

On the Development of Spinoza's Account of Human Religion

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‡ ON THE DEVELOPMENT OF SPINOZA'S ACCOUNT OF HUMAN RELIGION ‡

In his philosophical and political writings, Benedict Spinoza (1632-1677) develops an account of human religion, which represents a unique theoretical orientation in the early modern period.¹ This position is implicit in many of Spinoza's philosophical arguments in the *Treatise on the Emendation of the Intellect*, the *Short Treatise*, and *Ethics*.² However, it is most carefully developed in his *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus* (hereafter TTP).³ What makes Spinoza's position unique is the fact that he rejects a traditional conception of religion on naturalistic grounds, while refusing to dismiss all religion as an entirely anthropological phenomenon. This might, at first, seem like an illegitimate attempt to avoid the full implications of a naturalistic world view; however, Spinoza has sophisticated arguments, from within his philosophical perspective, which defend both aspects of his view. In this manner, Spinoza's work reveals the possibility of a theoretical orientation that was unimaginable to many of his contemporaries.

As a preliminary matter, it is important to become clear on what is meant by Spinoza's naturalism. In contemporary philosophy, the term "naturalism" is generally used to refer to a range of positions which hold that philosophical theories must respect the view of the world revealed by the natural sciences and use the discoveries of the natural sciences as a guide. In religious studies, naturalism is generally used to characterize positions that explain religious beliefs and practices entirely within the domain of the natural and social sciences. Each of these positions share significant

¹ The issue of Spinoza's name is a matter of some debate in the secondary literature on Spinoza's Jewish identity. Authors emphasizing the Jewish aspects of Spinoza's philosophy tend to prefer the Hebrew Baruch over the Latin Benedict. Here, I respect Spinoza's own decision to utilize the Latin form of his name in his philosophical publications. For further discussion of this topic, see the introduction to Ze'ev Levi, *Baruch or Benedict: On Some Jewish Aspects of Spinoza's Philosophy* (New York: P. Lang, 1989).

² All references to Spinoza's philosophical works utilize the translations in Edwin Curley, trans., *The Collected Works of Spinoza: Volume I* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985). Citations follow the standard Gebhardt pagination.

³ All references to Spinoza's TTP utilize the translation in Samuel Shirley, trans., *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1989). Citations refer to the pagination in the Shirley text.

affinities with Spinoza's view, but the form of naturalism found in Spinoza's philosophical system is more closely tied to rationalism.

Spinoza's naturalism is, perhaps, best grasped by considering the argument Spinoza provides for the impossibility of miracles in chapter six of the TTP. Spinoza begins by supposing, for the sake of argument, that miracles occur. He points out that a miracle, by definition, "must necessarily interrupt Nature's order which otherwise we would conceive as fixed and immutable by God's decrees."⁴ He then argues that this opposition to God's establishment of natural order would "cast doubt on everything, and would lead to atheism."⁵ This argument reveals the fact that Spinoza views the impossibility of miracles, and, by implication, naturalism as a logical consequence of the existence of God. Spinoza's conception of God is based entirely on rational investigation and is devoid of theistic elements. Thus, Spinoza's belief in God, properly understood, is nothing more than a belief in a natural world governed by fixed and immutable laws derived from reason.

Spinoza's view of nature leads him to dismiss the vast majority of religious beliefs and practices as purely anthropological phenomena, while preserving a core of essential religious belief which he defends through reason. Among the beliefs and practices which Spinoza dismisses is belief in the occurrence of miracles, the authority of scriptural revelation, and the existence of a personal deity as well as the practice of rituals in general. For Spinoza, these aspects of human religion cannot be grounded in rational argumentation, so their origins must be explained through anthropological principles. However, in chapter fourteen of the TTP, Spinoza presents a number of fundamental principles of faith, which he defends as objectively valid. Among these are a belief in God's existence, various basic features of God's nature, and basic ethical principles.⁶ His defense of these principles in

⁴ Shirley, *Tractatus*, 129.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 130.

⁶ Shirley, *Tractatus*, 224. Spinoza's fundamental principles of faith include a number of aspects which might, at first, seem to be theistic in nature. For instance, Spinoza holds that God is just and merciful and includes belief in immortality. However, Spinoza's account of such features in *Ethics* reveals that he often transforms theological vocabulary in a manner that removes its theistic elements, while

Ethics reveals that, for him, they follow as logical consequences of God's nature. A contemporary naturalist might argue that belief in the existence of God is inconsistent with naturalism. However, since the existence of God, which Spinoza believed could be established by reason, is logically prior to naturalism in the sense that Spinoza understood it, this does not reveal any inconsistency in Spinoza's view. Thus, both Spinoza's rejection of traditional religion and his defense of purified religious belief follow from his commitment to reason.

