RETHINKING THE CONTRIBUTION OF SPINOZA TO THEOLOGY AND BIBLICAL STUDIES

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Abstract

This article investigates the contrasting and often conflicting perspectives in the past and the present on the writings of Spinoza, specifically regarding his theological and biblical research. In the next section it points out how failure to acknowledge his influence affects our understanding of the Enlightenment, and it then discusses reasons why he was marginalised. The final section discusses how his role and influence can be better understood in terms of his social context.[1]

1 INTRODUCTION

The seventeenth century Dutch thinker, Spinoza, mostly known as a philosopher, is increasingly being recognised as one of the important representatives of the Radical Enlightenment and one of the outstanding figures in the history of Western European thought. This is clear from two contemporary portrayals that reflect the high regard in which he is being held by some within the discipline of philosophy. Thus the *Internet encyclopedia of philosophy* (http://www.iep.utm.edu/s/spinoza.htm), observed about him:

> Benedict de Spinoza was among the most important of the post-Cartesian philosophers who flourished in the second half of the 17th century. He made significant contributions in virtually every area of philosophy, and his writings reveal the influence of such divergent sources as Stoicism, Jewish Rationalism, Machiavelli, Hobbes, Descartes, and a variety of heterodox religious thinkers of his day. For this reason he is

> difficult to categorize, though he is usually counted, along with Descartes and Leibniz, as one of the three major Rationalists.

The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/spinoza) similarly and equally enthusiastically portrays him as follows,

> Baruch (or Benedictus) Spinoza is one of the most important philosophers – and certainly the most radical – of the early modern period. His thought combines a commitment to Cartesian metaphysical and epistemological principles with elements from ancient Stoicism and medieval Jewish rationalism into a nonetheless highly original system. His extremely naturalistic views on God, the world, the human being and knowledge serve to ground a moral philosophy centered on the control of the passions leading to virtue and happiness. They also lay the foundations for a strongly democratic political thought and a deep critique of the pretensions of Scripture and sectarian religion. Of all the philosophers of the seventeenth-century, perhaps none have more relevance today than Spinoza.

These two perspectives also correctly reflect the important insight that his philosophy cannot be separated from his research on religious topics, underlining the fact that any reappraisal of Spinoza is of special relevance to theology and biblical studies. Thus it was a timely development when, in 1995, some interest was displayed in his biblical research in an edition of the *Jewish Political Studies Review* with the title "Spinoza and the Bible."[2] In an essay in this volume, Elazar (1995) observed that Spinoza was "the most knowledgeable of the seventeenth century philosophers when it came to Scripture", adding the striking observation that he "invented" modern biblical criticism. This is a clear indication of the extent to which Spinoza is being reappraised, made even more striking because it is done within the context of contemporary Jewish scholarship in which he was a very controversial figure (cf. e.g. Piccinini 2004 and below). This is also confirmed by the perhaps most important re-evaluation of Spinoza in contemporary nontheological contexts, done in the minutely researched publication of Israel (2001) and the thorough, fascinating text of Stewart (2006). These publications are two of the most significant indications that a review of Spinoza's place within theological and biblical research is a matter of highest priority.

Such high praise cannot hide the controversy that was part and parcel of Spinoza's life from an early age. It is true that he enjoyed extraordinary acclaim.[3] Living a moderate, almost ascetic lifestyle as a lens grinder, he drew admiring visitors from all over the continent who visited him there at his home to discuss philosophical and religious issues. His thoughts were acclaimed by people from diverse levels of societies in France, England, Germany and other countries. His convictions, building on ancient Graeco-Roman naturalism and integrated with the work of Galileo and Descartes, were to exert an "immense influence over successive generations, and shook western civilization to its foundations" (Israel 2001:161).[4] This included his work on the Bible and theology which had a major influence on the development of theology and biblical research, specifically in Germany, but also in other countries.

