

Cambridge University Press
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Benedict De Spinoza
Excerpt
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Spinoza
Theological-Political Treatise

Containing
several discourses
which demonstrate that
freedom to philosophize may not only be
allowed without danger to piety and the stability of the
republic but cannot be refused without destroying the
peace of the republic and piety itself

The First Epistle of John, chapter 4, verse 13:

*'By this we know that we remain in God, and God remains in us,
because he has given us of his spirit.'*

HAMBURG
Published by Heinrich Kuhnraht
1670¹

¹ The *Tractatus* was actually published, we know, in Amsterdam and not in Hamburg. The false place of publication, 'Hamburg', was doubtless inserted by Spinoza's publisher Jan Rieuwertsz (c. 1616–87) as a precaution, as the work was illegally and clandestinely published in violation of the Dutch Republic's censorship laws and without the name of any author or (true) name of the publisher. The choice of the false publisher's name, Heinrich Kuhnraht, was probably intended by Rieuwertsz as an arcane joke, this being the name of a well-known early seventeenth-century German mystical writer, Heinrich Kuhnraht (1560–1605).

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Preface

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[1] If men were always able to regulate their affairs with sure judgment, or if fortune always smiled upon them, they would not get caught up in any superstition. But since people are often reduced to such desperate straits that they cannot arrive at any solid judgment and as the good things of fortune for which they have a boundless desire are quite uncertain, they fluctuate wretchedly between hope and fear. This is why most people are quite ready to believe anything. When the mind is in a state of doubt, the slightest impulse can easily steer it in any direction, and all the more readily when it is hovering between hope and fear, though it may be confident, pompous and proud enough at other times.

[2] I think that everyone is aware of this, even though I also believe that most people have no self-knowledge. For no one can have lived long among men without noticing that when things are going well, most people, however ignorant they may be, are full of their own cleverness and are insulted to be offered advice. But when things go wrong, they do not know where to turn and they will seek guidance from anyone. No suggestion they hear is too unwise, ridiculous or absurd to follow. Moreover, for the flimsiest of reasons they are conditioned one moment to expect everything to go better and the next to fear the worst. For when they are afraid, anything they see that reminds them of some good or bad thing in the past seems to prognosticate a happy or unhappy outcome, and so they call it a good or a bad omen, even though they have been disappointed a hundred times in the past. Again, if they see anything out of the ordinary that causes them great astonishment, they believe it to be a prodigy which indicates the anger of the gods or of the supreme deity, and they think it would be sinful not to

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expiate it by offering sacrifice and prayers, because they are addicted to superstition and adverse to [true] religion. They develop an infinite number of such practices, and invent extraordinary interpretations of nature, as if the whole of nature were as senseless as they are.

[3] This being the case, we see at once that it is especially those who have a boundless desire for things that are uncertain who are the most prone to superstition of every kind and especially that all humans when they find themselves in danger and are unable to support themselves implore divine assistance with pleas and womanish tears. They swear that reason is blind and human wisdom fruitless because it cannot show them a sure way of acquiring the empty things they want. On the other hand, they believe that the delirious wanderings of the imagination, dreams and all sorts of childish nonsense are divine replies, that God is adverse to the wise and that rather than inscribe his laws in the mind, he writes them in the intestines of animals, and that fools, madmen and birds reveal them by divine inspiration and impulse. It is dread that makes men so irrational.

- 6 [4] Hence, fear is the root from which superstition is born, maintained and nourished. If anyone wants to go further into this matter and consider particular examples, let him contemplate Alexander the Great. Although superstitious by nature, he did not begin to consult prophets until he first learned to fear fortune at the Gates of Susa (see Curtius, 5.4).² However, after he succeeded in defeating Darius, he ceased using soothsayers and seers, until he was once again caught up in a frighteningly difficult situation with the Bactrians in revolt and the Scythians provoking conflict while he himself was laid up with a wound. As Curtius himself says at 7.7: ‘turning again to superstition, that mockery of human minds, he commanded Aristander, to whom he entrusted his credulous fear, to make sacrifices to predict how things would turn out’. Many similar examples could be given which show with complete clarity that people are swayed by credulity only so long as they are afraid; that all the things they have ever worshipped under the influence of false religion are nothing but the fancies and fantasies of despondent and fearful minds; and that prophets have

² Quintus Curtius, *History of Alexander*, 5.4.