The manner in which Spinoza's theoretical orientation has been introduced might make it tempting to imagine Spinoza as having reached his ideas through pure philosophical reflection in isolation from the intellectual climate of his times. After all, Spinoza clearly rejects the position of traditional theologians; yet he clearly also rejects the skeptical attitude of figures like Isaac La Peyrère whose primary goal was to cast doubt on traditional religious authority.⁷ In fact, in his philosophical writings, Spinoza often treats the skeptic as a stubborn fool who is barely worth consideration by a serious thinker. Yet, adopting the attitude that Spinoza's ideas developed in an intellectual vacuum would be a mistake. Not only would it wrongly ignore the substantial intellectual debt Spinoza owes to many of his predecessors, but it would also obscure the very source of Spinoza's originality.

Instead, I will argue that Spinoza is able to reach a unique position on religion by synthesizing a number of seemingly disparate perspectives into a coherent and systematic view. In this manner, I hope to show that it is Spinoza's unusual historical position on the crossroads between a number of heterogeneous intellectual traditions in conjunction with his own remarkable drive to combine these perspectives into a coherent philosophical framework that led to his original contribution. This paper will provide a narrative account of the development of Spinoza's view of religion while considering the known biographical details of his life. Thus, it will attempt to roughly follow the chronological

preserving a sense in which such terms can be used properly. It is in this light that Spinoza fundamental principles of faith should be interpreted.

⁷Richard Popkin, *The History of Scepticism From Savonarola to Bayle* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 239.

order in which Spinoza was exposed to important ideas about religion beginning with the Jewish philosophy of Moses Maimonides, proceeding to the political philosophy of Nicollò Machiavelli and Thomas Hobbes, and ending with a discussion of the political climate of the Dutch republic.

Rational Religion in Maimonides

Moses Maimonides (1138-1204) was an Egyptian rabbi and is widely regarded as the most significant medieval Jewish philosopher. Spinoza likely first became acquainted with Maimonides' philosophy through his elementary education in the Talmud Torah school of the Amsterdam Jewish community and probably went on to study him more extensively while attending Rabbi Mortera's Keter Torah adult study group in the early 1650s.⁸ This also must have been the period in which doubts about Judaism were first emerging for the young Spinoza. According to his early biographer Jean Maximilien Lucas, the young Spinoza frequently posed questions to his teachers, which they found difficult to solve.⁹ One can imagine that he was frequently referred by these teachers to Maimonides' *Guide of the Perplexed*, the natural starting point for a philosophically inclined Jewish thinker. Given his increasing tension with the Jewish community ending with expulsion in 1656, Spinoza must not have been fully satisfied with the answers he found there.

Maimonides is one of the few authors to whom Spinoza refers explicitly in his writings. These references are almost entirely critical and mostly concern Maimonides' approach to scriptural passages which conflict with philosophical reasoning. Yet, in many other passages, ideas clearly found in Maimonides are presented by Spinoza as his own without any mention of their origin. Furthermore, the fact that Maimonides had a decisive impact on the development of a number of aspects of Spinoza's philosophy is well-established in the secondary literature on the topic.¹⁰ In addition to cases in which Spinoza more or less directly adopts a Maimonidean position, his philosophy is also enriched

⁸ Steven Nadler, *Spinoza: A Life* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 90-3.

⁹ Abraham Wolf, trans., *The Oldest Biography of Spinoza* (Port Washington: Kennikat Press, 1970), 42.

¹⁰ See Warren Harvey, "A Portrait of Spinoza as a Maimonidean," *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 19 no.2 (1981): 151-172.

by critical reflection on Maimonides. In particular, critical reflection on Maimonides' treatment of religious beliefs led Spinoza to the view that some beliefs form an essential rational core, while others cannot be rationally justified.

One of the overarching concerns of Maimonidean philosophy is showing that the revealed truth of Mosaic Law is perfectly consistent with conclusions reached rationally through philosophical reflection. In Maimonides' case, this meant showing that Hebrew scripture is consistent with Aristotelian philosophy. In the Aristotelian view, God is the unmoved mover who remains outside of nature. According to this view, "the world derives from the overflow of God...and He has cause to overflow to it everything that is produced in time."¹¹ God is not aware of the particular beings which result from the overflow of his eternal act of self-contemplation nor is he capable of undergoing any change.¹² While Spinoza's own view of God differs in important respects from Aristotle's, the differences need not concern us here as each view is entirely abstract, rational, and impersonal.