But more common than the fame and praise that he enjoyed was the strong and emotional rejection (Israel 2001:242ff.). He was vigorously opposed – to such an extent that ideological positions in different fields of scientific research were characterised as being Spinozist or not.[5] Gregory (1989:27-32) noted that his publications "provoked some of the most violent reactions to any published work of the seventeenth century". This is not only true of his own time, but also of later times when "no one else during the century 1650-1750 remotely rivalled Spinoza's notoriety as the chief challenger of the fundamentals of revealed religion, received ideas, tradition, morality, and what was everywhere regarded, in absolutist and non-absolutist states alike, as divinely constituted political authority" (Israel 2001:161).[6]

Tragically and surprisingly, as will be pointed out below, the controversy was not only stoked by his orthodox opponents, but also by kindred spirits. They kept Spinoza at arm's length or criticised his research, although they shared his thoughts and often took over his ideas. In some cases the opposition to Spinoza became quite surreal, as, for example, with Wachter (1673-1757) who vigorously rejected him, but in terms that were not less Spinozist than Spinoza himself. Later on Wachter made an "astounding volte-face and proclaimed himself a Spinozist. But it was impossible to doubt that the seeds of Wachter's subsequent Spinozism were already discernible" in his early works (Israel 2001:648). Another example is that of the French priest Simon, who himself was a controversial figure. He opposed Spinoza strongly for his criticism of the

Pentateuch and generally for his impiety. But he also supported "crucial strands" of Spinoza's methodology (Israel 2001:451). In his recent publication on Spinoza and Leibniz, Stewart (2006) reveals the duplicitous way in which Leibniz praised Spinoza in clandestine letters, took over important facets of this thinking, corresponded and visited him, while publicly criticising him as a heretic and atheist. An indication of how strong the responses to his ideas were is to be found in the facts that Spinoza stopped publication of his other works until after his death (his *Ethics* appeared posthumously) and withdrew in self-imposed exile.

It is interesting that his fame and notoriety were not the results of radical new insights like those of Galileo. Spinoza should not be regarded as an original thinker par excellence.[7] This was understood from an early stage. A major adversary, the French prelate Huet, observed scornfully that Spinoza was the chief exponent of exegetical impiety, conflating all "the profanities of Hobbes, La Preyère, Bodin, Grotius and other 'atheistic' Bible commentators into a coherent, systematic apparatus of unbelief and scepticism concerning the Bible" (Israel 2001:454). Spinoza's unique contribution was indeed to be found in his consistent and profound systematising of material that was being researched by his predecessors and colleagues.

> By joining up, and integrating in a powerfully coherent system, recent insights with concepts which had reverberated disparately and incoherently for millennia, Spinoza imparted order, cohesion, and formal logic to what in effect was a fundamentally new view of man, God, and the universe rooted in philosophy, nurtured by scientific thought, and capable of producing a revolutionary ideology" (Israel 2001:160-1).

These shared insights with predecessors and other thinkers of his time did not help him or relieve the pressure much. The thrust of his writings and the impact of his ideas were too strong for many of his opponents to register clearly that many of his pronouncements had already been promoted and published in earlier and other works of, for example, Renaissance authors.[8]

Spinoza's special competence to incorporate varying ideas into a solid and imposing system of thought is also especially true of and evident in his theological observations. Spinoza wrote an elaborate, comprehensive

discussion on the interpretation of the Bible in his famous *Tractatus theologico-politicus* (TTP)[9] at the beginning of 1670. This treatise in particular, but also his other works, illustrates how erudite he was in matters regarding theology and the Bible and how he could produce an impressive synthetical overview from a vast number of concrete and contingent exegetical insights in a coherent and critical manner. His close[10] study of this material is much more than a loose summary of some observations.

As a result of the very negative and highly emotional opposition to him, later discussions in the Enlightenment phase mostly failed to give the necessary credit to Spinoza as a pioneering figure. In fact, the impression to the contrary was created: Israel (2001:159) notes in his seminal publication on the radical Enlightenment that later historians claimed that Spinoza was a peripheral figure that "had very little influence". He observes that this evaluation is a typical example of "an abiding historiographical refrain which appears to be totally untrue but nevertheless, since the nineteenth century, has exerted an enduring appeal for all manner of scholars".

A good example of this same neglect and of the consequences of this historiographical refrain is how, within theological and biblical circles, the well known German New Testament scholar Werner G Kümmel failed to mention Spinoza in his influential and widely quoted publication on the history of biblical research. Spinoza's name is not often found in other similar scholarly reviews of the history of biblical scholarship. If later philosophers, who reflected on their discipline without the canons of interpretations that are operative in theological circles, were so prejudiced against Spinoza, it should not be surprising that something similar happened among theologians and biblical scholars. But it remains surprising that this happened, nevertheless, since other equally radical and critical voices were and are given enough attention and recognition for their contributions to the discipline.