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been most influential with the common people and most formidable to their kings when their kingdoms were in the greatest distress. But I think this is all well enough known to everyone, and I will not go further into it here.

[5] Since dread is the cause of superstition, it plainly follows that everyone is naturally prone to it (despite the theory that some people hold that it arises from men's having a confused idea of God). It also follows that superstition must be just as variable and unstable as all absurd leaps of the mind and powerful emotions are, and can only be sustained by hope and hatred, anger and deception. This is because such instability does not spring from reason but from passion alone, in fact from the most powerful of the passions. Therefore it is easy for people to be captivated by a superstition, but difficult to ensure that they remain loyal to it. In fact, because the common people everywhere live in the same wretched state, they never adhere to the same superstition for very long. It is only a new form of credulity that really pleases them, one that has not yet let them down. Such instability of mind has been the cause of many riots and ferocious wars. For, as is clear from what we have just said, and as Curtius quite rightly notes at 4.10, 'nothing governs the multitude as effectively as superstition'.³ Hence people are easily led, under pretence of religion, sometimes to adore their kings as gods and at other times to curse them and detest them as the universal scourge of mankind.

[6] To cope with this difficulty, a great deal of effort has been devoted to adorning religion, whether true or false, with pomp and ceremony, so that everyone would find it more impressive than anything else and observe it zealously with the highest degree of fidelity. The Turks [i.e., the Muslims] have organized this very effectively.⁴ Believing as they do that it is wicked even to argue about religion, they fill the minds of every individual with so many prejudices that they leave no room for sound reason, let alone for doubt. 7

³ Ibid., 4.10.

⁴ Spinoza's father, Michael d'Espinoza, a substantial merchant in Amsterdam, had traded, using Dutch ships, with Morocco as well as Portugal, the Canaries and Brazil, while a cousin, Jacob d'Espinoza, spent many years in the Middle East. Spinoza, consequently, probably knew rather more about Islamic lands than would most educated people in western Europe at the time but was still not particularly sympathetic.

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[7] It may indeed be the highest secret of monarchical government and utterly essential to it, to keep men deceived, and to disguise the fear that sways them with the specious name of religion, so that they will fight for their servitude as if they were fighting for their own deliverance, and will not think it humiliating but supremely glorious to spill their blood and sacrifice their lives for the glorification of a single man. But in a free republic (*respublica*),⁵ on the other hand, nothing that can be devised or attempted will be less successful. For it is completely contrary to the common liberty to shackle the free judgment of the individual with prejudices or constraints of any kind. Alleged subversion for ostensibly religious reasons undoubtedly arises only because laws are enacted about doctrinal matters, and beliefs are subjected to prosecution and condemnation as if they were crimes, and those who support and subscribe to these condemned beliefs are sacrificed not for the common welfare but to the hatred and cruelty of their enemies. However, if the laws of the state ‘proscribed only wrongful deeds and left words free’,⁶ such subversion could not be made to proclaim itself lawful, and intellectual disputes could not be turned into sedition.

[8] We are fortunate to enjoy the rare happiness⁷ of living in a republic where every person’s liberty to judge for himself is respected, everyone is permitted to worship God according to his own mind, and nothing is thought dearer or sweeter than freedom.⁸ I thought therefore that I would be doing something which was neither offensive nor useless were I to show that this freedom may not only be allowed without danger to piety and the stability of the republic but cannot be refused without destroying the peace of the republic and piety itself.⁹ This is the core thesis that I have set out to demonstrate in this treatise.

In order to do so, it is chiefly necessary for me to describe our most powerful prejudices about religion, which are vestiges of our ancient

⁵ In late seventeenth-century Holland it came to be widely asserted, not only by Spinoza but also by other republican writers such as Johan de la Court and Franciscus van den Enden, that the ‘free’ or democratic republic is the highest form of state.

⁶ Compare Tacitus, *Annals*, 1.72.

