commandments of religion and comply with the practical demands deriving from them. Absolute obedience to and compliance with the injunctions following from one's creed is a prerequisite for benefiting from the grace and beatitude promised to its adherents. Therefore, the followers of a confession rarely or never dare to question any of the tenets of their creed and willingly stuff their heads with superstitions presented to them by their religious ministers.

According to Spinoza, the contradiction and the fraud involved in such an institutionalized religion consists in the fact that instead of freeing human beings from the oppression of fear, and enabling them to live as autonomous rational subjects, which it promises to do, this kind of religion in fact sustains and nourishes fear in people; it grounds its own position and reason for existence upon human proneness to fear, claiming at the same time to be the only effective antidote to it. This contradiction inherent in the phenomenon of institutionalized religion is amply exploited by clergymen, who seek to satisfy their ambition by taking advantage of the insecurity and anxiety of ordinary believers and gain such authority in the eyes of people as to outweigh the authority of constitutional magistrates and the supreme civil powers.

Thus, to Spinoza, what explained the attractiveness of superstitious religion and the intolerance engendered by it was the combination of two contrary yet mutually complementary affects, fear and hope, which powerfully dominate most human beings: the fear to lose all things one loves and values, and the hope grounded in the anthropomorphic representation of a kind and loving God, who cares about the humans He Himself created. These twin affects gain much of their hold over some humans by being amplified and meticulously articulated by fanatical and ambitious clergymen, who give them institutionalized support by multiplying detailed injunctions and introducing external ceremony. How great the sway is held over peoples' minds by that institutionalized superstition is shown by the fact that a lot of believers succumb to the persuasion of preachers to the extent of being ready to fight in defense of their own subjection, as if this subjection constituted supreme beatitude, and to regard as the highest honor the opportunity to offer

their lives for the pride of their religious leaders and the supposed glory of their churches (TTP, Preface, § 10).<sup>24</sup>

#### MEASURES AGAINST RELIGIOUS INTOLERANCE

Spinoza devoted much attention to the analysis of the measures which could effectively diminish the influence of religious intolerance on both individuals and the state. It can even be assumed that the search for those measures constitutes one of the key aims of the TTP. Before I turn to a detailed discussion of the measures proposed by Spinoza to combat the evils caused by intolerance, I would like to specify four assumptions, which, I believe, he took as the basis and guiding principles for his project of inventing a panacea for the evil of religious intolerance. These assumptions will enable us to better penetrate the leading idea behind this project and in particular will make it clear why in considering many possible ways of defense against intolerance he rejected some of them, despite their apparent promise to be potentially effective in combating intolerance, while accepting others, which at first glance may appear flawed.

The first and the most basic of these assumptions is the principle that in matters concerning human activity in general we should take human beings for what they really are, and not for what we would like them to be. Spinoza attached paramount importance to this principle, typically disregarded, as he claimed, by philosophers. Opening his *Political Treatise*, he wrote that philosophers, in their philosophical and political projects, had usually taken into consideration human nature not as it really is, but so that it would correspond to their ideal representation of it. As a result, Spinoza said, "for the most part they have written Satire instead of Ethics and that is why they have never conceived a Politics which could be put to any practical application, but only one that would be thought a Fantasy, possible only in Utopia or in the golden age of the Poets, where there would be absolutely no need for it" (TP, 1, § 1).<sup>25</sup> In order to avoid this failure, he concludes, we must study human nature as it actually manifests itself in real human deeds. Only

<sup>24</sup> See JAMES, *Spinoza on Learning to Live Together*, 45; ROSENTHAL, "Spinoza's Republican Argument," 325.

<sup>25</sup> This quote comes from chapter one of the *Political Treatise*. According to Edwin Curley, "this introductory chapter is reminiscent of Machiavelli with its emphasis on the need for realism about human nature" (p. 503). Very interesting remarks about this demand for realism are found in STEINBERG, *Spinoza's Political Psychology*, 12ff.

if we do this can we have a means to decide which of the proposed political projects can bring about the desired effects and which are doomed to failure.

Another assumption is the principle that in our political projects we should take into account all people in the society without exception, and we should also take into consideration their actual psychological and social dispositions. This means that in practically applicable politics we should avoid simplification and illusions as to the ways human beings tend to behave and their motives for their behavior. We must assume that the principle governing social conduct of human beings is that nobody acts against his own particular interests. In general: “Everyone exists by the highest right of nature, and consequently, everyone, by the highest right of nature, does those things that follow from the necessity of his own nature. So everyone, by the highest right of nature, judges what is good and what is evil, considers his own advantage according to his own temperament, avenges himself, and strives to preserve what he loves and destroy what he hates” (E4p37s2). For this reason every realistic political program has to take into account the particular interests of every member of the state, for it is only because of their particular advantage that people may be disposed to accept the rules and regulations imposed on them by the authorities in the civil state.