This conception of God presents a number of problems to a devout Jewish rabbi such as Maimonides. He is committed, at least outwardly, to maintaining that scriptural teachings are perfectly true. He cannot simply reject scripture when it contradicts philosophical reasoning. Instead, Maimonides strives to offer non-literal interpretations of difficult passages. For instance, consider his treatment of the following passage from Genesis: "And Moses hid his face for he was afraid to look at God."¹³ Maimonides cannot accept that Moses was afraid to literally look upon God because this would imply that Moses, the greatest prophet (and therefore the greatest philosopher for Maimonides), thought God was an embodied entity who "can be apprehended by the eyes."¹⁴ Instead, Maimonides interprets this passage as utilizing a figure of speech in which looking upon God serves as a metaphor for acquiring true knowledge. Moses, with his prophetic insight into God, was not literally afraid to

¹¹ Shlomo Pines, trans., *Guide of the Perplexed* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1963), 279.

¹² Howard Kreisel, "Miracles in Medieval Jewish Philosophy," *The Jewish Quarterly Review* 75 no.2 (1984): 108.

¹³ Exodus 3:6, Revised Standard Version.

¹⁴ Pines, 29.

look upon God; rather, his true fear was of making “categoric affirmations in favor of the first opinion to occur to him” and erring in judgment.¹⁵

Insofar as this view of the relationship of reason and revelation is utilized as an approach to the interpretation of scripture, Spinoza rejects the Maimonidean position. Spinoza directly attacks and ridicules this view in a clear expression of intellectual frustration:

Maimonides and some others take the view that this and all other instances of the apparition of an angel...occurred in dreams, on the ground that nobody could see an angel with his eyes open. But this is mere rubbish. They are concerned only to extort from Scripture some Aristotelian nonsense and some fabrications of their own; and this I regard as the height of absurdity.¹⁶

There is only one other place in the Spinozistic corpus where Spinoza makes a similarly harsh attack directed at a single figure. In that passage in *Ethics*, Spinoza derides Descartes' dualistic philosophy of mind, which he clearly views as absurd.¹⁷ In both cases, Spinoza's frustration has the same basis. In Spinoza's view, each thinker has failed to rigorously pursue the clear implications of a position because he sought to preserve some traditional belief. In the passage above, Spinoza describes Maimonides' response to cases in which scripture contradicts his Aristotelian convictions. Instead of accepting what, to Spinoza, is the obvious conclusion that scripture does not accurately teach scientific truth about the world, Maimonides seeks to escape this conclusion by adopting a hermeneutical position that allows him to resolve the apparent conflict without calling scripture into question. From Spinoza's perspective, Maimonides came within reach of the important realization that scripture is merely a fallible human creation, but he turned away from this view because of his unwillingness to challenge religious orthodoxy. As a philosopher whose work clearly testifies to his own high standards of intellectual honesty in the face of distasteful conclusions, it makes sense that Spinoza would reserve the highest contempt for those who failed to follow through with their own ideas.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Shirley, *Tractatus*, 63.

¹⁷ Curley, *Ethics*, II/28/17.

Yet, as the case of Descartes clearly shows, Spinoza did not simply ignore the views of figures whom he believed had failed to follow through with their own ideas. Rather, he sought to push their ideas to the very logical conclusions, which they had failed to accept. In Maimonides' case, Spinoza's objection is easy to see. If a religious claim conflicts with a rationally supported argument, then one should simply accept that the religious claim is mistaken. However, Spinoza is unable to stop at this point. By rejecting scripture as a source of objective truth about the world, Spinoza risked being seen as rejecting religion entirely. In order to avoid such a charge of atheism, Spinoza needed a way to distinguish between those beliefs which he wished to maintain and those beliefs which he wished to reject. In addition, if Spinoza wanted his views to have any chance at all of gaining support, he needed to provide some account of religious beliefs which did not simply dismiss them as entirely worthless. In each case, Spinoza's solution has its origins in Maimonidean philosophy.

The solution to the problem of distinguishing between true religious beliefs and those which should be rejected is already implicit in the recognition of Maimonides' failure to pursue the logical conclusion of his view. In many cases, Maimonides had no problem assenting to religious claims. For instance, the claim that God is omnipotent, omniscient, and eternal easily falls within the Aristotelian view. In other cases, there is significant tension in the Maimonidean outlook. In these cases, it is often clear to the critical reader that the demands of Aristotelian philosophy conflict with some important principle of Jewish faith in a manner that cannot be resolved by giving a figurative interpretation. In these cases, it is often difficult to determine Maimonides' true stance. This has led some commentators to argue the Maimonides is presenting an orthodox view on the surface while truly holding a thoroughly Aristotelian view, a fact which he partially conceals.¹⁸

Maimonides treatment of miracles provides an excellent example of such tension in his philosophy. Belief in miracles, particularly in those miracles by which God delivered the people of

¹⁸ Leo Strauss, "Introduction," in *Guide of the Perplexed* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1963), xvii-xxiv.

