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Spinoza's Philosophical Religion

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In a letter he sent to Henry Oldenburg in 1665, Spinoza included a defence of his decision to write the *Theologico-Political Treatise*.¹ One reason, he explains, is that 'the common people never stop accusing me of atheism, and I am forced to rebut this accusation as well as I can' (IV/166, 15).² In the *TPP*, Spinoza repudiates the charge that he is an atheist by defending a view that he attributes not only to the common people, but also to the more powerful theologians of the Dutch Reformed Church: that God reveals himself in Scripture. The Bible, Spinoza agrees, not only teaches us that God exists, but shows us how to attain blessedness by obeying him. However, as Spinoza adds in his letter to Oldenburg, the *TPP* also has a further aim. It sets out to vindicate 'the freedom of philosophising and saying what we think, which I want to defend in every way; here the preachers suppress it as much as they can with their excessive authority and aggressiveness' (IV/166, 15). In response to the theologians and ecclesiastical officials who claim the right to police philosophical enquiry, Spinoza argues that philosophy and theology are distinct and autonomous practices. Since each reaches its conclusions by a valid and trustworthy method, but neither possesses the authority to judge the other, there is no

¹ In referring to the *Theologico-Political Treatise* (henceforth *TPP*) and to Spinoza's *Correspondence* I cite two editions: the volume and page number of *Spinoza Opera*, ed. C. Gebhardt, 4 vols. (Heidelberg: Carl Winter, 1925), followed by the page number of Edwin Curley trans. and ed., *The Collected Works of Spinoza*, vol. 2. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016). I have used Curley's translations. References to Spinoza's *Ethics* follow the usual format and here, too, I have used Curley's translation. See Edwin Curley ed. and trans., *The Collected Works of Spinoza* vol. 1 (Princeton University Press, 1985).

² Letter 30 to Oldenburg. On accusations of atheism against Spinoza see Jonathan Israel, 'The early Dutch and German reactions to the *TPP*: foreshadowing the Enlightenment's more general Spinoza reception?' in Yitzhak Melamed and Michael Rosenthal eds., *Spinoza's Theologico-Political Treatise: A Critical Guide* (Cambridge University Press, 2010), 72-100; Mogens Laerke, 'G. W. Leibniz's Two Readings of the *Tractatus*' in Melamed and Rosenthal eds., p. 115; Jacqueline Lagrée, *Spinoza et le débat religieux*, (Presses Universitaires de Rennes, 2004), 17-24; Michael Rosenthal, 'Why Spinoza is intolerant of Atheists', *Review of Metaphysics* 65:4 (2012), 813-39. Richard Mason claims that Spinoza was not concerned to rebut charges of atheism or skepticism. See Richard Mason, *The God of Spinoza* (Cambridge University Press, 1987), 22-3. But given Spinoza's letter to Oldenburg and Letter 43 to Ostens (see fn. 3 below) this seems implausible.

epistemological conflict between them. As the title of Chapter XV puts it, neither should be the handmaid of the other (III/180, 272).

This argument is designed to persuade the Dutch state and its Reformed Church that philosophers can safely be given the freedom to develop and discuss their ideas without endangering religion. ‘Scripture leaves reason absolutely free and has nothing in common with philosophy; each rests on its own foundation’ (III/10, 72). But Spinoza’s separation of philosophy from theology nevertheless brings the religious status of philosophy into question. If philosophical enquiry is not constrained by theologically-grounded conclusions about the content and practice of religious faith, is there scope for it to be, or become, irreligious? More specifically, does Spinoza’s own philosophy conflict with the demands of revealed religion, thus exposing him after all to the charge of atheism?

According to some of the earliest readers of the *TTP*, it definitely does. As Lambert Van Velthuysen sums up the charge, ‘I think I am not deviating very far from the truth, or doing the Author any injustice, if I denounce him for teaching pure Atheism, by disguised and counterfeit arguments’ (IV/218, 385).³ But Spinoza’s own attitude to the relation between religion and philosophy is harder to fathom. Following the lead of the *TTP*, some commentators have read him as the author and defender of a philosophy independent of religion. Spinoza, they contend, ushers in a secular form of philosophising.⁴ Following the lead of the

³ Lambert Van Velthuysen, Letter 42 to Jacob Ostens. Van Velthuysen was an advocate of Cartesian philosophy and sympathetic to many of Spinoza’s philosophical views. Curley suggests that he attacked Spinoza so fiercely because he felt the need to distance himself from the controversial argument of the *TTP*. See Curley, *Collected Works of Spinoza* vol. 2, p.365. Spinoza adamantly rejects Velthuysen’s charge: ‘Has someone who maintains that God must be recognized as the highest good, and that he should be freely loved as such, cast off all religion? Is someone who holds that our greatest happiness consists only in this [love of God] irreligious? Or that the reward of virtue is virtue itself, whereas the punishment of folly and weakness is weakness itself? And finally, that each person ought to love his neighbor and obey the commands of the supreme power? Not only have I explicitly said these things. I have also proved them by the strongest arguments.’ Letter 43 to Ostens, February 1671 (IV/220b-221b, 386-7).