The third assumption providing guidelines to Spinoza in his consideration of the means against religious intolerance is the principle saying that in order to be effective in political matters it is necessary to assimilate and possibly understand all the available data coming from social experience and practical politics. As Spinoza himself puts it: “experience has shown all the kinds of state which might conceivably enable men to live in harmony, as well as the means by which a multitude ought to be directed or restrained within definite limits. So I do not believe reflection on this subject can come up with anything not completely at variance with experience, or practice, which has not yet been learned or tested by experience” (TP, 1, §3). In short, it is important that all proposals in the political arena are based not merely on general theoretical assumptions but also rest on the analysis of experiential data.

The last of the four assumptions presupposed in Spinoza’s discussion of the means against religious intolerance is the principle stating that any considerations concerning politics must keep in view the ultimate end of the state. This principle has given rise to a number of conflicting interpretations, which it is not possible to discuss here.<sup>26</sup> A number of points, however, seem

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<sup>26</sup> See Mogens LAERKE, *Spinoza and the Freedom of Philosophizing* (Oxford: OUP, 2021), 2ff.

to be certain. For one thing, Spinoza affirmed that the best form of state is the democratic state on the grounds that democracy is not only the most advantageous form of government for citizens, but that it ensures maximum strength for the authorities of the state. Then he believed that the state exists not exclusively to provide protection for its citizens against all kinds of threats but serves other purposes as well. Even though many people may only be interested in protecting their property and their personal safety and living in a civil state with a view to securing these ends, the state itself also fulfills other purposes. These include supporting positive activities which (a) foster harmony and friendly relations between citizens, (b) help to improve their condition as citizens, (c) are needed to promote the citizens' spiritual and material well-being. This means that political regulations should be planned in such a way as to ensure maximum safety for the citizens and at the same time guarantee them maximum freedom and well-being (TTP, 20, §§ 11–12).

Applying these four principles to the task of formulating a realistic and practicable political strategy to combat the evils of religious intolerance, we must conclude that, first, our project must be based on a comprehension of human beings as they really are; second, it must be rooted in historical experience; and third, it must take into account the actual end (or ends) of the state. Only if these requirements are met can we hope to propose a program that will bring a real improvement in the well-being of human society, inevitably pluralistic and divided between diverse religious creeds and ethical codes. Only with a clear comprehension of human nature, including the knowledge of the "causes of man's lack of power and inconstancy" (E4p18s) and a true conception of "which affects agree with human nature and which are contrary to it" at our disposal—complete with the rich supply of data provided by human historical experience and a clear awareness of the natural ends of society and the state—will we be able to tell the valid measures needed to counteract the vice of intolerance from spurious ones.

With these general points in mind, let us now take a survey of particular measures to combat religious intolerance as considered and evaluated by Spinoza.

As intolerant attitudes and practices are grounded in certain beliefs about reality, God, man, and man's destiny in the world, perhaps the most effective remedy against religious intolerance would be the elimination of falsehoods concerning these essential matters. As a rationalist, Spinoza firmly believed that truth about reality and man is in principle available to the human mind,

even if not readily accessible to all, and he assumes that the knowledge of the universal truth, one and the same for all minds, would not introduce divisions among human being, but on the contrary, would act as a unifying factor; it is only false, irrational beliefs, groundless prejudices and superstitions that set people against one another, create confessions and sects, each claiming to be the exclusive possessor of the ultimate truth and denouncing all others as propounders of falsehoods. Given this (rather optimistic) assumption, the most obvious way, in Spinoza's perspective, to combat religious intolerance would appear to be a patient promotion of truth and comprehensive and indefatigable effort to eliminate from people's minds all the pernicious prejudices that stand in the way of human beings coming to know the truth about reality and their own place within it. As we have seen, Spinoza makes no secret of what he regards as chief erroneous beliefs that obscure the truth and are capable of inspiring particularly fierce intolerant attitudes—these are the main tenets of Judeo-Christian revelation: a personal arbitrary and rather anthropomorphic God, the exceptional status of man, created in God's image and likeness, within the realm of creation, the perspective of eternal afterlife, and the reward and punishment for deeds committed in this world.

How does one set about erasing these very long-ingrained and firmly adhered-to beliefs from people's minds? According to Spinoza, to execute such a formidable program it would take: (1) to explain convincingly why the teleological explanation of nature and the anthropomorphic interpretation of God are a far cry from the adequate objective description and explanation of reality; (2) to show that there are absolutely no objective reasons to set mankind apart from the rest of nature as belonging to a different order of being; and (3) to make clear that the belief in personal immortality and the consequent eschatology of an eternal world to come—or, the belief in heaven and hell—makes us easy prey to irrational and passionate hope and fear (hope for eternal reward and fear of eternal punishment). Spinoza had no doubt that once the illusions inherent in these beliefs were dispersed and truth about God and man firmly established, the ground for fanaticism and sectarianism would disappear and their influence upon human life would be significantly curtailed—if not vanish completely.