⁷ An allusion to the famous phrase (‘*rara temporum felicitate ubi sentire quae velis et quae sentias dicere licet*’) at Tacitus, *Histories*, 1.1. Tacitus is speaking of the reign of Trajan.

⁸ Although Spinoza was actually highly critical of some aspects of the Dutch Republic and its laws, it is part of his rhetorical tactics in the *Theological-Political Treatise* to put as optimistic a gloss as he can on the libertarian aspects of the Dutch constitution.

⁹ Almost the same words are used in the sub-title of the *Treatise*.

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servitude, as well as our assumptions about the authority of sovereigns. For there are many men who take the outrageous liberty of trying to appropriate the greater part of this authority and utilize religion to win the allegiance of the common people, who are still in thrall to pagan superstition with the aim of bringing us all back into servitude again. I plan to give a brief outline of the order in which I shall demonstrate these things, but first I want to explain why I was impelled to write.

[9] I have often been amazed to find that people who are proud to profess the Christian religion, that is [a religion of] love, joy, peace, moderation and good will to all men, opposing each other with extraordinary animosity and giving daily expression to the bitterest mutual hatred. So much so that it has become easier to recognize an individual's faith by the latter features than the former. It has been the case for a long time that one can hardly know whether anyone is a Christian, Turk, Jew or gentile, other than that he has a certain appearance and dresses in a certain way or attends one or another church and upholds a certain belief or pays allegiance to one magistrate rather than another. Otherwise their lives are identical in each case. 8

In searching out the reason for this deplorable situation, I never doubted that it arose because, in the religion of the common people, serving the church has been regarded as a worldly career, what should be its unpretentious offices being seen as lucrative positions and its pastors considered great dignitaries. As soon as this abuse began in the church, the worst kind of people came forward to fill the sacred offices and the impulse to spread God's religion degenerated into sordid greed and ambition. Churches became theatres where people went to hear ecclesiastical orators rather than to learn from teachers. Pastors no longer sought to teach, but strove to win a reputation for themselves while denigrating those who disagreed with them, by teaching new and controversial doctrines designed to seize the attention of the common people. This was bound to generate a great deal of conflict, rivalry and resentment, which no passage of time could heal.

Unsurprisingly, then, nothing remains of the religion of the early church except its external ritual (by which the common people seem to adulate rather than venerate God), and faith amounts to nothing more than credulity and prejudices. And what prejudices they are! They turn rational men into brutes since they completely prevent each person from

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using his own free judgment and distinguishing truth from falsehood. They seem purposely designed altogether to extinguish the light of the intellect. Dear God! Piety and religion are reduced to ridiculous mysteries and those who totally condemn reason and reject and revile the understanding as corrupt by nature, are believed without question to possess the divine light, which is the most iniquitous aspect of all. Clearly, if these men had even a spark of divine light, they would not rave so arrogantly. They would learn to revere God with more good sense, and surpass other men in love as they now surpass them in hatred. Nor would they persecute so fiercely those who disagree with them, but would have compassion for them (if they really do fear for those people's salvation more than for their own advancement).

- 9 Furthermore, if they had any godly insight, that at least would emerge clearly from their teaching. But while I admit that they could not express greater veneration for the deepest mysteries of Scripture, what I see in their actual teaching is nothing more than the speculations of the Aristotelians or Platonists. Since they did not wish to appear to be following pagans, they adapted the scriptures to them. It was insufficient for them to be mouthing nonsense themselves, they also desired, together with the Greeks, to render the prophets equally nonsensical. This proves clearly that they cannot even imagine what is really divine in Scripture. The more vehemently such men express admiration for its mysteries, the more they show they do not really believe Scripture but merely assent to it. This is also clear from the fact that most of them take it as a fundamental principle (for the purpose of understanding Scripture and bringing out its true meaning) that Scripture is true and divine throughout. But of course this is the very thing that should emerge from a critical examination and understanding of Scripture. It would be much better to derive it from Scripture itself, which has no need of human fabrications, but they assume it at the very beginning as a rule of interpretation.