⁴ For versions of this stance see Leo Strauss, *Spinoza’s Critique of Religion* trans. E. M. Sinclair (University of Chicago Press, 1997), pp. 1-31; Gilles Deleuze, *Expressionism in Philosophy: Spinoza*, trans. Martin Joughin (New York, Zone Books, 1992), p.270; Louis Althusser, *The Only Materialist Tradition, Part I*, trans. in Warren Montag and Ted Stolze eds., *The New Spinoza* (University of Minnesota Press, 1997), p. 9; R. J. Delahunty, *Spinoza* (Routledge, 1985), p.175; Steven Nadler, “Whatever is, is in God.” Substance and Things in Spinoza’s Metaphysics’, in Charlie Huenemann ed., *Interpreting Spinoza. Critical Essays* (Cambridge University Press, 2010), p.70. Jonathan Israel argues that Spinoza ushered in ‘a general trend in culture and ideas towards rationalization and secularization’. *Radical Enlightenment: Philosophy and the Making of Modernity, 1650 – 1750* (Oxford University Press, 2001), 6-7.

Ethics, where a philosophical way of life is endowed with a religious aura, other commentators have arrived at the contrary conclusion: that Spinoza views his philosophy as a form of religion, albeit an unorthodox one.⁵ While this debate has many strands, it is fuelled by an apparent tension between the *Ethics* and the *TTP*, which seem to pull in opposite directions, the first towards a religious interpretation of Spinoza's philosophy, the second away from it. My aim in this chapter is to show how this conflict can be resolved. From the fact that Spinoza distinguishes philosophy from religion in the *TTP*, I shall argue, we should not infer that he views them as categorically distinct. Instead, religion as he understands it can take various forms, of which the religion revealed in Scripture and articulated in the *TTP* is one, and Spinozist philosophy is another. The shift from a theological to a philosophical mode of enquiry is not a move from a religious to a non-religious outlook, but a transition from one form of religious practice to another.

Spinoza's defence of this view rests on the claim that the fundamental demands of a religious life – to love God and love one's neighbour – are endorsed by philosophy as much as by revelation. The Scriptures teach us to live as they dictate, but so, in a different way, does philosophical understanding. Spinoza's argument therefore hinges on a particular view of what constitutes a religious way of life, and although he derives this conception from the Bible in the *TTP* and arrives at it by reasoning in the *Ethics*, the Bible takes priority. The conclusion that the truly religious way of life described in Scripture only requires religious people to love God and their neighbours, and does not impose any further demands, sets a religious standard that Spinoza then finds mirrored in a philosophical way of life. If, as revelation tells us, this is what religion requires, philosophy qualifies as a form of religion.

⁵ See Steven B. Smith, *Spinoza, Liberalism and the Question of Jewish Identity* (Yale University Press, 1997) p. 21. Jacqueline Lagrée, *Spinoza et le débat religieux* (Presses Universitaires de Rennes, 2004), p. 214; Michael Rosenthal, 'Miracles, wonder and the state', in Melamed and Rosenthal eds., *Spinoza's Theological-Political Treatise: A Critical Guide* (Cambridge University Press, 2010). p. 232; Clare Carlisle, 'Spinoza on Eternal Life', *American Catholic Philosophical Quarterly*, Winter 2015, especially pp. 69-72. For the view that Spinoza is a theist, and not as Bennett puts it, 'a mealy-mouthed or perhaps ironical atheist' see for example Jonathan Bennett, *A Study of Spinoza's Ethics* (Cambridge University Press, 1984), p.35; Michael Della Rocca, *Spinoza* (Routledge 2008), p.285; Alexandre Matheron, *Indivu et communauté chez Spinoza* (Éditions de Minuit, 1988), p.142.

As Spinoza was well aware, his minimal conception of religion challenged the more elaborate, biblically grounded creeds of many of his theological opponents, who did not accept the conception of religion on which his argument is grounded. While they agreed that Scripture requires us to love God and our neighbours, they denied that these requirements are sufficient. A religious way of life also involves other commitments, such as membership of a church, specific forms of observance, and a range of theological beliefs.⁶ In the *TTP*, Spinoza sets out to show that they are mistaken, but he does not expect to convert them and largely writes them off as superstitious (III/12, 75). Instead, he aligns himself with the various Dutch advocates of a minimal form of religion that can be practised in many ways.⁷ One of these ways, Spinoza now goes on to explain, is philosophical.

I. Dividing Philosophy from Religion

The clearest objection to the view that Spinoza views philosophy as a religious practice lies in his insistence that philosophy lacks authority to identify the nature of a truly religious way of life. Starting from the viewpoint of its intended readership, the *TTP* assumes that we learn what religion requires of us by studying Scripture's account of God's revelations to his prophets. As the opening of Chapter 1 explains, 'Prophecy or revelation is the certain knowledge of some matter which God has revealed to men' (III/15, 76). But the task of interpreting the word of God as it is recounted by the biblical prophets belongs to theologians. It lies outside the expertise of philosophers, who are limited to deploying their rational understanding to grasp the fundamental structure and organisation of nature.

In explicating the differences between philosophical and theological enquiry, Spinoza assumes that his readers already have a sense of what philosophising involves. Philosophical reasoning, he summarises, starts from

⁶ For the theological context in which Spinoza was writing see Susan James, *Spinoza on Philosophy, Religion and Politics: The Theologico-Political Treatise* (Oxford University Press, 2012), pp. 7-34; Stephen Nadler, *A Book Forged in Hell. Spinoza's Scandalous Treatise and the Birth of a Secular Age* (Princeton University Press, 2011), pp. 17-35.

⁷ See James, *Spinoza on Philosophy, Religion and Politics*, pp. 189-91.

common notions, and shows how other adequate ideas necessarily follow from them (III/61,130). At its best, philosophy captures and explains the universal causal laws that govern natural things, including human beings, and delivers knowledge that is absolutely or mathematically certain. This knowledge in turn informs our grasp of many domains, including, for example, astronomy, architecture, psychology and ethics (III/36-7, 101-3).