However powerful and effective as a measure against religious intolerance this way of enlightening human minds and removing prejudices may seem to be, it cannot, Spinoza admits, effectively be put into practice. The greatest problem about it is the fact that scientific knowledge about reality and the subsequent knowledge about the right way of living and acting in the

world lies far beyond the comprehension of most human beings and is only available to a select group of philosophers. An ordinary human being will not be able to acquire this kind of knowledge by himself, and if presented with it, he will not accept it. Scientific proofs and explanations strike most ordinary minds as absurd and they reject them out of hand, even if they do not simply refuse to consider such arguments seriously.

The fact of the matter is that most people do not bother at all with scientific elucidation of facts which form the content of their lives. Likewise, a multitude of human beings regard the situation of suspended judgment and the concomitant uncertainty (so often desirable in philosophical thinking) as intolerable and even frightening. Most people value the feeling of security above everything else; the experience of doubt and awareness of their own ignorance, which often accompany scientific investigation (at least in the opening stages), is very disagreeable to them. Therefore, they abandon science and philosophy and turn to religion (and usually choose a very superstitious form of it) in order to find the security and certainty they cannot find elsewhere. Thus, if we want to win such people over to the ideal of tolerance, we must look for other means than philosophical argument.

Another difficulty with rational argumentation and challenging prejudices arises from the powerful grip that affects have on human nature. Humans can become prey to pernicious affects even if they possess a true perception of reality (E4, Preface). This is because, in Spinoza's theory, the strength of an affect is not a function of the truth or falsity of the idea corresponding to the given affect. Moreover, an affect generated by a confused idea of imagination cannot be restrained or removed merely by the presence of another idea, even if true. Only when this true idea engenders an opposite and stronger affect, can the influence of irrational passions be overcome (E4p14d). Therefore, mere knowledge of truth is not enough to remove or restrain such powerful affects as fear, hatred, envy or self-esteem; what is still required to successfully overcome such passions is, on the one hand, a contrary passion and a stronger one than the affect to be restrained, and, on the other, "great virtue of the mind, or strength of character" (E4p69d). Only these three factors combined—that is, knowledge of truth, an affect associated with it, and strength of character or fortitude—generate a force capable of effectively resisting and overcoming destructive passions and remove the tendency to turn to superstitious hopes for peace of mind.

Given this insight, it is hardly surprising that Spinoza should have come to the conclusion that the strategy of containing the superstitious ideas on which religious intolerance feeds is not simply a matter of eradicating false

ideas. The way of reasoning and true knowledge can be effective as a means of freeing people's minds of superstitions and false fears and hopes in the case of few philosophically minded human beings, but for many it is doomed to fall short of its objective. For most ordinary minded people, the only power capable of inducing them to change their habitual ways of behaving and thinking, and inspiring a more tolerant mood in them, is no other than religion itself. Thus, the final verdict arrived at by Spinoza after his long discussion is negative: the method of rational persuasion and clearing away of prejudices and superstitions is not by itself an effective remedy against religious intolerance and its detrimental influence on human life.

Spinoza's second remedy against the evil of religious intolerance is the way of coercive legislation, that is, of state decrees and regulations reinforced with a threat of punishment. This way may be useful in forcing some fanatics to renounce their extreme views and in winning them over to the cause of more pacific religion. Yet, in the last analysis, Spinoza did not consider this strategy of combatting religious intolerance very effective. He was thoroughly convinced (for both psychological and empirical reasons) that coercion by decrees and punishment does not really work in turning people's minds: history, old and more recent, clearly shows that forcing people to renounce their cherished beliefs results in their consolidation and dissemination, rather than their suppression (TTP, 18, §§ 23–26).

Moreover, binding people by legislation to embrace the views favored by the state is hardly conducive to the growth of loyalty and attachment to the state in the citizens. On the contrary, such coercive policy tends to breed disloyalty, double-dealing, hypocrisy, and outright disobedience. Legal constraints, when applied to the domain of personal beliefs and valuations, causes the state to run the risk of internal disturbances no less dangerous than those caused by religious intolerance. In general, Spinoza thought, any effort by the state to instill in the citizens some state-sponsored views and attitudes by means of legislating in the domain of morals, besides being counterproductive, tends to undermine the authority of the state and foments disharmony and sedition instead of fostering loyalty and cohesion.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> At this point, let us observe that this line of argument adopted by Spinoza against the use of coercive legislative measures in matters of conscience and belief was not his original invention, nor was it new in his time. Before Spinoza, it was very much employed by Socinians, who opposed intolerance, yet staunchly affirmed that combatting intolerance does not justify the use of coercive measures, exerting pressure on subjects or citizens, nor legislation concerning purely speculative things; see Zbigniew OGONOWSKI, *Z zagadnień tolerancji w Polsce XVII wieku* (Warsaw: PWN, 1958), 103–4.



If, however, neither the way of philosophical and scientific argument, nor the one of state legislation appears to be fit effectively to counteract the evil of religious intolerance, what can be done at all to contain its spread and minimize its pernicious influence upon our lives, both in the individual and the social sphere? In his TTP, Spinoza outlined his own proposal of strategy and tactics of fight against religious intolerance, and a very complex one. In a somewhat simplified account, his approach consists of two parts, each part corresponding to one of the two essential aspects of the problem: the theological and the political side thereof. Spinoza himself expressed confidence that the approach he invented and proposed for consideration, would be workable, effective, and acceptable to most people.