Israel from slavery in Egypt, is an important element of the Jewish faith. Furthermore, belief in miracles was widely accepted in the medieval period. Thus, it should not be surprising that Maimonides accepts the possibility of at least some miracles in the *Guide*. This includes miracles which Aristotle holds are impossible, such as changes in substance when God transforms water into blood in Exodus.¹⁹ Yet, in a sign of his own awareness of the tension of his position, Maimonides attempts, wherever possible, to give miracles other explanations.²⁰ This raises the question of whether or not Maimonides actually believed that miracles are possible or whether he was simply offering this view in order to maintain an appearance of orthodoxy.²¹

Fortunately, the issues surrounding the intentions of Maimonides can be avoided in this analysis. What is important is that as a critical reader of Maimonides' *Guide*, Spinoza would have been well-equipped to detect the tension in Maimonides' position and consider the possibility that Maimonides may have held less orthodox views that he outwardly claimed. This tension gave Spinoza a clear basis for differentiating between those beliefs he wished to preserve and those he wished to reject. Spinoza sets out this basis in chapter 13 of the TTP in which he argues that the aim of scripture "was not to impart knowledge" except in the case of basic principles which "are very few, and of a very simple nature."²² He makes it clear that those principles which are found to be essential will be fully supported within the domain of philosophical reasoning and will be shared by all true religions. It is this division Spinoza has in mind when he writes in a letter to Henry Oldenburg, "the chief distinction I make between religion and superstition is that the latter is founded on ignorance, the former on wisdom."²³ In this way, Spinoza's view of religion fits one possible interpretation of

¹⁹ Pines, *Guide*, 345.

²⁰ Kreisel, "Miracles in Medieval Jewish Philosophy," 111.

²¹ This point is raised by Steve Nadler in *A Book Forged in Hell* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011), 92.

²² Shirley, *Tractatus*, 215.

²³ Samuel Shirley, trans., *The Letters* (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1995), 333.

Maimonides in which he is truly a full-fledged Aristotelian but does not explicitly deny miracles so as to avoid weakening the faith of the masses.

Spinoza's second problem was that he needed to provide some sort of positive role for the religious beliefs which he rejects in order to avoid appearing to attack religion. Maimonides provides Spinoza with just such an account. In his philosophical system, Maimonides distinguishes between those beliefs which are true and those which promote an orderly society.²⁴ A good example of the latter case can be found in Maimonides' approach to ceremony in book III of the *Guide*. Maimonides holds that "the law as a whole aims at two things: the welfare of the soul and the welfare of the body."²⁵ When faced with an apparently arbitrary law, Maimonides will seek to show its social utility. For instance, regarding laws concerning ritual purity, Maimonides argues that they are designed by God to restrain sexual desire, which would otherwise degrade society.²⁶

Spinoza adopts the Maimonidean account of ceremonial observances and non-essential scriptural beliefs as existing because they are necessary for an orderly society. Spinoza argues that "Scripture commands no other kind of knowledge other than what is necessary to obey God according to [the commandment of loving one's neighbor], and without which men are likely to be self-willed."²⁷ Thus, the belief and practices of scripture can be treated as useful lies, which have a good social effect on the masses, but need not be believed by the philosopher. However, since Spinoza denies Maimonides' explanation that these practices have their origins in the benevolent intentions of God, he must provide some other account explaining their origins. For such an account, Spinoza turns to the account of religion in the work of Nicollò Machiavelli and Thomas Hobbes.

The Origins of Religion in Machiavelli and Hobbes

²⁴ Ibid., 111.

²⁵ Pines, *Guide*, 510.

²⁶ Ibid., 533.

²⁷ Shirley, *Tractatus*, 215.