In the *Ethics*, Spinoza traces the fundamental truths that reasoning yields; but in the *TPP* his main concern is to distinguish philosophical from theological enquiry. ‘My principle purpose’, he emphasises, ‘is to speak only of what concerns Scripture’ (III/16, 78). Theology, he argues, is a hermeneutic practice, a matter of uncovering the meaning of Scripture rather than reasoning from one adequate idea to another. By carefully and systematically interpreting the texts of the Bible, and not attributing anything to the prophets that they did not clearly and repeatedly say (III/16, 78), it decodes the content of the divine law that God has revealed and explains what they require of us. In doing so, however, it also elucidates the nature of prophetic insight and identifies the limits of its authority. While the prophets’ knowledge informed them of the demands of a religious way of life, it did not enable them to assess the truth of philosophically grounded claims.

To substantiate this account of the epistemological scope of theology, Spinoza offers an anthropological analysis of the practice of prophecy, which he derives from his interpretations of the Old and New Testaments. It is clear, he argues, that the prophets were human beings endowed with the same mental powers as everyone else, and equally evident that they did not possess a significant level of philosophical understanding. What set them apart was rather their extraordinary powers of imagination, which made them unusually sensitive and responsive to the circumstances in which they found themselves; they ‘perceived God’s revelations only with the aid of the imagination, i.e. by the mediation of words and images, which may have been true or imaginary’ (III/28, 92). Prophets noticed things that eluded ordinary people and felt their significance; but rather than articulating their insights in philosophical terms, they expressed them imaginatively. Drawing on their inadequate ideas of the things and processes around them, they experienced God ‘as they were

accustomed to imagine him' (III/34, 99). For example, Isaiah saw God clothed and sitting on a royal throne, Ezekiel saw him like a fire, and because Moses 'believed that God's nature admits of ... compassion, kindness, etc., God was revealed to him according to this opinion and under these attributes' (III/40, 105-6). Moreover, Moses's idea of the deity enabled him to communicate his revelation to the Israelites, who shared his anthropomorphic conception of God and were ready to accept it.

Spinoza's analysis offers us a way to make sense of the phenomenon of revelation, but does not so far tell us how to distinguish genuine from false prophecy. Drawing once again on the biblical record, he argues that a true prophecy must satisfy three conditions, which are jointly sufficient to establish it as a piece of morally certain knowledge. The first condition concerns revelation itself: a prophet must have imagined the things revealed to him 'very vividly, in the way we are usually affected by objects when we are awake' (III/31, 96). But since a prophet whose vivid experiences have sincerely persuaded him that he has received God's word may nevertheless be mistaken, this is not enough. Two further conditions must be met, the first of which is the occurrence of a sign. When a prophet publicly asks God to confirm that he has received the divine word, and he and his audience experience some extraordinary occurrence that they interpret as a sign from God, they gain further grounds – as do the readers of Scripture - for believing that the prophecy is genuine (III/32, 97). But a final and yet more important kind of evidence lies in the prophet's moral character. He must be the sort of person who will not deceive others or allow himself to be deceived, because his heart is 'inclined only to the right and the good' (III/31, 96).

When these requirements are satisfied, there is sufficient evidence to conclude that a prophecy is genuine; but they do not, of course, generate the mathematically certain knowledge that philosophy yields. As we have seen, prophecy is an imaginative practice, and 'to be able to be certain of things we imagine, we must add something to the imagination - viz. reasoning' (III/30, 94). It remains possible that an apparently virtuous prophet has faked a revelation and rigged a sign, and thus that a prophecy which satisfies all three criteria is false. The requirements do, however, guarantee what Spinoza describes as

moral certainty (III/30, 95). The knowledge that God has revealed himself to a particular prophet rests on inductively grounded generalisations (for example that genuine prophecies are accompanied by signs, and that only virtuous people are true prophets) that have come to define the practice of prophecy. Somewhat as the inductive practices of naturalists give us reliable knowledge about the identity of a particular bird or animal, so the practice of prophecy reliably identifies prophets. Furthermore, this kind of knowledge is vital to our lives. It gives us access to conclusions, including conclusions about prophecy, that are not attainable by philosophical means, because they lie ‘beyond the limits of the intellect’. In Spinoza’s view, ‘we can compose many more ideas from words and images than we can by using only the principles and notions on which our whole natural knowledge is constructed’ (III/28, 92). Because imagination is in a sense more fecund than reasoning, it enables us to grasp aspects of particular situations and processes that escape our rational deliberations, and allows us to put them to use in our lives.

By focusing on the genuine prophecies recorded in Scripture and ignoring the false ones, theologians are able to assemble a body of evidence about the content of divine revelation. But revelation remains hard to interpret. Since prophets experience God in the light of their own temperaments, imagination and opinions, since they express themselves in metaphors and narratives, and since they communicate in terms that their audiences will be able to grasp (III/32, 97), the meanings of their insights are elusive. To uncover them, we need to begin by considering what kinds of things prophets know, and thus what truths they have authority to speak about. And since, as far as we can tell from the biblical record, their insights were not the fruit of philosophical training or knowledge, we should not expect them to be able to pronounce on philosophical issues. To be sure, many people have rashly persuaded themselves that the prophets ‘knew everything the human intellect can attain to’ (III/35, 100); but a moderately careful reading of Scripture reveals that this is not the case. For example, although the author of the book of Joshua recounts that, during Joshua’s battle with the Ammonites, the sun stood still in the sky, we have no reason to believe that he had any knowledge of astronomy, and every reason to suppose that he is describing the event in imaginative terms, as it appeared to Joshua and

his army. ‘They believed [that the sun stood still in the sky] and did not consider that a refraction greater than usual could arise from the large amount of ice then in that part of the air – or from some other cause’ (III/36, 101). We are therefore ‘not at all bound to believe [the prophets] concerning speculative matters’ (III/35, 100; III/156, 257).

