

# Overcoming the Value Conflict between Individual Freedom and State Authority in Spinoza's *Theological-Political Treatise*

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**Abstract:** The new Renaissance spirit was the crucible for a new type of Christianity that appreciated man for his involvement and accomplishment in the terrestrial world. This new way to describe someone as a true Christian will find fulfillment in Calvinism and the Protestant ethics based on the principles introduced by the Pastor of Geneva. In this paper I will analyze Spinoza's approach of philosophy and theology in his book *Theological-Political Treatise*, which proposed solutions, hardly accepted by his contemporaries. In the first part of the paper, I will present Descartes' influence on Spinoza's thinking, pointing out on the *white*, non-philological character of Cartesian philosophy. In the second part, I will argue that Spinoza made a separation between natural light and theology, but he identified their point of convergence on the realm of morality. At the end, I will highlight the fact that Spinoza identified a possible value conflict between Jewish Old Law *and* New Law, but at the same time he also found the way in which it can be managed. In his view, philosophy and philosophers have important roles because a vision based on reason rather than faith is necessary when it comes to establish a rational state.

**Keywords:** Spinoza, value conflict, *Theological-Political Treatise*, rational state, Christian teaching

## INTRODUCTION

There are religions which offer positive solutions in order to create a certain lifestyle, to impose certain existential behaviors. In this sense, we can mention the religion of the Olympian gods or the Jewish one, imposed by Moses.

Buddhism was the first great reaction to such a positive religious way. Buddha offered a negative solution, giving up the advantages of

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tradition, in favor of discovering freedom by detaching from all the attractions of the sensitive world.

Refocusing from the sensible to the world of ideas, Plato realized in his turn, in the Greek philosophy, a similar revolution in thinking with that made by Buddha for the Eastern world. Later on, following the same technique of denying the value of the outer world, Christianity put the accent on inner value, the place where free decisions are made, where the true judgment are located, a place that is not contaminated with the ephemeral advantages of the material world.

Negative solutions have the disadvantage of causing the retreat from history of peoples who let themselves bewitched by these infusions as they enter afterwards into a kind of cosmic sleep. In confronting Islam, viewed as a historical positive solution, the contemplative Christianity of the first millennium has proven to be a victim in demographic and territorial terms. The historical recovery of Christianity in the 12th century occurred through the setting up of positive solutions in the very heart of the Christian faith, such as the crusades that have re-orientated the souls towards something concrete, towards Jerusalem, the Holy city, a target within the sensible world, even if it had strong connotations with the inner or transcendent world either.

The crusades and the medieval religious orders created by the Europeans were positive solutions to the great challenges the Christian world underwent. Even if they failed, they created the new Renaissance spirit in which Italian and Flemish bankers found the crucible for a new type of Christianity that appreciated man for his involvement and accomplishments in the terrestrial world. This new way to describe someone as a true Christian will find fulfillment in Calvinism and the Protestant ethics based on the principles introduced by the Pastor of Geneva.

## THE IDEA OF A “WHITE THEOLOGY” FROM DESCARTES TO SPINOZA

On this background, attempts were also made to create *white theologies* which would make the new Christians to depart as much as possible from the original, negative path of Christianity and then to connect themselves to a new, fundamentally positive vision in which they could build the rational state. René Descartes conceived a *more geometrico* theology to provide a support for his metaphysics, to ensure a foundation for the *gray ontology* based on the subject (Marion 1993). This theology was qualified by Jean Luc Marion as *white*

*theology*. It was called *white* because it is anonymous and indeterminate as a white sheet of paper - that qualifies the beneficiary without specifying why it is useful to him -, or as a blank check that does not determine the size of the credit or the amount of credit it assigns (Marion 1991, 450). Descartes created a sort of '*pocket theology*' or '*a theology to go*'. It is the theology for a missionary who reaches the end of the world and loses the entire luggage. He only gets his common sense or reason in which he must discover a theology capable of justifying his faith which has thrown him at this end of the world. *White theology* is the only possible one in the Tatar desert where any material build-up is subject to dissolution. This *white missionary theology* is radically different from the previous because it is based on the subject; a subject that was abandoned by his fellows, stranded, lost and forgotten by the civilized world. The missionary has to convert souls without even having the *Bible*, which he has inevitably lost in the hypothetical desert of the Tatars, having available only his own reason that he must hypertrophise, sometimes to the point of the disease of reason, when reason becomes more insane than madness, as Derrida has mentioned (Derrida 1998, 98).