Spinoza most likely first became acquainted with the work of Machiavelli and Hobbes when he was a student of Fransiscus van Enden, who wrote two political works around the same period.²⁸ The accounts of religion that influenced Spinoza are found in Machiavelli's *Discourses on Livy* and Hobbes' *Leviathan*. There is direct evidence that Spinoza read Machiavelli as a copy of his complete works was found in Spinoza's library.²⁹ In the case of Hobbes, the *Leviathan* was not found in his library though Hobbes' *De Cive* was among the books in his collection. However, Spinoza was almost certainly familiar with the Dutch translation of his friend Abraham van Berckel, which had a significant impact on the intellectual scene in the Netherlands.³⁰

Whether Machiavelli or Hobbes was the primary influence on Spinoza's anthropological account of human religion is a question that cannot be conclusively answered. Hobbes clearly plays a key role in the development of Spinoza's political views in the TTP. Steven Nadler identifies Hobbes' *Leviathan* as the principle source of Spinoza's anthropological account of religion and does not consider Machiavelli.³¹ However, Spinoza was already well under way in his work on the TTP in 1665 as is indicated by his correspondence with Henry Oldenburg, whereas the *Leviathan* did not appear in any language that Spinoza could read until the Dutch translation in 1667.³² While Hobbes political views could have been gleaned from *De Cive*, which was written in Latin, his anthropological account of religion does not appear there. It is possible that Spinoza was able to access Berckel's translation prior to its publication date; however, it seems unlikely that Spinoza could have read the *Leviathan* during the period in which his views on religion were first forming in the early 1660s, but he would have read it by the publication of the TTP in 1670.

²⁸ Nadler, *Spinoza*, 104.

²⁹ Jakob Freudenthal, *Die Lebensgeschichte Spinoza's* (Leipzig: Verlag Von Veit & Comp., 1899), 161.

³⁰ Nadler, *Spinoza: A Life*, 195.

³¹ Nadler, *A Book Forged in Hell*, 55-6.

³² Shirley, *The Letters*, 185.

The fact that Spinoza could have read Machiavelli as soon as he began studying with van Enden lends credence to the view that *Discourses* was the primary source for Spinoza's anthropological account. However, it is uncertain whether or not Spinoza would have come into contact with the particular passages that express this position. Since both Machiavelli and Hobbes express similar views, there is no way to settle this matter by investigating the texts. For instance, both Machiavelli and Hobbes restricted their consideration to pagan religions in order to avoid providing a controversial account of Christianity.³³ In the absence of conclusive evidence either way, I will proceed on the plausible assumption that Spinoza was familiar with both texts and that each contributed to his account of human religion.

Spinoza and Hobbes both identify human ignorance of natural causes combined with the resulting uncertainty and fear this produces as the primary cause of the origin of most religious beliefs. Spinoza describes the masses as “the wretched victims of alternating hopes and fears, the result [of which] is that, for the most part, their credulity knows no bounds.”³⁴ This clearly echoes Hobbes own view by which mankind lives in perpetual fear.³⁵ The problem, in each case, is that events occur in nature whose natural cause cannot be immediately known. The result, according to Spinoza, is that “if they struck with wonder at some unusual phenomenon, they believe this to be a portent signifying anger of the god or of a supreme deity.”³⁶ This argument also appears in the *Leviathan*, in which Hobbes argues that “when [man] cannot assure himself of the true causes of things (for the cause of good and evil fortune for the most part are invisible), he supposes causes of them.”³⁷

³³ Popkin, *The History of Scepticism*, 197.

³⁴ Shirley, *Tractatus*, 49.

³⁵ Ian Shapiro, ed., *Leviathan* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010), 67.

³⁶ Shirley, *Tractatus*, 49.

³⁷ Shapiro, *Leviathan*, 66-7.

The next step in the process occurs when certain individuals either consciously or unconsciously begin channeling the superstition of the masses for their own benefit. Machiavelli provides such an account of Roman religion:

...every religion has the foundation of its life on some principle order of its own. The life of the Gentile religion was founded on the responses of the oracles and on the sect of the diviners and augurs. All their other ceremonies, sacrifices, and rites depended on them; for they easily believed that the god who could predict your future good or your future ill for you could also grant it to you. From these arose temple, from these the sacrifices, from these the supplications and every other ceremony to venerate them.³⁸

Such ceremonies and rituals become more and more developed until they reach the point of becoming a fully institutionalized religion. Spinoza uses the Ottoman Turks as an example:

To counter this unfortunate tendency [of the masses being victims of alternating prejudices], immense efforts have been made to invest religion, true or false, with such pomp and ceremony that it can sustain any shock any constantly evoke the deepest reverence in all its worshippers.³⁹

In this manner, the social utility of religion becomes part of the anthropological account of its origins. What begins as the weakness of mankind to superstitions is transformed into a formal set of beliefs, institutions, and ceremonies to benefit the interest of the elites in ruling an orderly and obedient populace.⁴⁰

Spinoza and Hobbes also use their narrative account of the development of superstitious religious beliefs and ceremonies to explain the diversity of religious customs. As Spinoza puts it in the TTP, "superstition, like all other influences of hallucination and frenzy, is bound to assume very unstable and varied forms."⁴¹ Hobbes makes the same argument in more elaborate form when he writes, "by reason of the different Fancies, Judgments, and Passion of several men, have grown up into

³⁸ Harvey Mansfield and Nathan Tarcov, trans., *Discourses on Livy* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1996), 37.