What remains of revelation once the prophets’ speculative misunderstandings have been stripped away? A first clue lies in the biblical evidence that genuine prophets were virtuous people whose hearts were inclined to the right and the good (III/99, 171-2). Despite their lack of philosophical acumen, they possessed morally certain knowledge of ‘things which concern loving-kindness (*charitas*) and how to conduct our lives’ (III/42/109), and on these issues were in a position to speak authoritatively. So rather than looking to prophecy for an understanding of physics or the nature of God (III/37, 102), we should concentrate on its moral message. Happily, this proposal is confirmed by the revelations recorded in the Bible. Again and again, the prophets enjoin their listeners to live as revelation dictates by obeying the divine law; again and again, they make it clear that the way to do this is to obey God by loving your neighbour; and again and again, they emphasise that this is sufficient for salvation. ‘Scripture requires nothing from men but obedience... Next, obedience to God consists only in the love of your neighbour – for as Paul says in Romans 13.8, he who loves his neighbour in order that he may obey God has fulfilled the Laws’ (III/168, 258; III/174, 265). What theology establishes, then, is that revelation gives us morally certain knowledge of the essential features of a religious and saving way of life.

In the *TTP* Spinoza abstracts this core meaning of revelation from a sequence of biblical narratives and presents it in propositional form. But, as he repeatedly acknowledges, this is not how the prophets themselves express it. Their accounts of the divine law are couched in the figurative terms of our imaginative thinking. This feature of prophecy draws attention to a further difference between theology and philosophy. Whereas the goal of philosophy is truth, the aim of the prophetic narratives contained in Scripture is to move us to obey the divine law. ‘Who does not see’, Spinoza urges, ‘that each Testament is

nothing but a training in obedience, and that neither Testament has any aim but that men should obey from a true heart' (III/174, 264)?

The first half of this contrast between philosophy and theology is familiar from the *Ethics* as well as the *TTP* and underlies the argument we have so far traced. As the Spinozist philosopher extends his understanding, he becomes increasingly skilled at identifying and perceiving the relations between adequate ideas, and gains an increasingly full and accurate conception of the causal structure of nature. (He comes to understand, for example, that the earth revolves around the sun rather than the other way round, and that the sun therefore cannot 'stand still' in the sky.) As part of this process, he gains a better understanding of human beings by learning what is good and bad for them, and comes to appreciate that the only sure way to overcome the confusion and sadness to which our inadequate ideas give rise is to enlarge our philosophical understanding. Philosophy is therefore the means by which we acquire true or adequate knowledge, not only of what the world is like, but also of how it is best for us to live.

By contrast, the scriptural narratives with which theologians concern themselves deal only with the inadequate or imaginative ideas of the prophets, and cannot be a source of adequate knowledge. Rather than contributing to our certain, philosophical understanding, the function of prophetic utterance is to encourage people to obey the divine law. A crucial aspect of a prophet's skill lies in his ability to move his listeners to live in accordance with the law by enlivening their images of an obedient way of life and stirring up their hearts to obey. Thus conceived, the Bible is fundamentally a rhetorical text designed to persuade, and in order to fulfil this purpose its claims need not answer to the standard of philosophical truth. It is important, for example, that the miraculous story of Joshua's battle with the Ammonites should strengthen the faith of at least some of those who hear it, and as long as it serves this purpose it does not matter that its account of the course of the sun is false. Equally, it was important that Moses' description of his meeting with an anthropomorphic deity served to strengthen the Israelites' commitment to the Mosaic law, but not important that it misrepresented the nature of God. 'Moses did not try to convince the Israelites by reason. ... [H]e threatened the people with punishment if they did not obey

the laws and urged them to obedience with rewards. All these are means only to obedience, not knowledge.' (III/174, 264).

This analysis of the relationship between philosophy and theology is designed to establish that the two forms of enquiry are not in competition and that their conclusions do not come into conflict (III/179, 271). Since each has its own goal and epistemological standards, neither is in a position to pass judgment on the other. Philosophy is consequently unable to assess the morally certain knowledge that prophecy yields, and theology lacks the means to endorse or criticise philosophically grounded conclusions. 'We conclude, unconditionally, that Scripture is not to be accommodated to reason, nor reason to Scripture' (III/185, 278). In addition, however, philosophy and theology give us knowledge of different things. While philosophical understanding ranges over many aspects of nature, theology provides us with morally certain knowledge of true religion. It shows us what the divine law requires of us, and reliably assures us that obedience to the law is sufficient for salvation. If, then, we ask how knowledge of true religion can be acquired, Spinoza's answer seems to be that we gain it from theology. Philosophers must therefore accept that, for all its power, their mode of enquiry does not deliver knowledge of the nature of a religious life. It cannot establish that all we have to do in order to be saved is to obey the divine law (III/185, 278).

II. Blurring the Boundary

Ever since the *TTP* was published, Spinoza's argument for the distinctness of philosophy and theology has aroused suspicion. Although he insists that theology is not the handmaid of philosophy (III/180, 272) and purports to give theology its own epistemological domain, many readers have found his case unconvincing. Their reservations often focus on the *TTP*'s discussion of faith, where the requirements of a truly religious life are filled out. Siding with St. James and St. John against St. Paul (III/175-6, 266-7), Spinoza initially seems to hold that one's actions are a sufficient mark of obedience, and that the test of one's religious faith lies in what one does rather than in what one believes. 'No one can deny that one who, according to God's demand, loves his neighbour as

himself is really obedient, and according to the law, blessed' (III/174, 265). As the discussions proceeds, however, Spinoza's position turns out to be more complex. Although, by Jewish or Christian standards, true religion as he conceives it imposes very few constraints on one's beliefs, there are nevertheless some doctrines of the universal faith that one must affirm, because one will otherwise be unable to obey the law. 'The only beliefs we are bound by Scriptural command to have are those which are absolutely necessary to carry out this command' (III/174, 265). For example, one cannot love God unless one believes that he exists, and cannot love him wholeheartedly unless one believes that he is present everywhere (III/177, 268).