Spinoza thus is a historical figure who deserves to be re-evaluated by theologians and biblical scholars, as is clear from the revisionist work of Israel, Stewart and other more balanced authors. That he challenged some of the very fundamentals of Judaeo-Christian tradition is true and is a matter that could be expected to be disturbing. But other thinkers of his time who held such views did not experience the same emotional

opposition and consequent neglect. A revision of Spinoza therefore needs to understand this opposition if it is to correct the skewed historiographical refrain according to which he is portrayed as a scholar of little consequence for the discipline. The following research is an attempt to contribute towards such a reappraisal by attempting to understand in more detail the reasons why Spinoza had been neglected.

2 EXPLAINING THE NEGLECT OF SPINOZIST THINKING

There are some intriguing and sad reasons why Spinoza was denied proper recognition in the course of history. It is of great importance to understand these reasons, since they explain much about the way in which the interpretative task within theology is often determined by unrelated, nontheological, social, personal and political factors. As in the case of Galileo and other thinkers on the cutting edge of innovative thought, these reasons also reveal how pettiness, personal animosity, social prejudices and other negative matters ultimately cannot deny authentic and legitimate research its rightful place, even though they can try to do so. We sharpen our hermeneutical skills, and promote the hermeneutics of suspicion which have become such an integral part of modern historiography, by enquiring why his critics opposed Spinoza as intensely as they did. Not only what these critics said is important, but equally significant is why they said it. The subtext or ideological nature of their observations therefore needs to be examined.

The following are some of the reasons why Spinoza was criticised and marginalised.

2.1 The focus and nature of Spinoza's research

Some of the reasons can be traced to a mild form of ignorance and misunderstanding on the part of biblical scholars. Three aspects are relevant here:

2.1.1 Biblical scholars may tend to think of Spinoza more as a philosopher than as a biblical scholar, not only because of his greater reputation as a philosopher and the mainly philosophical form and framework of his research, but also because he was not involved at any official level in teaching biblical material at an institution of learning. This overlooks the fact that it was not

uncommon for intellectuals to research theology and the Bible; this often happened at that time, when researchers studied fields of learning outside their disciplines. Examples of this include Reimarus, who was a teacher of Near-Eastern Languages at a gymnasium in Hamburg (Kümmel 1973:89), but whose best known theological publication is on the Gospels as falsifications of the historical Jesus. Except for the fact that philosophy and theology were often researched together, a proper reading of Spinoza's works will quickly reveal his almost overwhelming interest in religious and biblical material (cf. below). It is problematic to categorise Spinoza in terms of contemporary ideals of specialisation or to discard his extensive biblical research because of the philosophical context with which it was integrated.

2.1.2 Another reason for the neglect may have been that the history of biblical studies has mostly been written from a Christian perspective, so that someone like Spinoza, seen as an author on the interpretation of Hebrew scriptures, would almost by definition not be noticed. In fact, he specifically researched the New Testament and discussed the theological implications of Christian scriptures. For the rest, it is well-known that he retained warm relationships with some Christian groups (cf. below), so that it is not without reason that Spinoza was regarded by some as a Christian sympathiser and supporter. A Danish visitor to Amsterdam, for example, describes him as a Christian who "is an apostate Jew" (Israel 2001:163). This positive relationship with Christianity would explain his interest in, knowledge of and impressive comments about it.

2.1.3 Spinoza's reputation also suffered as a result of the frequently repeated stereotype that his works do not excel in clarity. His works were called "abstruse" at an early stage (Israel 2001:307), and reference was made to the veiled and coded language in which they were presented (Israel 2001:309).[11] In such a context it is not surprising that his thinking was downplayed as both difficult and vague.

2.2 Ideological prejudices

Certain ideological prejudices played a decisive role in the evaluation of Spinoza's work.