³⁹ Shirley, *Tractatus*, 51.

⁴⁰ Maimonides also provides an account of sacrifices that explains religious ritual in terms of providing a substitute for the superstitious practices of the masses in chapter 46 of part III of the *Guide*. However, Maimonides' account is not naturalistic in the sense that he attributes the origins of these rituals to God rather than to clever rulers. Nonetheless, Spinoza may also have been influenced by Maimonides on this point.

⁴¹ Shirley, *Tractatus*, 50.

ceremonies so different, that those which are used by one man, are for the most part ridiculous to another.”⁴² In this manner, the anthropological account of the origins of human religion not only explains the causal origin of irrational beliefs, but has the additional benefit of solving the otherwise vexing problem of the existence of diverse religious traditions.

Skepticism, Toleration, and the New Sciences in the Netherlands

Spinoza’s account of human religion clearly owes much of its substance to reflection on the work of philosophical writings of Maimonides, Machiavelli, and Hobbes. However, these figures were not interested in developing the radical implications of their own accounts of religion. Therefore, while Spinoza certainly drew much of his philosophical analysis from these sources, it is unlikely that they provided the impetus behind the radical direction in which he took their views. Instead, there is reason to believe that the 17th century Dutch intellectual climate was the primary external factor influencing Spinoza to take a radical direction. Spinoza would have had his first significant exposure to these ideas when he began working as a merchant, which could have occurred no later than his father’s death in 1649.⁴³ The influence of these ideas would have increased after his excommunication in 1656 and would continue for the remaining twenty-one years of his life.

Skepticism about religion emerged, in its modern form, in the tumultuous period following the Protestant Reformation. Before this time, those individuals who held broadly skeptical views about religion either kept their ideas to themselves or were suppressed by religious authorities to the extent that their ideas failed to achieve significant influence outside of their immediate circles. Two important changes occurred in the early modern period. First, major philosophical works expressing skeptical themes became more widely disseminated with the rise of the printing press and the proliferation of religious writing spawned by the Reformation. Second, skeptical ideas began to circulate more widely

⁴² Shapiro, *Leviathan*, 67.

⁴³ Nadler, *Spinoza: A Life*, 80.

in private intellectual circles and through personal contacts.⁴⁴ Undoubtedly, the contents of these private communications were often more radical than the published work that appeared in the period.

Amsterdam was a center of radical ideas, and it was home to a flourishing industry centered on printing radical texts. Spinoza's friend Jan Rieuwertszoon ran such a publishing business and owned a bookstore that served as a meeting place for individuals with radical ideas.⁴⁵ Since Spinoza clearly frequented such circles, there can be little doubt that he was exposed to such positions. Among the views discussed would have been the ideas of classical figures such as Epicurus as well as modern skeptics such as Montaigne and Charron. Yet one must question what impact these ideas had on Spinoza's position since there is no clear evidence of their influence in his philosophy.

One response to skeptical arguments about religion is to use them to attack established authority. Such an approach can be seen in the writings of Uriel Acosta, who committed suicide when Spinoza was nine years old and lived in the same Jewish community in which Spinoza was raised. In his *Example of a Human Life*, Acosta offers a harsh attack on the religious establishment of rabbinic Judaism, which he blames for various personal misfortunes and for reducing its adherents to slavery.⁴⁶ Another response to skeptical arguments about religion is to incorporate them into a broader skeptical view concerning knowledge in general. This approach can be seen in the writing of Montaigne who used Pyrrhonian skepticism to argue that religion had no rational basis.⁴⁷ Spinoza would have been acquainted to each of these skeptical outlooks through his contact with the intellectual scene in Amsterdam.

What is significant about these approaches is that Spinoza goes to great lengths to reject each of them. Spinoza's own view rejects undermining established political authority, and he is careful to

⁴⁴ Wooton, David. "New Histories of Atheism" in *Atheism from the Reformation to the Enlightenment*, ed. Michael Hunter and David Wooton (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1992), 44.

⁴⁵ Travis Frampton, *Spinoza and the Rise of Historical Criticism of the Bible* (New York, T & T Clark, 2006), 175.

⁴⁶ See Helen Lederer, trans., *An Example of a Human Life* (typescript, HUC, 1958).