Spelling out these conditions, the *TTP* lists seven doctrines, of which the last, in particular, challenges the division that Spinoza has so far been at pains to establish between philosophy and theology, and casts doubt on its claim that neither has authority over the other. According to this final doctrine, one cannot obey the law unless one believes that 'God pardons the sins of those who repent'. For, as Spinoza goes on to explain, 'no one is without sin. So if we did not maintain this, everyone would despair of his salvation, and there would be no reason why anyone would believe God to be merciful' (III/178). We therefore seem to be required to believe in the existence of an anthropomorphic deity who punishes or pardons human beings, although it is significant that the doctrine does not specify how this belief is to be fleshed out. As the *TTP* emphasises, 'each person is bound to accommodate these doctrines of faith to his own power of understanding, and to interpret them for himself, as it seems to him easier for him to accept them without any hesitation, with complete agreement of the heart, so that he may obey God wholeheartedly' (III/178/9, 2770). However, while this may give many people the imaginative latitude they need in order to believe that God pardons those who repent, it is not clear that it will enable Spinozist philosophers to do so. According to the *Ethics*, philosophical reasoning definitively shows that God does not have anthropomorphic properties and therefore cannot truly be described as pardoning human beings. So although individuals who lack this knowledge may legitimately imagine God in anthropomorphic terms, anyone who has a philosophical understanding of the deity will be unable to affirm the seventh doctrine of faith.

Spinoza's conclusion poses a double threat. If affirming the doctrines of universal faith is a condition of leading a religious life, Spinozist philosophers who are unable to do so will qualify as irreligious. In addition, however, the incompatibility between the commitments of philosophy and religion appears to undermine the *TTP*'s claim that philosophy has no epistemological authority over theology. If philosophers are in a position to assess and reject the truth of fundamental doctrines on which a truly religious way of life depends, theology must surely be epistemologically subordinate to philosophy. Equally, if enlightened philosophers are bound to hold beliefs that are contrary to the demands of true religion, studying philosophy must surely be incompatible with a religious existence.

This apparent incoherence has led some commentators to suggest that Spinoza is insincere when he claims that theology and philosophy have independent spheres of authority.⁸ Others have taken the more straightforward view that, whatever his motivations may have been, his attempt to separate theology from philosophy fails.⁹ Although he establishes that theology is not in a position to assess philosophical arguments and conclusions, he does not establish the contrary, so that philosophy proves to be the more powerful of the two forms of enquiry. Regardless of their differences, both these strands of criticism imply that Spinozist philosophy surpasses revealed religion. As philosophers extend their understanding, they come to appreciate that the claims on which revealed religion rests are inadequate or confused, and progressively replace them with an adequate or true understanding of the relation between God and human beings. Losing their commitment to religion,

⁸ The leading advocates of this view are Leo Strauss, *Persecution and the Art of Writing* (University of Chicago Press, 1952) and Yirmiyahu Yovel, *Spinoza and Other Heretics: The Marrano of Reason* (Princeton University Press, 1989). For a careful and to some extent sympathetic assessment of Strauss's claims see Edwin Curley, 'Resurrecting Leo Strauss' in *Reading Between the Lines: Leo Strauss and the History of Early Modern Philosophy*, ed. Winfried Schroeder (De Gruyter, 2015).

⁹ Theo Verbeek, *Spinoza's Theologico-Political Treatise. Exploring the Will of God* (Ashgate, 2003), pp. 28-37; Daniel Garber, 'Should Spinoza have published his Philosophy?' in Charlie Huenemann ed., *Interpreting Spinoza. Critical Essays* (Cambridge University Press, 2008), 166-87; Susan James, *Spinoza on Philosophy Religion and Politics* (Oxford University Press, 2012), 216-24. For further discussion of Spinoza's distinction between philosophy and theology see Michael Rosenthal, "Spinoza's Dogmas of the Universal Faith and the Problem of Religion", *Philosophy & Theology* 13(1), pp. 53-72 and Sylvain Zac, *Spinoza et l'interprétation de l'Écriture* (Presses Universitaires de France, 1965).

they immerse themselves in a philosophical way of life. But before we accept this view of Spinoza's position, we need to ask again how philosophy and religion are related. Does the philosopher transcend religion, as these interpretations imply? Or is philosophy itself a religious practice, so that as people learn to philosophise they manifest their faith in a new way?