With Descartes and after him, theology no longer assumes its philological textuality, which in previous philosophical streams was in consensus with the *Gospel* Christianity. From this moment on, theology unfolds its *theology* (Marion 1991, 450) as a *theory on the idea of God*, based on a research of the very foundation, of what will be called *causa sui*. This change of theology determines modernity. It was a modernity accused of atheism and libertinage by the philological circles, both Catholic and especially Protestant from the Netherlands. Voetius and Regius, through disputes that more closely resembled trials against Cartesian philosophy, aimed precisely at this white, non-philological character by which theology departed from the Revealed Text, of which only a white paper remains, becoming a *mathesis universalis*, a science of the carrier, of the bearer. This universal science can be accessed by any man if he is in possession of a method that follows the path of reason.

The circles of philologists, who thought that the *Sola Scriptura* was the way of salvation, were not willing to take a step further and give up this last stronghold - the Text-, in order to acquire divine grace. The Cartesian reform appeared to contemporaries as being far too radical. If Luther and Calvin have liberated the faith from the clergy and the Church, Descartes wanted a release from the revealed text in which he

saw the dangers of a theological hermeneutics that could become dangerous, leading to sectarianism and fanaticism. The path of the *mathesis universalis* attempted to preserve the ancient ideal of *theoretical* divine revelation, which primarily involved the idea of universality. Thus, the *Metaphysical Meditations* and, particularly, the treatise *Passions of the Soul* came to support this grandiose Cartesian project through which philosophy, theology and science supported each other with the goal of building a mathematical model that was *more geometrico*.

#### THE CONFLICT BETWEEN THEOLOGY AND PHILOSOPHY OR THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN OBEDIENCE AND FREEDOM IN THE *THEOLOGICAL-POLITICAL TREATISE*

The new philosophical, theological and political model imposed by the Cartesian thinking, capable of giving people the feeling of freedom, equality and dignity, was amplified by the 17<sup>th</sup> century philosophers. In *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus* (*Theological-Political Treatise*), Spinoza was consciously assuming the missionary role of the new positive solution that was to counterbalance the religious tensions between Catholics and Protestants, the Protestant Sects between them, and, on a larger scale, to generate a new world in which the differences between Christianity and Islam no longer matter.

The Christian faith that aimed the salvation of souls had to be moved into the private space, liberating the public space for the games of reason that proposed an experiment, positive this time, on politics.

In this context of spiritual upheaval, the *Theological-Political Treatise* was born. Through the proposed solutions, hardly accepted by its contemporaries, this book made them to declare that it was “written in hell by a renegade Jew” (Scruton 1996, 21). The placement of authentic faith only in the private space was something that seemed difficult to be accepted, defying the logic on which the world had functioned on until then. This was, in fact, the great modern revolution, born in the crucible of the baroque world.

Spinoza pointed out in his treatise that the essence of any religion and any theology is the acceptance of obedience as the basic duty of the believer (Spinoza 1960, 215). For the Dutch philosopher, any attempt to approach the philosophy to theology is doomed to failure, leading to either dogmatic excesses or skepticism. Between theology and philosophy there can be no connection or support, nor can it be

any kind of subordination, the two fields being mutually distinct, autonomous and different from each other (Spinoza 1960, 219).

Philosophy and theology are separate. The natural light that philosophy deals with cannot be taught by the techniques of obedience. But allegiance has to do with the salvation that can only be achieved in this way. Natural light and theology can however find a point of convergence in the realm of morality. Spinoza highlighted the fact that the Good discovered by the philosophers leads to a necessary perfect being to guarantee it. He considered that obeying to this sovereign Good and respecting the moral life are matters in which faith comes into play.

