Spinoza's Revelation

Religion, Democracy, and Reason

Nancy Levene reinterprets a major early modern philosopher, Benedict de Spinoza – a Jew who was rejected by the Jewish community of his day but whose thought contains, and critiques, both Jewish and Christian ideas. It foregrounds the connection of religion, democracy, and reason, showing that Spinoza's theories of the Bible, the theologico-political, and the philosophical all involve the concepts of equality and sovereignty. Professor Levene argues that Spinoza's concept of revelation is the key to this connection, and above all to Spinoza's view of human power. This is to shift the emphasis in Spinoza's thought from the language of *amor Dei* (love of God) to the language of *libertas humana* (human freedom) without losing either the dialectic of his most striking claim – that man is God to man – or the Jewish and Christian elements in his thought. Original and thoughtfully argued, this book offers new insights into Spinoza's thought and should have wide appeal.

NANCY K. LEVENE is Associate Professor of Religious Studies at Indiana University, Bloomington, Indiana. She is coeditor, with Peter Ochs, of *Textual Reasonings: Jewish Philosophy and Text Study at the End of the Twentieth Century* (2002).

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For my parents, Aasta and Sam Levene
with love and gratitude

> [H]e who practices justice and charity in accordance with God's command is fulfilling God's law, from which justice and charity have the force of law and command. And here I acknowledge no distinction whether it is by the natural light of reason or by revelation that God teaches and commands the true practice of justice and charity, for it matters not how the practice of these virtues is revealed to us as long as it holds the place of supreme authority and is the supreme law for men. So that if I now show that justice and charity can acquire the force of law and command only through the right of the state, I can readily draw the conclusion – since the state's right is vested in the sovereign alone – that religion can acquire the force of law only from the decree of those who have the right to command, and that God has no special sovereignty over men save through the medium of those who hold sovereignty.
>
> (TTP, 219–220)

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Preface

In this book I argue that what is most at stake in Spinoza's thought, *libertas humana* (human freedom), can only be understood as the labor of human beings to become increasingly like God, a labor fraught with philosophical, theological, and political peril. Philosophically, the challenge is to understand God as neither internal nor external to human striving – neither transcendent of nor immanent in human existence – but as the continually revealed difference between human beings in bondage and human beings in freedom. This is to see, on the one hand, that human beings are most empowered in their relations with each other: "Man is God to man," Spinoza tells us (E IV p35s). But it is also to see that the obstacles to realizing (enacting, creating) this truth are profound – rooted in nature and culture alike. Unlike traditional theistic pictures, Spinoza's view does not rule out the attainment of *libertas* from the outset – God is not forever beyond human grasp. But it becomes clear that placing God between human beings serves precisely to reveal how difficult (*because* possible) this life's work is – how unattainable God (freedom) can truly seem once human beings can no longer console themselves with the "humility" that they will never attain it.

Theologically and politically, it is to tackle several related issues. Religion, for Spinoza, means at least two things. It refers most basically to the divine law, "the knowledge and love of God" that is "our supreme good and blessedness" (TTP, 51). The divine law is rational, universal, and true, and is the foundation of enlightenment in all senses. Yet religion also refers to human laws, to those laws that are enacted in particular times and places as interpretations of the divine law, or as manipulations of it. This second notion of religion is at once rooted in political life and also a dire threat to it. For those laws that claim divine authority will be most effective at galvanizing the majority, for good and for ill, and they will also, inevitably, attempt to set themselves up as an autonomous power, a "dominion within a dominion" (E III pref), in competition with legitimate sovereign political power. That the divine law taken in itself is rational does not prevent its turbulent involvement in human conflicts,

and indeed, more strongly, this involvement is part and parcel of the divine law itself, for, as Spinoza puts it, "religion can acquire the force of law only from the decree of those who have the right to command, and . . . God has no special sovereignty over men save through the medium of those who hold sovereignty" (TTP, 220). This key statement reveals Spinoza's dual commitments to truth and interpretation, religion and law, the divine and the human, the rational and the revealed that are, I show, at the heart of his work. What Spinoza calls true religion is not the divine law taken in its pristine, apolitical form as opposed to its false interpretations by flawed human beings. True religion is the exceedingly delicate and always unstable balance between the commands of God which issue in universal principles of justice and charity and the commands of the political sovereign whose concern is peace and security for its particular realm; false religion is simply the tipping of this balance at the expense of one side or the other. Religion, the divine law, can only be true if it is also political, human. Politics, human law, can only be true if it is also divine, for "I acknowledge no distinction whether it is by the natural light of reason or by revelation that God teaches and commands the true practice of justice and charity, for it matters not how the practice of these virtues is revealed to us as long as it holds the place of supreme authority and is the supreme law for men" (TTP, 219–220).