[10] As I reflected on all this – that the natural light of reason is not only despised but condemned by many as a source of impiety, that human fabrications are taken as divine teaching, that credulity is deemed to be faith, and that doctrinal conflicts are fought out in Church and Court with intense passion and generate the most bitter antipathies and struggles, which quickly bring men to sedition, as well as a whole host of other things that it would take too long to explain here – I resolved in all seriousness to

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make a fresh examination of Scripture with a free and unprejudiced mind, and to assert nothing about it, and to accept nothing as its teaching, which I did not quite clearly derive from it. With this proviso in mind, I devised a method for interpreting the sacred volumes.

In accordance with this method, I began by inquiring first of all: What is prophecy? In what manner did God reveal himself to the prophets?¹⁰ Why were they acceptable to God? Was it because they had elevated conceptions of God and nature, or was it simply due to their piety? Once I knew this, I was easily able to conclude that the authority of the prophets carries weight only in moral questions and with regard to true virtue, and that for the rest their opinions matter very little to us.¹¹

Once I had understood this, I sought to know why it was that the Hebrews were called the chosen of God. When I saw that this was simply because God had chosen a certain part of the earth for them where they could dwell in safety and prosperity, I realized that the Laws revealed by God to Moses were nothing but the decrees of the historical Hebrew state alone, and accordingly that no one needed to adopt them but the Hebrews, and even they were only bound by them so long as their state survived.¹²

Next I set myself to discover whether we should really conclude from Scripture that human understanding is corrupt by nature. To find this out, I began to consider first whether universal religion, or the divine law revealed to the whole human race through the prophets and Apostles, was really anything other than the law which the natural light of reason also teaches.¹³ Secondly, I inquired whether miracles have occurred contrary to the order of nature and whether they show the existence and providence of God more surely and clearly than things which we understand clearly and distinctly through their own first causes.¹⁴

I found nothing in what Scripture expressly teaches that does not concur with our understanding and nothing that is in conflict with it. I also perceived that the prophets taught only very simple things which could be easily understood by everyone, and had elaborated them with the kind of style, and supported them with the sort of reasons that might most effectively sway the people's mind towards God. In this way, I became completely convinced that Scripture leaves reason absolutely free and has nothing at all in common with philosophy, but that each of them stands on its own separate footing. In order to demonstrate these things conclusively

¹⁰ Ch. 1. ¹¹ Ch. 2. ¹² Ch. 3. ¹³ Ch. 4. ¹⁴ Ch. 6.

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and settle the whole issue, I demonstrate how Scripture should be interpreted, proving that we must derive all our knowledge of it and of spiritual matters from Scripture alone and not from what we discover by the natural light of reason.¹⁵

After this I pass on to show the prejudices which have arisen because the common people (who are addicted to superstition and cherish the relics of time rather than eternity itself) adore the books of Scripture rather than the word of God as such. Then I prove that the revealed word of God is not a certain number of books but a pure conception of the divine mind which was revealed to the prophets, namely, to obey God with all one's mind by practising justice and charity. I show that this is taught in Scripture according to the understanding and beliefs of those to whom the prophets and the Apostles normally preached this word of God. This they did in order that people might embrace it without any reluctance and with their whole minds.¹⁶

[11] Having thus demonstrated the fundamentals of faith, I conclude finally that the object of revealed knowledge is simply obedience. It is therefore entirely distinct from natural knowledge both in its object and in its principles and methods, and has nothing whatever in common with it. Each of them [i.e. faith and natural knowledge] has its own province; they do not conflict with each other; and neither should be subordinate to the other.¹⁷

[12] Furthermore, human beings have very different minds, and find themselves comfortable with very different beliefs; what moves one person to devotion provokes another to laughter. Taking this together with what I said above, I conclude that everyone should be allowed the liberty of their own judgment and authority to interpret the fundamentals of faith according to their own minds; and that the piety or impiety of each person's faith should be judged by their works alone. In this way everyone will be able to obey God in a spirit of sincerity and freedom, and only justice and charity will be esteemed by everyone.¹⁸

[13] Having in this way demonstrated the freedom the revealed divine law accords to every person, I proceed to the second part of my thesis,

¹⁵ Chs. 7–11. ¹⁶ Chs. 12 and 13. ¹⁷ Ch. 14. ¹⁸ Ch. 15.