#### OLD LAW VS NEW LAW - IS THERE ANY VALUE CONFLICT?

In the chapter of the *Treatise* dedicated to ceremonies, Spinoza created a hermeneutics on the difference between the significance of the Old Law established by Moses and the New Law that Christ brought into the world. At the same time, the Dutch philosopher also revealed the mission of philosophy that must overcome, through natural light and rational laws accepted by free people, the stage of a society that was organized by commandments and superstitions imposed by the force of an extra-personal authority. In fact, Spinoza intended, in the spirit of Grotius, to create the modern state, which, in his view, had to imitate the image of the Dutch Republic. Thus, his main attack was directed against excessive tarrying in the model imposed by the Old Testament. “For example, the philosopher noted, Moses teaches the Jews not to kill and steal, not as a learned man or as a prophet, but to the commandments he adds the punishment, which can and must vary according to the nature of each people as the experience had taught it enough” (Spinoza 1960, 81). Moses’ law referred to the outer world, the bodily life, the sins of the Decalogue sanctioning predominantly material deeds, such as: not to kill, not to steal, not to covet, etc., which he has imposed under the authority of God who punished the departure from the law. Moses made all these regulations for the good functioning of the state he was founding.

In this respect, Spinoza would have stated that: “if Moses wanted to give a moral teaching not only to the benefit of the state, but also to the peace of the soul and the true happiness of all men, then he would not have commanded only the external action, but he would have asked for the consent of the soul, as Christ does, who preached only universal

moral teachings. And for this reason Christ promises a spiritual reward and not, such as Moses, a reward of the flesh” (Spinoza 1960, 81-82).

Therefore, for the Dutch philosopher, Christ was interested in the soul of man. He came to the world to treat precisely a possible neurosis of the old Jews, born out of the excess of zeal imposed by the respect of the law that had to regulate their outer life, but often created situations incompatible with the authentic, soulful experiences of building their inner world. Christ observed the duplicity of the Pharisees, who encouraged an ambivalent behavior between formal observance of the law and its violation *de facto*, but also the deep soul disturbances due to the acceptance of a life based on deception. The Christian teaching came to clarify the waters of inner life, helping man to accept the rules imposed by Moses’ law, which aimed precisely at the proper functioning of the state.

Christ does not abolish the Law of Moses; the New Law did not destroy the old one, but they coexisted in parallel worlds, the first being the one of the outer world, while the latter was valid only in the inner world, created by the soul of man. Spinoza points out these aspects in his *Treatise* by the following phrase: “From this we can easily understand that Christ did not in any way dismantle the law of Moses, since he did not want to introduce a new law into the state, and did not take any further greater care than that of preaching moral teachings and of distinguishing them from the laws of the state” (Spinoza 1960, 82). But between the Law of Moses and that of Christ, there is a difference of essence as to the meaning of their purpose, which is nevertheless supposed to be reciprocal. The Law of Moses has the role of constraint, and this is seen in the author's authoritative behavior towards the chosen people. The New Law, set up by Christ, is meant to come to the aid of the man who accepts obediently and humiliously the authority imposed on him by the force and command of the supreme God, who punishes and also gives hope to the believer. In the hope, hyperbolized in this new teaching that brings to the forefront the idea of the kingdom of heaven and, connected to it, the idea of salvation, the role of Christ is that of a teacher, an illuminator of the deep and authentic understanding of the Old Law, which can now be accepted and voluntarily followed by souls who, by faith, come out triumphantly from under the cursed sign of doubt and corruption. Through Christ, man comes to believe voluntarily without being bound by the authority of the Temple, but only by the authority of consciousness.

There are two significant moments between Moses' time and Christ's time. One is David's moment, the author of the *Psalms* which made him famous, as the first to exalt man's presence in the face of divine greatness, thereby discovering the value of interiority. Then it's the time of the wise Solomon, who was more than a king of the outer world. By his life and activity, he came closest to the Christ-like ideal of the divine teacher and judge. Solomon's teachings and the manner in which he judged by applying the Law came closer to what Christ will later do. Spinoza captured this evolution from Moses to Solomon when he wrote: "Then all of Solomon's teachings ... promise happiness only for the cultivation of intellect and wisdom" (Spinoza 1960, 83). The Dutch philosopher considered Solomon's work to be the first major step towards understanding the knowledge of God, the only way for man to accept the universal law and necessity.