Let us begin with the theological part. The method of his procedure in the theological argument is based on his conception of biblical hermeneutics and it consists in explaining the origin and status of Scripture as well as in considering what constitutes the essence of true piety and religious faith. The reason why Spinoza thought the discussion of the origin, status and interpretation of the Bible should be the starting point of his argument, was the recognition that Scripture was the chief weapon in the hands of religious fanatics: a reference to or a quote from the Bible ensures one an effective influence upon human minds (TTP, 7, § 1, § 6; see also TTP, 2, § 2 ).

The investigation into the origin and the meaning of Scripture makes clear that, firstly, the Bible was not produced by any supernatural agency: it was not composed or dictated by a transcendent and providential God endowed with psychological and moral characteristics traditionally attributed to the Abrahamic God. Scripture is simply a work of human literature and ought to be perceived as a very ordinary, mundane document. Therefore, Spinoza argues, it should be treated only as a historical document and studied by means of the adequate method, i.e., the method of historical exegesis (TTP, 7, § 14; 15, § 25). Secondly, this elucidation of the origin of the Bible also clearly indicates that the stories related in the Scriptures carry no supernatural meaning either, hence they should be understood only according to historical criteria, in the context and in terms of the political and social situation of the time they are set in.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> Interestingly, Spinoza coupled his theory of the origin of Scripture with an equally unfavorable account of the Prophets. In his view, the prophets of the Old Testament were not particularly enlightened individuals: they did not possess any scientific knowledge about God, nature and humans, and their visions had the source exclusively in the vivid power of imagination and had really nothing to do with objective cognition. Therefore, as Spinoza put it, "those who search the prophetic books for wisdom and knowledge of both natural and spiritual matters, go completely

There is, however, at least one major “truth” in Scripture. By using the method of historical exegesis, Spinoza argues, we come to the conclusion that actually the only message of the Bible is a simple moral imperative: love God and your neighbor. This moral message, which can also be formulated as “practice justice and loving-kindness to your fellow human beings”, is according to Spinoza the essence of all the commandments and the lesson of all the stories of Scripture. But Scripture conveys this moral message not only through visions of its prophets and its stories; it also illustrates it through its portrayal of God. The God of the Bible is portrayed as wise, just, and merciful and the task of people is represented as the imperative to imitate these virtues in their own actions. “God through the Prophets asks no other knowledge of Himself from men than the knowledge of his divine Justice and Loving-kindness, i.e., such attributes of God as men can imitate in a certain way of life” (TTP, 13, § 20).

True to his own insight into the meaning of the Scriptural message, Spinoza argues that authentic piety is no other than practicing justice and loving-kindness and the only precepts that belong to true religion are the commandments that enjoin adherence to its universal moral imperative and strengthen human beings in their love of their neighbors. The rest, including the ritual and theological commentary, is of no importance. Obedience to God “consists only in the love of your neighbours” (TTP, 13, § 8). What is more, this simple moral message of the only true religion does not require any theological backup, nor does it assume on the part of the believers any philosophical knowledge of the nature of God and the Universe. Anyone, “no matter how slow,” can get to know this moral message of religion (TTP, 13, § 4).

Spinoza believed that this way of thinking about the origin and the sense of the Bible not only safeguards the freedom to philosophize, but it removes the ground for dogmatic preachers to claim exclusive possession of the unique truth of religion and to impose their opinions on other people as the only true interpretation of the religious doctrine. As a matter of fact, the only source of knowledge for human beings is their own reason, and it is only by the use of reason that we can come to know what is true and what is not. The religion as contained in and taught by Scripture does not at all have any cognitive dimension and does not reveal any truth to us. The only message it conveys is a moral one. In this perspective, not only is the view subordinating reason to the authority of the Scriptures a mistake, but so is the opposite

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astray” (TTP, 2, § 2).

view, according to which the intended sense of the Scriptures must be identical with the truth and should be interpreted through referring to some external model of rationality or reason (see TTP, 15, §§ 1–2).

Besides, Spinoza thought that by reducing the message of the Scriptures and the essence of piety to a simple moral message, he freed religion from the unnecessary and encumbering ballast of rituals and speculations. He also believed to have opened the way to free interpretation of the Bible: on his presuppositions everyone could interpret Scripture in their own way without becoming any less pious. A further, socially important consequence followed from these conclusions; namely, that there was no need and no function for a socially prestigious class of specialists: experts in elucidating the revealed message of God and priests officiating at religious ceremonies; there was no objective reason to believe that part of the essence of religion was to regard “the ministries of the Church as positions conferring status, its offices as sources of income, and its clergy as deserving the highest honor” (TTP, Preface, § 15). In short, by establishing that the Bible did not contain any supernatural message from a transcendent God and by reducing piety to practicing the virtues of justice and charity, Spinoza sought to undermine the ecclesiastic influence upon the life of society and, in particular, in politics, and in this way he hoped to diminish people’s susceptibility to the superstitious religion based on fear and superstitions.