III. Philosophical Religion

If a religious life fundamentally consists in loving God and loving one's neighbour, a philosophical form of religion must satisfy this standard. Just as revelation encourages us to live as true religion demands, philosophical understanding must do the same. In the *Ethics*, Spinoza sets out to establish that it does, and although it is beyond the scope of this chapter to offer a full account of his argument, we can nevertheless outline some of the main steps by which he arrives at this conclusion. A first fruit of philosophical reasoning is that it transforms our conception of God. In place of the anthropomorphic ideas of the deity that dominated the imaginative outlooks of the prophets, and indeed of most of the religious people by whom Spinoza was surrounded, philosophers who follow his arguments are led to a quite different conception of the deity. The God of the *Ethics* is the infinitely powerful, immanent cause of everything that exists. As Spinoza puts it, 'whatever is, is in God, and nothing can be or be conceived without God' (EIp15), who 'is the immanent ... cause of all things' (EIp18). Moreover, rather than exercising his power in the arbitrary, anthropomorphic fashion described by the prophets, this deity manifests his power in the systematic causal processes at work in nature: 'In nature ... all things have been determined from the necessity of the divine nature to exist and produce an effect in a certain way' (EIp29). As philosophers increase their understanding of individual things and the relationships between them, they therefore increase their understanding of the operations of divine power and increase their knowledge of God. In the words of the *TTP*, 'the more we know natural things the greater and more perfect is the knowledge of God we acquire' (III/60, 128); and as the *Ethics* elaborates, '[P]erfecting the intellect is nothing but understanding God, his attributes and his actions, which follow from the necessity of his nature' (EIV Appendix IV).

As well as radically altering the philosopher's idea of God, the pursuit of rational understanding transforms the philosopher himself. The more adequately philosophers understand how they are affected by the external things they encounter, the better they are able to distinguish between relationships that promote and relationships that undermine their efforts to extend their understanding. Putting this knowledge to work, they become more active and resilient (EVp20s), and experience what Spinoza describes as an increased joyfulness - a growing confidence and satisfaction in the power of understanding, which commits them yet more strongly to the project of philosophical enquiry (EIIIp58).

Connecting these two aspects of their knowledge, philosophers come to understand that their power and joyfulness are manifestations of the infinite power of God. But this, according to Spinoza, is what it is to love God. We love things that affect us with joy (EIII, Dftn. of the Affects, VI); so the more fully philosophers understand that God is the ultimate cause of their joyfulness, the more they will love him. As Spinoza puts it, 'he who understands himself and his affects clearly and distinctly rejoices, and his joy is accompanied by the idea of God. Hence he loves God, and does so the more he understands himself and his affects' (EVp15). Making the religious connotations of this condition clear, Spinoza adds that, 'whatever we desire and do of which we are the cause insofar as we have the idea of God, or insofar as we know God, I relate to religion' (EIVp37s).

Because philosophical understanding is manifested in love of the deity, those who attain it meet the first requirement of a religious life. They love God. 'The man who is necessarily the most perfect and who participates most in supreme blessedness is the one who loves above all else the intellectual knowledge of God, the supreme being, and takes the greatest pleasure in that knowledge. Our supreme good, then, and our blessedness, come back to this: the knowledge and love of God' (III/60, 128). But does their understanding also bring them to love their neighbours? As we have seen, the philosopher's ability to increase his power and become more active depends on learning to control the way that external things affect him, and here his relationships with human beings play a central role. Of all external things, other people have the greatest

potential to harm or help us (EIV, Appendix IX). We both depend on them for our survival and are vulnerable to the damage they can inflict. If philosophers are to avoid debilitating social relationships that will block their efforts to develop their understanding, they must ensure that they relate to other people in ways that empower them and make them joyful. To put the point another way, their relationships with other people must be loving ones.

In everyday life our efforts to form stable, loving relationships often fail. For example, we tend to try to get others to help us realise our desires without taking their own preferences into account, ‘and when all alike want this, they are all alike an obstacle to one another’ (EIIIp31s). However, understanding shows philosophers how to solve this problem. To form enduring loving relationships with other people, we have to form relationships that empower all parties and ensure that no one has anything to gain by damaging them. Philosophers who appreciate this requirement will therefore want others to share the joy that they themselves desire, and will do their best to create the mutually empowering relationships that Spinoza describes as bonds of friendship with those around them (EIVp40). They will try to live harmoniously with other people by forming political associations (EIV Appendix XXVI).

In an ideal philosophical community whose members have grasped these rational insights, individuals will express their love for one another in perfect mutual friendship. (The nature of religion can be summed up, Spinoza observes, in the principle that ‘everyone who is led by reason desires for others also the good he wants for himself’ (EIVp73s).) But even in more realistic circumstances, where some people have more rational understanding than others, and many of them have inadequate ideas about what stable, loving relationships involve, philosophers will still love their neighbours. To take one of Spinoza’s examples, they may try to win support for their own projects by giving people unsolicited gifts and expecting favours in return. A philosopher who understands the deficiencies of this strategy will try not to accept the gifts he is offered; but nor will he rebuff the giver. Recognising the strategy as a misguided attempt to form a mutually supportive relationship, he will do what he can to help the donor create a genuinely empowering friendship, and where this is beyond his power, will do his best to limit the sadness the donor’s action is liable to cause. ‘So it

often happens that it is necessary to accept favours [of this kind] and return thanks to [the donor] according to his temperament' (EIVp70s). Because we are finite, 'we do not have an absolute power to adapt things outside us to our use' (EIV Appendix XXXII), and must co-operate with other people as best we can; but we can nevertheless maximise our joy and satisfaction by loving our neighbours as far as possible.

Philosophical understanding therefore empowers us to live as the divine law requires by loving God and our neighbours; and as long as this is all that religion demands of us, a philosophical way of life will consequently qualify as a religious one. But here a further objection arises. The religious life revealed to the prophets demands that we *obey* the divine law, and according to Spinoza this in turn requires us to affirm the doctrines of faith. As we have seen, Spinozist philosophers cannot meet this last condition; if obedience to the law requires us to believe the final tenet of faith - that God pardons those who repent - they cannot obey the divine law. So if obeying the law is a necessary feature of a religious way of life, a life informed by philosophical understanding cannot after all be a religious one.