2.2.1 Spinoza's Jewishness certainly played a major role in the neglect of his work, as later research with its anti-Semitic remarks about him reveals. This is clear, for example, in the debate between the French scholar, Simon, and the Dutch scholar, Vossius. It is also evident in the influential publications of the Lutheran theologian Wachter (1673-1757). Wachter wrote about the publications of Spinoza within the context of bitter polemics against Jewish groups and thought.[12]

2.2.2 Spinoza's disastrous personal history, especially the fact that he had been excommunicated from the influential synagogue[13] in Amsterdam at a young age, further contributed to his reputation as an extremist and therefore a peripheral figure. The excommunication was a major action against him with grave social consequences.[14] Many Jewish scholars and later interpreters felt that Spinoza attacked the Jewish faith because of this expulsion and consequently misrepresented Hebrew Scriptures. The fact that he sympathised and lived with Christian groups, also contributed to him being mistrusted as a sympathiser of Christianity (cf. e.g. the discussions in Piccinini 2004).[15] He was the victim of anti-Semitic prejudices in some cases, and also, ironically, the object of Jewish attacks in other cases. In both cases, ideological prejudices drove his critics to attack him.

2.2.3 If some personal reasons caused the neglect of Spinoza's role in theological and biblical interpretation, the typical dynamics of historiography within scholarship, especially when it is driven by ideological prejudices, also contributed to this neglect. For a long time, the history of biblical studies as a discipline has been described mainly in terms of and from the perspective of German theologians. These works often became and still remain the point of departure for historiography of the Enlightenment period. This particular Germanic filter on history, together with the general neglect of the Dutch contribution[16] to the origins and early phase of the Enlightenment, produced a skewed picture of the discipline, contributing in no small manner to the failure of scholars to properly acknowledge the major role of Spinoza.

2.2.4 Another ideological reason for the neglect of Spinoza's thought can be traced to a particular method of researching the Enlightenment that was prevalent in earlier times. Traditional historiography for a long period of time failed to research the social dimensions and consequences of philosophical positions, concentrating rather on abstract ideas. When, in contrast to this, a particular thought system is placed within a social context and the history of its spread and reception analysed, this often produces a different picture that allows us to understand the past more adequately. The harsh realities of Spinoza's social setting, when properly investigated, help to illustrate his special place and his strong influence. In his social setting, he stands out as a unique figure with great influence, both positive and negative (Israel 2001:307; also cf. below on his influence and social context).

2.3 Labelling

One of the characteristic ways of disempowering opponents in Enlightenment times was to label them atheists. This also happened with Spinoza. He was often described as an apostate or an atheist by his opponents – not only those who were in influential church positions, but also those who shared many of his convictions.[17] This did not help his reputation, even though Spinoza went out of his way to deny these accusations and to contradict such rumours. How important this was to him is clear from his citing of 1 John 4:13 on the title page of his book ("Hereby we know that we dwell in God and He in us, because He has given us of his Spirit"). It is most striking that he cites Christian scriptures so prominently at this point – something that could not have escaped the attention of his critics.

2.4 A powerful alliance

Another reason for the neglect of Spinoza can be traced, ironically, to an unusual alliance between church, theology and science that existed in his time. Israel (2001:473) observes that the negative consequences of the early Enlightenment for traditional religious orthodoxy with its belief in a providential God inspired Scripture and miracles, also impacted negatively on churches.

> By the 1740s, traditional confessional thinking and dogmatic theology were everywhere so weakened that the very term *incrédulité* had discernibly changed its meaning, and instead of denoting, as in the past, scepticism about Christianity had come to mean, or often tended to mean, absence of belief in a First Mover, or providential God, in some form or other. The churches in their debilitated state could not press too hard, let alone persecute or expel discrete "Christian deists". Consequently, outright condemnation came to be reserved for nonprovidential deists alone.

As a result, an alliance developed between rational Christian theology and advocates of a natural religion. The stigma attached to impiety was so strong that the deists consciously and unconsciously entered into this alliance even though they were in private anything but Christian in their convictions or lifestyle. Ironically, then, the condemnation of Spinoza at the hands of intellectuals like Simon, Reimarus and Leibniz contributed to the negative image and neglect of his work, even though these theologians in fact often took over or shared many of his insights. In the light of the social setting of his time, Spinoza was the victim of an unholy alliance that found its *raison d'etre* not in a shared mindset, but in him as a common enemy. This created a reputation that continued to exist over many years.