Let us consider now the political measures against religious intolerance advocated by the philosopher in his TTP. His leading proposal in this domain is to completely subordinate religion insofar as it concerns public matters and political activities to the state. By this measure he hopes to contain the pernicious influence of religious fanatics upon society, who tend to breed social discord, spread anxiety and disseminate prejudices and whose impact is often dangerous to the cohesion and authority of the state itself, as religious extremists usually seek to gain control over all aspects of social life.<sup>29</sup>

This idea of Spinoza’s that religion should be controlled by secular civil authorities may appear to be problematic and provoke a variety of responses, ranging from surprise to outright repudiation. Obviously, it is open to the criticism that it is highly illiberal in itself and gives civil authorities undue say in matters that belong to the private and spiritual sphere of personal life; in particular, it can be argued that it opens the way for political authorities to coerce indoctrination and ideological oppression. I think one has to concede that there is some ground for this criticism, nevertheless our misgivings

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<sup>29</sup> See NADLER, *A Book Forged in Hell*, 187.

concerning Spinoza's postulate may be somewhat allayed if we consider the deep theoretical grounds for it as well as substantial qualifications it is subject to in Spinoza's conception.

First of all, it is important to stress that the rationale for his claim that religion must be subordinated to the state is not a merely pragmatic consideration but follows from Spinoza's metaphysical assumptions. In Spinoza's view there is no law and no standard of justice prior to the existence of the state: no justice can be practiced outside or independently of the state, and since piety or true religion consists in practicing justice, there is no true religion outside and independently of the state. As he himself puts it in the TTP, "no one can rightly practice piety nor obey God, unless he obeys all the decrees of the supreme power" (TTP, 19, § 27). This is why "no religious authority should attempt to impose religious laws on its faithful independently of the sovereign".<sup>30</sup>

Further, it should be duly stressed that the supremacy of the state over religion does not mean that civil authority is legally entitled to compel citizens to embrace some definite religion. As already observed above, Spinoza decidedly repudiated any legislation in purely speculative matters, nor would he countenance any interference by the civil authorities within the private sphere of the individual's religion: just as no confession can legitimately call for the assistance of the state and its power in propagating its particular creed, so no state has the right to persecute its citizens for their alleged heresy or irreligion. In his project the civil control of religious affairs is limited to external practices and forms of worship. True religion, that is piety, which Spinoza defines as "inward worship of God" is a purely personal matter and should be left entirely to the discretion of the individual (TTP, 7, §§ 90–93).

Crucial for Spinoza's thought is the distinction between the strictly private and essentially public sphere, between "inner worship of God" and "outer worship of God". The former lies exclusively within the power of the individual, while the latter belongs to the domain controlled by civil authorities which are responsible for all practices and actions which take place within the public sphere and thus may influence the public at large. This is what Spinoza means by saying that the "interpretation of religion" lies within the competence of secular authority. While individual citizens are, as already indicated above, free to study and interpret the Bible according to their own discretion and no state (or any other organization, be it a church, for that matter) has any right to interfere with their study, it is only the state and

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<sup>30</sup> Michael DELLA ROCCA, *Spinoza* (New York: Routledge, 2008), 226.

its subordinate institutions within whose discretion lies the decision of how God's law should be translated into social practice and which religion-inspired activities could be allowed and which not. This is so because only the state and its institutions have the right to decide which ways of showing obedience to God are compatible with the well-being of the whole body of citizens and the security of the state, and which may turn out to be harmful to the common peace and the cohesion of society (TTP, 19, §§ 25–26).

Spinoza maintained that his solution to the problem of the relationship between state and religion not only corresponds to the basic metaphysical principles, but "is also confirmed by experience itself" (TTP, 19, § 19). The greatest advantage of the proposed subordination of ecclesiastics to civil authorities lies in that this solution offers apparently the only effective means to contain religious intolerance and counteract its pernicious impact. That is why he firmly affirmed that whoever wished to deprive civil authorities of the right to decide in matters concerning religion and altogether exempt ecclesiastical bodies from the competence of the state, acted against the peace, security, and stability of the state, for it is such an exemption and lack of subordination that "gives rise to quarrels and disagreements which can never be restrained" (TTP, 19, § 41). He illustrated his point with examples taken from the history of the Hebrew nation known from the Old Testament, and, in chapter 18 of his TTP, he ended his examination by a conclusion which very aptly sums up his position:

How ruinous it is, both for religion and for the Republic, to grant the ministers of sacred affairs the right to make [religious] decrees or to handle the business of the state, and how much more stable everything is if these people are held in check, so that they do not give any answers except when asked, and in the meantime teach and put into practice only doctrines that have already been accepted and are very familiar. (TTP, 18, § 22)

Another political remedy against religious intolerance proposed by Spinoza, and a very radical one, is the introduction of freedom of thought for all citizens and the related freedom to express in public what is thought in private (TTP, 16, § 1). Naturally, these two kinds of freedom entail the freedom to profess one's religion and, equally importantly, the freedom to philosophize.