Theology, in Spinoza's parlance, also has this dual reference. On the one hand, it refers to two kinds of unscrupulous interpreters of the divine law: those who seek to divide the divine from the human as a way to divide the privileged few (who are to have special access to the truth) from the ignorant many (who are denied such access); and those who seek to conflate the divine and the human by claiming that the divine law is only available to one particular people, in one particular human law. To the first, he insists that the few and the many are identically in the position of having to construct a particular polity commensurate with universal commands (a job for ordinary human beings, not for God or his philosophical-theological experts) – that human law cannot be abandoned for the presumed brighter truth of the divine law since the latter does not command without the former. To the second, he insists that no particular polity is the sole repository of divinity and that the mark of chosenness is simply the fact of enacting divine laws and not of possessing some divine origin.

On the other hand, theology refers to the prophetic task of enacting such divine laws, as distinct from the "knowledge and love of God" which the *Ethics* calls *beatitudo*, blessedness. Theology (prophecy) and philosophy (reason) are separate (*separare*), sovereign, equal, Spinoza insists (TTP, 170). The theologian, the prophet, is the one who may not "know"

the psychological, emotional, and ontological obstacles to freedom – she may not have read the *Ethics* – but she knows that such knowledge is not the only avenue to what Spinoza calls *salus*, salvation, which is not for philosophers alone. This is emphatically not to say that salvation is a lesser form of enlightenment for Spinoza. Indeed, I argue that the efforts to square Spinoza's notions of blessedness and salvation by placing the latter on a lower level than the former (e.g., blessedness is theoretical, eternal, true; salvation is practical, historical, useful) have missed Spinoza's crucial reason for separating philosophy and theology in the first place, which is to show that they cannot be understood separately outside of the political existence that connects them ("for God has no special sovereignty over men"). While it is possible to speak in a preliminary way of a difference in Spinoza between theoretical and practical truth – between truths that concern rational understanding and truths that concern how to act – this distinction cannot be used to justify the assumption that these truths correspond to two different ways of living in the world, one the individual, philosophical pursuit of the highest good and the other the (less privileged) pursuit of common goods that simply enable societies to function. This distinction – between truth and practice, individual and social, philosophy and theology, truth and power – ultimately does not hold up in Spinoza and falsifies his conclusions.

Spinoza does think there are greater and lesser kinds of knowledge (power), greater and lesser forms of ignorance (disempowerment). He does think the former is directly connected to understanding the causes of things and that this understanding is exceedingly difficult to achieve and will not be pursued by all, or even most. But he also thinks that to construct and live according to laws, dogmas, commands that prioritize love, friendship, justice, and charity is not only just as valuable as "knowing" these things in their philosophical complexity; it is, if realized, the same thing. In other words, justice and charity (leading to *salus*) are no less complex and laborious than the "knowledge and love of God" (leading to *beatitudo*) and thus the few (who pursue philosophy) and the many (who are "merely" capable of justice and charity) will each find that the obstacles are the same, for "all men are born in a state of complete ignorance, and before they can learn the true way of life and acquire a virtuous disposition, even if they have been well brought up, a great part of their life has gone by" (TTP, 180). In Spinoza's mind, if the obstacles to understanding are no less political than they are philosophical, this is because understanding itself is no less political than it is philosophical. If indeed it does not matter "whether it is by the natural light of reason or by revelation that God teaches and commands the true practice of justice and charity," this is because this true practice – both rational and

revealed – is the supreme task commanding all human beings equally. It is human beings who conjoin the separation between (God as) reason and (God as) practice, law, command.