To assess this argument, we need to examine Spinoza's conception of obedience. According to the prophets, he contends, salvation depends on obeying a law, understood as a set of commands imposed on us by a divine legislator whose rewards and penalties encourage us to follow his decrees (III/58, 126). Readers of the Bible, like the audiences to whom the prophets revealed the divine word, are not expected to conform to the divine law because they understand the intrinsic benefits of doing so, but because they fear God's punishment and hope for salvation. To follow a law for these instrumental reasons is, Spinoza contends, to *obey* it. The prophets imagined God as a legislator and judge, who requires us to obey his commandments on pain of punishment and in the hope of mercy. However, while a prophet such as Moses 'conceived the way that people could best be compelled to obedience', he credited God with qualities that are in fact 'attributes only of human nature, and ought to be removed entirely from the divine nature' (III/64, 132-3).

Spinozist philosophers understand enough to avoid this mistake. They know that the prophets' ideas of the deity are confused, and that their

representations of him are imaginative constructions. As philosophers abandon an imaginative outlook, they come to understand that God is not the sort of being who issues commands and that the only sense in which he can be said to impose laws on us is a figurative one (III/58, 126). Like all individual things, we are subject to the necessary laws of nature, which ‘produce effects in a fixed and determinate way’ (III/58, 126), and insofar as they determine the course of human events these laws undoubtedly bind us. However, since we cannot fail to conform to them and are powerless to do anything about this fact, the issue of obeying or disobeying them does not arise. We are bound to live in accordance with the laws of nature through which God expresses his power, but cannot be said to obey or disobey them (III/59, 127).

Here, once again, a gap seems to open up between religion and philosophy. If philosophers cannot accede to the biblical injunction to *obey* the divine law, it seems that they cannot satisfy the requirements of a religious life and philosophising again fails to qualify as a religious practice. But before we settle for this conclusion there is a further point to consider. Spinoza makes it clear that the revelations of the Hebrew prophets were meant to persuade people who would see no reason to live in accordance with the divine law unless they were given some external incentive for doing so. To induce the ancient Israelites to lead religious lives, for example, Moses had to represent the law as a set of commands that they would be punished for disobeying (III/59, 127). However, while the prophets hit on one way of persuading people to live as religion requires, theirs is not the only way to achieve this goal. Rationally grounded understanding also teaches us that the best and most joyful way to live is to love God and one’s neighbours. Moreover, once we understand the reasons for living as these truths dictate, ‘we embrace them, not as laws, but as eternal truths. That is, obedience passes into love, which proceeds from true knowledge as necessarily as light does from the sun. So we can, indeed, love God according to the guidance of reason, but we cannot obey him according to the guidance of reason’ (III/264, ...) Without being prodded into obedience by external sanctions, philosophers actively embrace the tenets of the divine law and enforce them for themselves.

Obedience to the divine law therefore has no place in a philosophically informed outlook, but this is not enough to make such an outlook irreligious. The core demand of religion, as the *OTP* presents it, is not to obey God, but to love him and love your neighbour. The primary religious requirement is to live in accordance with these precepts rather than to do so in one particular way. Since philosophers have their own way of conforming to the law, the fact that they cannot obey it does not prevent them from leading a form of religious life. ‘The one who follows the divine law is the one who devotes himself to loving God, not from fear of punishment, nor from the love of another thing such as pleasure or reputation, but only because he knows God, or because he knows that the knowledge and love of God is the highest good’ (III/60, 128).

IV. Philosophical and Revealed Religion

So far, Spinoza’s arguments for the religious character of philosophy have presupposed considerable philosophical sophistication. While readers of the *OTP* and the *Ethics* who were already familiar with the lineaments of his philosophical system would presumably have found them reassuring, those whose primary loyalty lay with revealed religion might well have remained troubled. The philosophical position developed in the *Ethics* suggests that, while people who obey the revealed divine law do everything that religion requires and all that is needed for salvation, the love of God and one’s neighbour that arises from philosophical understanding opens out to a superior form of religious life. Although the Bible and philosophy articulate two forms of religion, they are not of equal worth, and only philosophy can lead us to the highest degree of perfection.

People whose theological sympathies made them suspicious of philosophy (of whom there were many in seventeenth-century Europe) were bound to ask whether there was any biblical warrant for this view. Regardless of what philosophers say, does Scripture give us any reason to think that the religious insights revealed by the prophets can be matched or even surpassed by philosophical understanding? In the *OTP* Spinoza aims to quieten this doubt by arguing that there is ample biblical evidence for the existence of the two forms of religion that he identifies. Biblical testimony informs us that, while the Old

Testament prophets revealed the divine law as a set of externally imposed commands, they also foretold ‘a time to come when God would inscribe it in [people’s] hearts’ (III/159, 248). Furthermore, their predictions were borne out in the teachings of Jesus Christ, which, unlike those of the other prophets, were grounded on rational knowledge. Although Christ sometimes resorted to parables and anthropomorphic images in order to make his insights accessible to his audiences, the substance of his revelations reflected a philosophical rather than an imaginative understanding of God. He communicated with God ‘mind to mind’, and as far as we know was the most extraordinary philosopher who has ever lived. He was, Spinoza insists, ‘not so much a prophet as the mouth of God’ (III/64, 133). Christ’s teachings therefore illuminate the character of religion in its philosophical form.¹⁰ Instead of teaching the law as a set of commands that bound a particular group of people, he perceived the content of revelation ‘truly and adequately’. He was therefore able to communicate it in its universal form, as a sequence of ‘common and true notions’ (III/64, 133) that one can conform to for oneself, regardless of external incentives. Thus understood, the fruits of reasoning are accessible to everyone and, as long as we reason correctly, lead us to a single set of truths about the nature of a religious way of life.