Spinoza attached exceptionally great importance to this point. His insistence on the freedom of every individual to develop his own worldview and live according to his own moral convictions is all the more remarkable as it appeared contrary to the practice accepted by nearly all political and religious systems of his days. What affirmed him in this attitude was perhaps

his confidence (exaggerated, as it turned out) in his ability to convince his opponents and enemies of religious tolerance that granting the freedom of thought and expression to all individuals, and in particular the freedom of religious belief and philosophizing (far from undermining the authority of the state and the church) is, on the contrary, a condition of their health and inner strength and cohesion. It lies in the best interest of both these basic social institutions that their members feel free from constraint and oppression and can participate in the communal life of their own accord. This idea is expressed in the extended sub-title of TTP, which contains “several discussions showing that the republic can grant freedom of philosophizing without harming its peace and piety, and cannot deny it without destroying its peace and piety.”

Let us now turn our attention to the principal elements of these “several discussions” and Spinoza’s leading arguments in favor of his point, examining them in particular for their relevance to counteracting the evil of religious intolerance.

First, in Spinoza’s conception, freedom of religious belief is understood very widely, so as to encompass not only freedom to embrace and profess any of the established religious creeds, but also freedom to profess views which are opposed to any of the traditional religions (e.g., atheism). Thus, in Spinoza’s thinking freedom of religion entails what may be called freedom from religion, that is the freedom not to belong to any officially recognized confession. This is remarkable for if in the 17th century freedom of religion was widely recognized and defended among progressive philosophers, almost no one admitted the legitimacy of freedom from religion (including atheist beliefs), the one known exception being Pierre Bayle, Spinoza’s contemporary. As for atheism, even the most ardent defenders of religious toleration, as, for instance, John Locke, usually adhered to the view that atheism should not be allowed in the state. The reasoning behind this assertion was as follows: it is faith in God that is the ground and source of all moral feeling and moral behavior, and morality is absolutely indispensable for the functioning of the state; therefore, whoever undermines faith in God, by that fact alone undermines the moral foundation of the state, which is mutual trust among the citizens and justice.<sup>31</sup>

Grave and pernicious prejudice as this identification of revealed religion with morality is, it is still not the worst misconception behind the opposition to the complete freedom of thought, including the freedom to be an atheist.

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<sup>31</sup> A comparative account of Spinoza and Locke doctrine of toleration can be found in Jonathan I. ISRAEL, *Enlightenment Contested* (Oxford: OUP, 2006), chap. 6

The worst error in the domain of politics concerning human freedoms is the belief that restriction of freedom of religion in the civic realm is beneficent for the state, as it allegedly contributes to the increase of inner stability and security in society and strengthens the bonds between the state authorities and citizens. Actually, as Spinoza claims, the reverse holds true. That the policy of imposing restrictions on the freedom of the citizens to profess religion of their own choice results in more social unrest, inner tension, hidden or open enmity between social groups and sometimes even violent strife, and not at all in an increase of peace, security, and well-being, is amply borne out by experience. State-sponsored religious intolerance, as often as not resulting in violent persecution and always in humiliating and crippling discrimination, threatens to unleash forces of hatred and jealousy which it may turn out almost impossible to control (TTP, 20, §§ 41–42; TTP, 20, §§ 44–45)

Next, it should be underscored that Spinoza's case for the freedom of thought and expression in the life of society was based neither on the argument from epistemic humility nor on the normative conception of human rights. This distinguishes his argument and his whole concept of freedom from similar arguments by his contemporaries: John Locke, for instance, derived his defense of freedom of thought and expression, and more generally, of tolerance, from the quasi-ethical principle that with respect to truth we ought to adopt the attitude of humility; while Hugh Grotius openly appealed to the ethical conception of the natural rights of the human person and argued that depriving human beings of their natural freedom of thought and giving unhampered expression to what they think is morally evil.<sup>32</sup> By contrast, Spinoza did not refer to any ethical considerations in his defense of freedom of thought, instead he based his case on the conception of human nature: for him state-sponsored arbitrary restrictions on the freedom of thought of its citizens cannot work in practice as they are thoroughly contrary to human nature, moreover, such restrictions are in fact harmful to the interest of the state and civil authorities. His very distinct position on human freedoms is a direct consequence partly of his metaphysical and anthropo-

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<sup>32</sup> These matters are interestingly and comprehensibly discussed in Justin Steinberg, "Spinoza's Curious Defense of Toleration," in *Spinoza's Theological-Political Treatise*, ed. Yitzhak Y. Melamed and Michael Rosenthal (Cambridge: CUP, 2010). See also Stefan ŚWIEŻAWSKI, *Dzieje filozofii europejskiej w XV wieku*, vol. 7, *U źródeł nowożytnej etyki. Filozofia moralna w Europie XV wieku* (Kraków: Znak, 1987).

logical commitments, and partly of his very specific conception of natural rights as powers to act (TTP, 16).<sup>33</sup>

Spinoza firmly believed that the perspective on human nature and freedom of thought and expression he adopted provided the theoretical framework in which all the various arguments of the proponents of religious intolerance would be refuted and themselves must understand that all attempts to control and restrain human freedom are inevitably doomed to failure and sooner or later their effects will prove disastrous to themselves. Thus, if they really want to pursue their own true advantage and act in accordance with the laws of human nature, they must not ignore what is inscribed in human nature itself. They must understand, first, that “it cannot happen that a mind should be absolutely subject to the control of someone else” (TTP, 20, § 2), and second, that “no one will ever be able to transfer to another his power, and consequently, his right, in such a way that he ceases to be a man” (TTP, 17, § 2).