Religion is thus a particularly rich concept for Spinoza. On its own it encapsulates the major tension his work enunciates between what is rational and what is faithful; what are "eternal truths" and what are laws and commands (TTP, 247, n. 31); what is universal and what is political. It is also the place in his work where his rhetoric is the most difficult to negotiate. Spinoza's genuine criticisms of religion – his pronounced exasperation at despots, experts, and those seeking to foster hate and contention in religion's name – lead him to suggest in places that this tension is in fact a simple opposition: that ultimately one can have access to "eternal truths" separate from laws and commands; that if human beings were genuinely rational they would have no need of laws at all; and thus that politics, the construction of just laws, is, for the truly chosen, but a prolegomenon to achieving wisdom beyond the law. This suggestion is nowhere in evidence in the *Ethics*, which maintains from beginning to end that genuine rationality is always about lawfulness (both the natural law that binds us and the human and divine laws that command us), and thus that no one escapes its challenges. But it does pop up in several places in the TTP – in the notion that "simple obedience" is a way for the majority to achieve salvation (presumably in distinction to the learned, who can be truly free and thus not obedient) (TTP, 177); in the contention that the wisdom of the prophets was mere "moral certainty" as opposed to the "mathematical certainty" that is far superior (TTP, 24); in the suggestion that the mind, the intellect, is the true site of the handwriting of God as opposed to "carnal man," who seeks only to feed his "appetites" (TTP, 52).

It is not that Spinoza did not *mean* these distinctions. He clearly felt that philosophy was never going to be the desired occupation of more than a tiny minority, that it was enough for the majority to devote themselves to "simple obedience," which he defines as "justice and charity, or love towards one's neighbor" (TTP, 167), for "all men without exception are capable of obedience, while there are only a few – in proportion to the whole of humanity – who acquire a virtuous disposition under the guidance of reason alone" (TTP, 177–178). Such obedience, Spinoza says, is a "dogma of universal faith," and if "faith requires not so much true dogmas as pious dogmas," this nevertheless does not mean the majority are incapable of greater understanding but only that inasmuch as they do not possess it, they can still be saved (TTP, 166). The prophets, Spinoza held, were such ordinary pious people, at once promoters and exemplars of the pious dogmas of faith. They cannot be expected to have known

what they knew with mathematical certainty. But, given their authority (and the authority of the Bible), Spinoza felt the need to defend the "mind" against carnal man, truth against prophecy, insofar as the latter unthinkingly prefers miracles designed to impress the senses to what the mind knows without such miracles.

But the rhetoric of separation (between faith and philosophy, prophecy and truth, obedience and understanding) in the TTP easily overwhelms the more subtle point Spinoza is making, which is that separation is the key to relation. To this end, it is not enough to say that the *Ethics* (with its connection of determination and freedom, mathematics and morality, the mind and the appetite) reveals the rhetoric of the hierarchy of one to the other to be utterly spurious according to Spinoza's first principles. It is that, even as Spinoza periodically indulges in this rhetoric, the TTP is itself a sustained critique of it. Spinoza's language of "reason alone" and "eternal truth" (outside of law) is baffling precisely because what Spinoza shows in the TTP is that the very notion of an "eternal truth" is constituted – politically and hermeneutically – through a pact: between human beings and God, between human being and human being, between text and reader, mind and history, self and other – that God has no special sovereignty over human beings save through the human sovereignty over God. To say, then, that the one who can embrace "divine commandments" as "eternal truths" is the one who can "love God, but not obey him" (i.e., the one whose obedience "passes into love") is to say that the love of God involves obedience not to God but to human beings (to oneself and others), to "those who hold sovereignty" (TTP, 248). It is not obedience that disappears with the appearance of truth; it is the very image of God as a sovereign in competition with human sovereignty, and thus the very notion of an eternal truth that would preexist human efforts to practice it. When Spinoza says (in a footnote to the TTP) that "I have called [the love of God] a law in the same sense as philosophers apply the term 'law' to the universal rules of Nature according to which all things come to pass," he directly contradicts what the TTP otherwise consistently argues, which is that both divine and human laws (unlike natural law) depend "not on Nature's necessity" but on "human will," as law that "men lay down for themselves or for others to some end" (TTP, 49–50).

This is not a matter of deciding which is Spinoza's true view, but of noticing that, in places, he is not careful enough to encapsulate his own conclusions – that obedience "passes into love" (of God) no more than love (of God) passes into obedience (to human beings), and thus that "simple obedience" is never simple. It is a matter of reading Spinoza, as he would have us read the Bible, according to his own standards. For

indeed what Spinoza argues is that the "fiction" of covenant (making, originating, revealing) is the only way to make sense of the way in which human beings are themselves not given (the eternal, the good, the truth, the end) in nature but made, makers of the eternal, the good, the truth, the end in nature. It is the labor of relationship – *pactum* – that, in the beginning, makes what is natural also cultural, what is divine also human, what is determining also free.