The claim that Christ’s philosophical understanding was revealed to him, and thus that revelation can be a source of philosophical knowledge, may seem paradoxical. But Spinoza embraces it. All our natural knowledge, he claims, can be called prophecy; ‘for what we know by the natural light depends only on the knowledge of God and of his eternal decrees’. Thus, ‘we can call natural knowledge divine with as much right as anything else, since God’s nature, insofar as we participate in it, and his decrees, as it were, dictate it to us’ (III/15, 76-7). The fact that we can come to know God through imagination and through understanding indicates that God reveals himself in both these ways. Furthermore, whereas the imaginative powers that give rise to prophetic revelation are extremely rare and no longer in evidence, the rational capacities through which God also reveals himself are ‘common to all men’ (III/15, 77).

¹⁰ On Spinoza’s view of Christ see also Letters 75 and 78 to Oldenburg in Curley ed, *The Collected Works of Spinoza* vol II, pp. 470-3, 480-2; Yitzhak Melamed, “Christus secundum spiritum”: Spinoza, Jesus and the Infinite Intellect” in Neta Stahl ed. *The Jewish Jesus* (London: Routledge, 2012), 140-151.

Admittedly, Christ's revelation was unparalleled, and manifested a superlative level of philosophical understanding. But since all humans have some capacity to reason, all of us, including people who have never heard of the Bible, have the means to start cultivating a religious way of life. 'Since our mind ... has the power to form certain notions which explain the natures of things and teach us how to conduct our lives, we can rightly maintain that the nature of the mind, insofar as it is conceived in this way, is the first cause of revelation' (III/16, 78).

Spinoza therefore defends his view that philosophy is a form of religion on philosophical and theological grounds. There is both rational and biblical evidence that the way of life opened out to us by philosophy enables us to follow the divine law by loving God and loving our neighbours. For some of Spinoza's current admirers this conclusion may be unwelcome, because it conflicts with an attractive line of interpretation to the effect that he ushers in a secular form of philosophising. One of the most radical features of his work, so some commentators contend, lies in its rejection of religion.¹¹ Spinoza undoubtedly rejects many aspects of the religious outlook shared by his contemporaries and this is why he was regarded as an atheist. But to claim that his philosophy abandons or transcends religion is to misidentify the nature of his radicalism. While he aims to challenge the dominant religions of his time, and does so in no uncertain terms, he does not aspire to slough off religion in favour of a more 'scientific' or secular style of philosophising. Instead, he aspires to illuminate a form of religious life that does justice to what he regards as our best and fullest understanding of God. Rather than confining religion to a single imaginative form of belief and practice, he acknowledges that the manner in which we love God and our neighbours can alter with our circumstances, and with the levels of understanding that changing cultural and historical conditions make possible.

Revealed religion emerges in communities with relatively little philosophical understanding, and offsets this limitation by providing imaginatively grounded reasons for loving God and one's neighbour. One of its great achievements is its power to encourage and inculcate co-operative ways of life. But its requirement to obey the divine law nevertheless subjects people to an arbitrary constraint, namely the commands of an imagined anthropomorphic

¹¹ See fn. 4.

God who has the power to punish or reward as he chooses. To put the point in the republican terms that run through Spinoza's work, there is a hint of servitude about revealed religion, insofar as it encourages us to understand ourselves as subject to an arbitrary divine power. Indeed, as Spinoza remarks, since law is generally taken to be a principle of living prescribed by the command of others, 'those who obey the law are said to live under the law and seem to be slaves' (III/59, 127). They cannot be called just (III/59, 127), and do not qualify as free.

Philosophical religion liberates us from this form of servitude. Rather than obeying the divine law in order to win rewards or avoid punishments, we become able to follow it on the basis of our understanding of God and in doing so act freely and with a constant heart' (III/66, 135). As the teachings of Christ indicate, religion can make us free; but a free religious existence is nevertheless only available to people who, partly by virtue of their place in history and their material circumstances, are able to cultivate their philosophical understanding. In the republics of his own day, Spinoza suggests, we see the fragile beginnings of a form of political organisation in which people are free to philosophise; but we still await an accompanying conception of a fully free religious life. This is what the *TTP* and *Ethics* offer us. By developing our philosophical understanding, they contend, we can overcome the servitude implicit in the religious way of life revealed to the biblical prophets, and love God and our neighbours in a spirit of liberty.

Spinoza's philosophical conception of religion differed radically from the established Dutch confessions of his own time, and conflicted with them in a number of highly controversial ways. As his critics repeatedly pointed out, he rejected divine providence (E1Appendix), denied that God loves us (EVp17c), and allowed no place for prayer or other kinds of intercession. In the eyes of many of his readers, a philosophy that so signally lacked the redemptive features of religious practice was nothing but a form of atheism, and although Spinoza firmly resisted this charge (Ep. 43, IV 220b-222b), it can hardly have surprised him. He insists on the religious value of biblical revelation; 'Everyone, without exception, can obey. But only a very few (compared with the whole human race) acquire a habit of virtue from the guidance of reason alone. So, if we didn't have this testimony of Scripture, we would doubt nearly everyone's salvation'

(III/188, 281-2). But he cannot agree that obedience is essential to a religious way of life. On the contrary, he holds out the possibility of a more comprehensive and blissful union with God, grounded on philosophical understanding. For his critics, this is where true religion ends. For Spinoza, philosophy takes the requirement to love God and one's neighbour to a higher level of perfection, and marks the beginning of a free form of religious life.

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