These two simple truths accepted, the advocates of intolerance will immediately know that all their efforts, however strenuous, to control what others think must prove futile and fall flat. Further, they will realize that giving up by individuals some of their prerogatives ensured them by their natural constitution in order to become members of human society, does not in any way mean that these individuals abdicate their natural rights as a whole.

Another advantage of his strategy of defending freedom of thought and expression, Spinoza believed, is that it follows immediately from it that the prerogative of the state authorities to define the rules concerning what should be regarded as right and pious within the state does not by any means amount to the right to impose upon the citizens the exclusive way they must think, believe, and evaluate things. As already mentioned, practice shows that any attempt to do this breeds conflict and disruption within the society and ultimately turns out to be pernicious to the state and its authorities (TTP, 20, §§ 8–9).

In the above, I tacitly presupposed a close connection in Spinoza between the freedom of thought and the freedom of expression. This presupposition is by and large correct. Nevertheless, it is very important to observe, that in his conception these two kinds of freedom are not wholly coextensive, that is their scope is different. Whereas he resolutely maintained that freedom of

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<sup>33</sup> See JAMES, *Spinoza on Learning to Live Together*, 102–20; Donald RUTHERFORD, “Spinoza’s Conception of Law: Metaphysics and Ethics,” in MELAMED and ROSENTHAL, *Spinoza’s Theological-Political Treatise*.



thought cannot be restricted in any way and under any condition, he did not make the same claim for freedom of expression.

The crucial text in this respect is chapter 20 of the TTP in which it is asserted that the state cannot allow "seditious ideas" to be proclaimed in society. What these "seditious ideas" are is not clearly defined, but it seems certain that for Spinoza they are ideas inciting people to open rebellion against the state authorities. This point is a delicate one and needs to be considered carefully. In my opinion, it is not Spinoza's intention to state that citizens have no right publicly to criticize or disagree with the authorities. Indeed, they do have such a right and denying them the exercise of it would be both futile and harmful to the state. Nevertheless, public criticism of the authorities should respect some definite conditions: it should be voiced in a peaceful manner, based on reasoned arguments and never exclude conciliation and agreement. It becomes seditious if it makes use of deception, violence, and seeks to introduce changes within the state by force (TTP, 20, §§ 15–16)

This reservation as to the extent of the application of freedom of expression in political practice introduced by Spinoza may be disappointing to adherents of citizens' unlimited right to make public their opinions on the authorities. A number of problems immediately arise: where exactly does the dividing line between seditious and non-seditious opposition to the establishment lie; who is to decide in particular situations whether the ideas at work behind political events are seditious or not. If this decision lies with the authorities, this seems to open the way for very oppressive politics, for any government will be given the right to qualify as seditious any tendencies in the society which it does not find to its liking.

Surely, there are weighty reasons to be put forward in favor of Spinoza's position. They partly derive from his prior commitments in the domains of metaphysics and anthropology and their adequate examination must be set within a broader perspective on his fundamental philosophical presuppositions. However, the decisive reason to make him introduce the stated limitation on the right of civic expression in the domain of politics was likely a practical one and based on thorough comprehension of the nature of political life. The fact of the matter is that in political life the borderline between word and deed, between merely verbal expression and action bringing about serious social consequences is fluid and notoriously difficult, if not impossible, to define. And according to Spinoza's conception, as I mentioned above, the function of the state is to ensure security for all its citizens, therefore it is clear that to fulfil its function, the state must impose strict limits on what the

citizens can legitimately do; consequently, it is not unreasonable to suppose that there may be a limit to impose on what they can legitimately say in public.

This brings us to the last point and the third political measure proposed by Spinoza as a means to counteract the evil and to contain the spread of religious intolerance. This third measure may succinctly be described as consisting in restraining the freedom of action.

Spinoza was deeply convinced that an unlimited freedom of action, in contrast to the freedom of thought, is not favorable to the peaceful life and well-being of the society. On the contrary, if everyone had unlimited liberty to do whatever they like, no society would be able to survive. His main argument against the unlimited freedom of action in the state was based on the recognition that rebellion against one's own state always brings about disastrous consequences, unsettles people's lives and causes immeasurable suffering. Admittedly, there are situations, in which a violent protest or an open rebellion may seem justified. However, the innumerable examples taken either from ancient history, that of ancient Rome, for instance, or from contemporary history, as of England or the United Provinces, are clear in pointing out that rebellion against the state causes many disasters, and, contrary to what some people might think, it is not an effective means to improve the situation, since it always gives rise to threat. Hence the conclusion: "the form of each state must necessarily be retained, and it cannot be changed without a danger that the whole state will be ruined" (TTP, 18, § 37).