The experience of building the state from Moses to Solomon lived by the Jewish people meant that all the biblical stories gained much greater significance than all other historical teachings as they could testify for a genuine program of the emancipation of the human being in the sense of building an authority of government, and especially of the way in which this authority can find the means by which the state, whose exponent it is, could become functional and, particularly, accepted by the people who constitute its social corpus. Moses was a lawmaker (he represented the authority of the legislative power) who built the principles of the functioning of a society opposite to that based on the Egyptian model having its foundation on excessive idolatry and enslavement.

After this period of time, which went on through judges and kings who practiced their quality of enforcing the Laws of Moses, Christ came and pointed out the right and concrete way to apply the Laws God has given to men, thus representing divine power in its judicial expression.

The *Theological-Political Treatise* launches the idea of a great challenge, namely the realization of the third Temple and the third Jewish state, which will have the mission to bring here on Earth the Messiah in the form of a divine governor, an ideal expression of the power of government. This mission must be granted to the Jewish people, who brought, through Moses, the laws of God on Earth, through Christ – the judgment of God, and who will have to show, through the Messiah, the divine path of government. The third Jewish state, in the view of the Dutch philosopher, will have to be a republic

governed by reason, and the Messiah will be the leader of this modern parliamentary republic.

Spinoza argues that a vision based on reason rather than faith is necessary when it comes to this last mission of the third Jewish state based on the authority of the *Scriptures*. He considers that the establishing of an ethics must be the primary teaching of the new Messiah. This ethics cannot be founded on the philological analysis of the Sacred Texts as this would interfere with their meanings (Spinoza 1960, 126), but on a logical and mathematical interpretation, following Euclid's geometric method (Spinoza 1960, 131). Such ethics, *more geometrico*, would have a maximum degree of universality and would be imposed by natural evidence.

Starting from this noble and sacred mission of the philosophers to prepare the way for the coming of the Messiah, Spinoza reveals that the greatest danger lies in transforming philosophy into a dogma similar to those with which theology operates, and, in this context, the temptation of the philosophers will be that of becoming like popes.

The philosopher king would be, in fact, a secular Pope, who would conduct himself according to dogma of reason (Spinoza 1960, 135-136). The greatest danger to philosophy, the Dutch thinker argues, is that it could become dogmatic. In such a context, it becomes possible for a genius philosopher to desire to acquire the condition of a god and for one of his disciples to become a high priest of the rational religion, copying the pattern of the relationship between Moses and his brother Aaron, who became his great sacerdotal. Spinoza has, in fact, proved to be a great visionary, perhaps perceiving his own tendency toward dogmatism, as he is not, by its ethics, ultimately, but a great priest of the French philosopher René Descartes. Over time, things have been somewhat repeated in amazing mimetism. Karl Marx found a fanatical "sacerdot" in Friedrich Engels, and Lenin discovered his great follower in Stalin.

Synthesizing these trends, we can see how the modern age managed to create a *dogmatic Eon*, in fact a dogmatic age, dominated by the "truths" of reason, which seem not to be subjected to criticism and objections.

## CONCLUSION

In Spinoza's vision, the Laws of Moses have aimed at the construction of the Jewish state, and therefore they had a public character; but the religion founded on them finally became, through Christianity, a



matter of private space. Spinoza insists on this new, private character acquired by the Christian religion. In his vision, in this private character lies the core of the idea that it is impossible to govern by religion, which, in the public space, must yield its place to philosophy. Spinoza brings more arguments to demonstrate the separation between faith and philosophy in defense of this idea. The belief based on the sacred text is a matter rather of feeling, of an interpretation of religious contents, which, moreover, become extremely personalized and contextualized, as the Dutch philosopher fully demonstrates through his new method of historical analysis of the Scripture.

Spinoza dreamed of a political and especially religious framework that would allow the initiative and the freedom of expression of people, cultivated through education, as individuals. The philosopher believed in politics, in the possibility of rationalizing it in universally recognized frames that would necessarily involve, first of all, the existence of a real constitution and of a real parliamentary life, based on freedom. He believed that these hopes could actually come true in a parliamentary republic, as the De Witt brothers would create.

Spinoza was a man who has anticipated the Europe's political reality for at least two centuries, making him a stranger, a misfit for his contemporaries and even for those of the next century.

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