⁴⁷ Popkin, *The History of Scepticism*, 48.

emphasize that point in the TTP. Spinoza's rejection of skepticism concerning knowledge is even more striking. Not only is Spinoza's own epistemology markedly anti-skeptical, but he treats the skeptical figure as either ridiculous or insincere. Thus, it is unlikely that Spinoza held in high regard those who expressed these kinds of skepticism about religion. This would also suggest that such ideas did not have a strong influence on his philosophical views.

However, despite the fact that Spinoza did not share or even respect the broadly skeptical views that he would have been exposed to in Amsterdam, there is good reason to believe that these ideas did play a role in his philosophical development. Despite the flaws Spinoza must have seen in the views of figures like Acosta and Montaigne, he must have agreed with them that the claims of religious authorities should not be accepted without question. Thus, it is likely that the radical environment of Amsterdam encouraged Spinoza to draw more radical conclusions from the work of figures such as Hobbes and Machiavelli, whose philosophical depth he would have respected. In addition, skeptical views would have made Spinoza sensitive to the vulnerability of religious claims to rational argumentation. A natural response to this would be to seek some criterion for distinguishing between religious claims that are rationally defensible and those that are not.

The skeptical outlook of the 17th century may explain why Spinoza chose to reject the objective validity of the majority of religious beliefs in favor of providing naturalistic accounts of them; however, it fails to explain why Spinoza sought to preserve a core of religious beliefs in his system. Given the incendiary nature of much of Spinoza's work, it can hardly be that he included this aspect to appease religious authorities. Instead, this move was motivated, in part, by Spinoza's own experience of interacting with various liberal Christians in Amsterdam. In particular, I will focus on the influence of the Collegiant circles, which Spinoza was known to frequent.

The Collegiants were groups of liberal Christians who met to pray and discuss theology in various Dutch cities, including Amsterdam. The membership of such informal organizations was

constituted primarily by Mennonites, Remonstrants, and Socinians.⁴⁸ While these views share certain affinities, they are not without differences on important theological points. At times, this led to controversy within Collegiant circles.⁴⁹ Yet, for the most part the Collegiants must have been fairly tolerant in their approach to religious differences as evidenced by the fact that they accepted Spinoza, a non-Christian, into their midst.

This relative peace was achievable because of a view among the Collegiants that only a few simple truths were absolutely essential to Christianity. This view likely arose as a natural response to the problem of maintaining peace among holders of diverse views within the Collegiant community. Central to this position was the view that the primary focus of Jesus' teachings was to love fellow humans and that the Christian faith is not dogmatic in nature.⁵⁰ This view is expressed, in much the same form, by Spinoza when he presents his own view of the essential elements of religion in the TTP.⁵¹ Thus, it seems highly probable that Spinoza's decision to defend a purified core of religion had its origins in the view of the Collegiant community of which he was a member. Yet, it is important to remember that many of the Collegiants, unlike Spinoza, accepted spiritualism as a legitimate source of religious belief. Thus, while Spinoza's decision to defend a core of religious beliefs may have originated with his exposure to liberal Christians, he does not entirely share their reasons for defending such an approach, which he reached through reflection on Maimonides.

A final influence on Spinoza from the Dutch intellectual scene would have been the adherents of the new sciences. There are a number of different routes by which Spinoza was influenced by the beginnings of the scientific revolution and the mathematical view of the world that it advocated. Descartes, who was a key influence on Spinoza's philosophical work, was a major advocate of this new way of thinking. Spinoza shows interest in this kind of thinking in his arguments concerning physics

⁴⁸ Frampton, *Spinoza and the Rise of Historical Criticism of the Bible*, 162-3.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 176.

⁵⁰ Nadler, *Spinoza: A Life*, 139.

⁵¹ Shirley, *Tractatus*, 215.

and astronomy in his *Descartes' Principles*. In addition, Spinoza maintained a correspondence with the English chemist Robert Boyle in which he actively discussed various experiments. Finally, Spinoza supported himself as a lens grinder and is known to have had knowledge in optics from his correspondence with Gottfried Leibniz.

In addition to the influences described above, Spinoza probably read the work of Joseph Delmedigo early in his education. Delmedigo was a Jewish advocate of the new sciences and a student of Galileo Galilei.⁵² His book on the new sciences, *Sefer Elim*, was published by Rabbi Menasseh ben Israel of the Amsterdam community, and Spinoza was probably exposed to it at a relatively early age.⁵³ This text likely added weight to Spinoza's view of nature as a rational system of fixed mathematical laws. However, the conception of nature as governed by rational laws is already found in the philosophy of Maimonides; therefore, it is likely that Delmedigo's work merely reinforced and was not the origin of Spinoza's naturalism. However, the powerful intellectual drive of advocates of the new sciences towards a naturalistic view of the world likely had some influence on Spinoza.