This statement is clear enough, yet it can be further elucidated by reference to Spinoza's conception of the state. According to him, the most desirable form of the state is one which maintains a degree of balance between civil liberties and the political-legal order. For this reason, one should reject both the kind of state in which all actions of citizens are under the supervision of the state and are subordinated to its orders and superiority, and, on the other hand, the kind of state where all domains of life are beyond the state's control. As for the first kind of state, the one in which everything is under its control, it should be, as Spinoza believed, rejected because it ignores the fact that citizens "are best placed to cooperate when they are as free as possible to live as their own ideas dictate."<sup>34</sup> On the other hand, the latter form of state—the one in which there is no control whatever of the state over its citizens—should also be rejected, because it courts the danger of disorder and a loss of social bonds, without which no development, whether collective or individual, is possible.

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<sup>34</sup> JAMES, *Spinoza on Philosophy*, 2.

## CONCLUSION

The fact that Spinoza's reflections on religious intolerance were shaped in the face or even under the pressure of certain social and political events in the Dutch Republic carries some limitations, but it does not lead to the conclusion that Spinoza's analysis is deprived of a strictly philosophical meaning—a meaning which reveals something important on the nature of intolerance, and especially religious intolerance. I do hope that I have succeeded in showing that he provides a theoretical insight into the origins, nature, and consequences of religious intolerance from which valid practical consequences can be drawn. His approach to the problem of religious intolerance inspires admiration for the breadth and depth of his discussion, the richness of psychological and sociological observation, acuteness of analysis and judgment. His identification of the root causes of the disquieting social phenomenon in the deep layers of human nature allows for the generalization of his discussion and the application of his findings to other worrying social and psychological phenomena, in particular to other spheres of social discord, intolerance, discrimination and persecution, which stand in the way of successfully building an open society. Perhaps the main merit of Spinoza's analyses is that his account of the origin of religious intolerance and then his arguments against it do not only have merely strategical or instrumental character but they are deeply rooted in his metaphysical and anthropological findings. In this sense, their basis is, first of all, positive argumentation based on his understanding of reality and human nature. Consequently, his account of religious intolerance is not limited only to the codification of political measures for combating religious intolerance but it is a coherent and well thought-out whole.

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## SPINOZA'S CRITIQUE OF RELIGIOUS INTOLERANCE

## Summary

This article presents a new interpretation of Spinoza's account of religious intolerance. According to Rosenthal and Steinberg Spinoza explains the origins of religious intolerance in two ways. The first is in the *Ethics*, which is grounded on the affect of ambition; the second in the *Theological-Political Treatise*, which is based on the opposed affects of fear and hope. I agree with this interpretation, yet I considerably modify and supplement this account. The interpretation I propose rests on the observation that in order to understand Spinoza's view we need to draw the subtle distinction between the explanation of the psychological causes of religious intolerance and the elucidation of why religious intolerance appears to appeal so much. First, I shall discuss Spinoza's account of the origin of religious intolerance. Second, I shall discuss what it is about us, according to Spinoza, that makes us exposed to religious intolerance. Third, I shall consider the measures which, in his view, should be taken in order to curb religious intolerance effectively.

**Keywords:** Spinoza; religion; intolerance; prejudice; superstition; clericalism.

## SPINOZY KRYTYKA NIETOLERANCJI RELIGIJNEJ

Artykuł przedstawia nową interpretację stanowiska Spinozy w kwestii pochodzenia i natury nietolerancji religijnej. Według Rosenthala i Steinberga Spinoza wyjaśniał pochodzenie nietolerancji religijnej na dwa sposoby. Pierwszy z nich, obecny w *Etyce*, odwołuje się przede wszystkim do afektu ambicji; drugi, obecny w *Traktacie teologiczno-politycznym*, opiera się na analizie wpływu na ludzkie myślenie dwóch przeciwnych sobie afektów strachu i nadziei. W niniejszym artykule modyfikuję i uzupełniam to ujęcie. Ponadto wskazuję, że aby zrozumieć poglądy Spinozy na temat nietolerancji religijnej, należy skrupulatnie odróżnić wyjaśnienie przyczyn nietolerancji religijnej od wyjaśnienia powodów, dla których ludzie poddają się wpływowi nietolerancyjnych religii. W pierwszej części artykułu omawiam pogląd Spinozy na temat pochodzenia i natury nietolerancji religijnej. W części drugiej wskazuję na powody, jakie zdaniem Spinozy decydują o tym, że ludzie mają skłonność do ulegania religijnej nietolerancji. W części trzeciej rozważam środki, które zdaniem Spinozy należy podjąć, aby skutecznie ograniczyć nietolerancję religijną.

**Słowa kluczowe:** Spinoza; religia; nietolerancja; uprzedzenie; zabobon; klerykalizm.