What the TTP thus shows is that the very notion of an "eternal truth" which preexists covenant – so at odds with his two key notions in the *Ethics*, the *causa sui*, the eternal truth which originates itself, and *conatus*, the work of doing so – is also the grossest tyranny, subjecting minds to something they can never attain and creating political orders divided between those (experts) who know they are ignorant and those who, under this sign, they claim to rule. Whether in his insistence that the sacred can emerge only from the mutual sovereignty of text and mind, or whether in his elaboration of covenant as that which structures both religion and politics, Spinoza is consistent, and even ruthless in demolishing the pretense of human beings to avoid the work of relationship, interpretation, and law – to take refuge in pristine "eternal truths" that are simply there to be discovered. His suggestion that obedience (salvation) is easy and philosophy (blessedness) hard is no more true than the reverse: that philosophy is easy and obedience hard, for philosophy (no less than prophecy) can easily deceive itself that it is extraordinary, miraculous, privileged. Whether by reason or revelation, blessedness and salvation require the same immense effort: "no one enjoys blessedness because he has restrained the affects. Instead, the power to restrain lusts arises from blessedness itself" (E V p42dem). To paraphrase, no one enjoys truth because she obeys; instead the power to obey arises from truth. Neither truth nor obedience is a shortcut for anyone. Spinoza's critique is thus of the subordination of politics to religion, theology to philosophy, faith to reason, multitude to learned (and, in each case, vice versa), and his defense is of human power and its fragility as the pivot that keeps each side of these distinctions sovereign. This critique, this defense, is the heart of what follows.

A word on audience. This book brings together several strands of Spinoza's thought – his views on religion and the Bible, interpretation, democracy, and rationality – showing that each involves the concepts of equality and sovereignty and, above all, revelation (covenant, creation, making). I am indebted to the many close readers of Spinoza whose works have helped me to find my way through his difficulties, and I hope my own work contributes to these efforts. It may cut a rather broader swath through Spinoza's major ideas than suits some, but I have attempted to

capture a snapshot, as it were, of the dynamism and creativity of Spinoza's project overall. In places, my account of Spinoza's metaphysical views is quite compressed and I do not seek here to indicate more than a general sense of the complexity and fascination of these views. This also goes for the technical commentaries on Spinoza that animate the world of Spinoza scholarship. I have flagged only those of most pressing relevance to my argument. The book is directed at all readers with an interest in Spinoza's thought, but will have especial interest for those in the philosophy of religion, theology, Jewish studies, and political theory (working on issues in antiquity, modernity, or postmodernity) for whom the question of the relationship between religion, reason, and politics remains urgent. Spinoza's is one voice on this question, but one that is well worth exploring. In Spinoza's day, the biggest threat to equality and sovereignty came from religion itself – from despotic leaders using religion to advance their aims and from squabbling theologians concerned to manipulate the masses. In the modernity that unfolded after him, these threats changed. Reason ascended as the dominant discourse, though one that provoked, at times, no less despotism and squabbling. Spinoza is one of the only thinkers in modernity to make a case for why religion *and* reason are political and what difference – political, philosophical, theological – it makes for one to dominate the other. On this question, we still have much to learn from him.

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Abbreviations

I have used the following abbreviations in referring to frequently cited texts.

Collected Works	*The Collected Works of Spinoza*, ed. and trans. Edwin Curley
DPP	*Descartes' Principles of Philosophy*, in *Collected Works* (I refer to the Part in roman numerals)
E	*Ethics*, in *Collected Works* (I refer to the Part in roman numerals)
Ep	*The Letters*, trans. Samuel Shirley (except where otherwise indicated)
G	*Spinoza Opera*, ed. Carl Gebhardt (I refer to the volume number with a roman numeral and the page number in arabic numerals. I give the page number only if I am citing more than a single word.
KV	*Short Treatise on God, Man, and His Well-Being*, in *Collected Works*
MT	*Appendix Containing Metaphysical Thoughts* (to DPP), in *Collected Works*
TdIE	*Treatise on the Emendation of the Intellect*, in *Collected Works* (I reference by section)
TP	*Tractatus Politicus*, in *The Political Works*, trans. A. G. Wernham (I quote the section number, followed by the page number)
TTP	*Theological-Political Treatise*, trans. Samuel Shirley

I have used the following abbreviations for Spinoza's terminology. In the interest of clarity I have omitted most of Spinoza's cross-references within the texts. I indicate these by ellipses.

app	appendix
a	axiom

c	corollary
d	definition
Def.Aff.	Definition of the Affects (located at the end of *Ethics* Part III)
dem	demonstration
Exp	Explanation
L	Lemma
p	proposition
pref	preface
s	scholium