The intellectual origins of Spinoza's account of religion in the diverse intellectual traditions which influenced his development should now be apparent. The substantive analysis of his position is largely drawn from philosophical influences. His decision to divide religious beliefs into a rationally defensible core and a larger set of beliefs to be justified through their social utility has its origins in critical reflection on Maimonides. The anthropological account of the origin of religions he provides in the preface to the TTP can be seen as a more radical version of the accounts provided by Machiavelli and Hobbes. However, while the analysis came from these philosophical sources, the drive to draw radical implications requires a different explanation. Some of it must be explained in terms of Spinoza's inner drive to push theories to their logical conclusion and his willingness to accept

⁵² David Rudderman, *Jewish Thought and Scientific Discover in Early Modern Europe* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2001), 124.

⁵³ Nadler, *Spinoza: A Life*, 138.

distasteful consequences. Yet, much of the impetus likely came from the radical intellectual climate of Amsterdam at the time. Spinoza's unusual place in the crossroads of each of these influences as well as his drive to systematize his views led to the account of human religion that he provides in the TTP.

Now that the development of Spinoza's account has been explained, one might wonder what Spinoza made of his own position. One clear implication of Spinoza's account is that so long as one preserves the essential philosophical core of true religion, any number of inessential religious beliefs could be embraced to serve as moral guidance. Spinoza embraced this implication as is clear from his response to a letter accusing him of providing no way to distinguish between the false prophet Mohammed and the true prophets of the Judeo-Christian tradition:

As for the Turks and the Gentiles, if they worship God by the exercise of justice and by love of their neighbor, I believe they possess the spirit of Christ and are saved, whatever conviction they may hold in their ignorance regarding Mahomet and the oracles.⁵⁴

This passage anticipates the ecumenical views of many contemporary authors in the debate on the problem of religious diversity. For instance, John Hick advocates for a philosophical conception of religion that can both give a realistic interpretation of certain core elements of religion and render diverse faiths compatible.⁵⁵ This view was, in some respect, anticipated by Moses Mendelssohn in *Jerusalem* in which he advocates a rationalistic view of religion and a broadly ecumenicalist attitude that may have been influenced by Spinoza.⁵⁶

Yet Spinoza differs in important respects from contemporary ecumenicalists. First of all, Spinoza is largely unconcerned about whether or not religious people will accept his account of their religion. While he preserves a core of religious beliefs which can be defended objectively, he dismisses the vast majority of beliefs as mere prejudices. Very few faithful adherents of any major religion could ever accept Spinoza's dramatic revision of the content of religion. In this manner, Spinoza shares the

⁵⁴ Shirley, *The Letters*, 241.

⁵⁵ See John Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion, Second Edition* (New Have: Yale University Press, 2004).

⁵⁶ Moses Mendelssohn, *Jerusalem*, trans. Alan Arkush (New England University Press, 1983), 99-100.

approach of the contemporary irrealist in his approach to religious belief.⁵⁷ Like the contemporary irrealist, Spinoza defends the majority of religious beliefs on the ground that they lead to good ethical behavior. Thus, Spinoza's account anticipates a number of contemporary positions on religious diversity while not fitting neatly into any single popular account in the philosophical literature.

The fact that Spinoza seems to fall in between all the major positions in both the early modern and contemporary debates concerning the correct account of religion might lead one to suspect that his view is, in some manner, inconsistent. Such an objection would begin by pointing out that Spinoza gives two entirely different accounts of religious belief. He defends a small set of core beliefs as objectively valid, yet he dismisses the vast majority of beliefs and gives an anthropological account. If Spinoza could not provide principled reasons from within his philosophical system for this differential treatment, then one could rightly object that his position is inconsistent.

On further investigation, this worry proves to be unfounded. In each case, Spinoza's treatment of religious beliefs is grounded in his commitment to reason. Certain core beliefs can be defended because they follow logically from basic definitions and axioms which are known through the natural light of reason. All other beliefs, by virtue of the fact that they cannot be so derived, are necessarily invalid insofar as they are taken to represent objective truths about the world. However, they must be given some explanation, by virtue of the fact that everything in nature behaves according to fixed laws. Instead, their origin is explained in terms of various psychological features of human beings. In this manner, Spinoza's dual treatment of religious belief turns out to be deeply motivated by his philosophical system.

⁵⁷ For an account of the contemporary debate on the philosophical problem of religious diversity including a discussion of irrealism, see Nathan Hilberg, *Religious Truth and Religious Diversity* (New York: Peter Lang, 2009).

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