3 THE IMPORTANCE OF RECOGNISING SPINOZA'S ROLE AND CONTRIBUTION

From the above remarks it is clear how negative perceptions regarding Spinoza's writings have prevented us from recognising his special contribution to the study of theology and biblical studies. This, in turn, affects our insight into the Enlightenment period. We fail to recognise how later Enlightenment thought is firmly grounded in and intensively prepared for by earlier thinkers, specifically in and through Spinoza's writings. No proper account can be given of the historical developments between the Renaissance and the later, fully developed Enlightenment if he is regarded as a peripheral scholar with little influence.[18] How did we move from the precritical but historical approach of Renaissance scholars to the full-blown Enlightenment thinking of the nineteenth century? Studying Spinoza will not only help us to understand the seminal, key role he

played, but will also answer this question about the earlier forms of the Enlightenment age.

At the same time, failure to acknowledge his contribution keeps us from understanding how Enlightenment thinking is the product of the social, religious and cultural conditions under which it resonated and thrived. It is not without special significance that Spinoza lived in the Netherlands in a period when it was not only a safe haven for the persecuted and marginalised, but when it also experienced exceptional prosperity and favourable socioeconomic conditions. We have noted above how his Jewish upbringing in a synagogue where the young boys were given a good education formed him as a thinker. Equally formative must have been other factors that were directly linked to his situation in the Netherlands. The mere fact that the Netherlands was during these times the context for such figures as Thomas a Kempis, Grotius, Erasmus, Rembrandt and many other influential and gifted intellectuals, confirms our need to understand Spinoza in a more balanced manner within his social context. There was something in this social context that promoted the intellectual activities of these well-known individuals. If, therefore, we recognise Spinoza for the influential thinker that he was, our eyes are opened to the social factors that were formative in his life. This, in turn, allows us a more adequate picture of the history of the Enlightenment as it was shaped by the work of various intellectuals in a crucial period in the history of the Netherlands. This needs more attention now.

4 THE SOCIAL CONTEXT OF SPINOZA

In order to understand the work of Spinoza, aspects of his social context which we mentioned above need to be highlighted in more detail.

In many of the major cities in the Netherlands, scientific works like those written by Spinoza were discussed at organised meetings in the vernacular and in a nonacademic context by artisans, shopkeepers and tradespeople. In this way Spinoza's work permeated society far beyond the confines of esoteric groups (Israel 2001:322-3), clearly because it addressed the type of questions and issues that thinking people could identify with. His writings addressed issues of special concern to those who reflected deeply on topical matters.

This is well explained in a recent contribution by Piccinini (2004:7), who discusses the way in which Spinoza transcended his Jewish context. She observes how Spinoza took

> from the Jewish tradition the common property of European ideas that it conveyed to him – and nothing *else*. Thus we believe we have answered the question of whether the Jew as a Jew is entitled to venerate Spinoza. Spinoza belongs not to Judaism, but to the small band of superior minds whom Nietzsche called the "good Europeans". To this community belong *all* the philosophers of the seventeenth century, but Spinoza belongs to it in a special way.

This was the type of social context within which Spinoza belonged. He articulated the problems and issues that were typical of that context. His works were read by people who were struggling with and discussing these problems and issues.

Spinoza's publications appeared in the Netherlands when it was a place of refuge for people of all over Europe. His forebears had moved there from Portugal towards the end of the sixteenth century because of persecution by the Inquisition (cf. Gregory 1989:2). By that time not only other Portuguese and Spanish Jews, but many other immigrants (Protestants, philosophers and traders) from all over the world (e.g. Poland, Germany, France) had settled in Amsterdam because of the religious tolerance of the city. There were other factors as well, however, because they also settled there as a result of the economic prosperity that characterised the Netherlands in this period. The city attracted people whose skills and professional competence contributed markedly to its intellectual life. The civic authorities, in turn, encouraged the flow of refugees, also and especially because of economic advantages.[19] At that time Amsterdam, one of the few major cities in Western Europe, was in the words of Mak (1994:105) a very prosperous place with a thriving economy.[20] It provided an open and safe space for newcomers pursuing a better life and safe location. It is therefore not surprising that, from the beginning of the seventeenth century to its middle, the numbers of citizens rose from 50 000 to 150 000.[21] It was a thriving, prosperous metropolis in which many divergent groups were exposed to and enriched by the presence and convictions of each other.

The cosmopolitan nature of the city, the political and economic strength of the United Provinces, the presence of gifted intellectuals like Erasmus and other Renaissance and, later on, Enlightenment thinkers and visitors, the well developed bookselling and publishing trade and the infrastructure of the navy are but a few of the factors that contributed to a social context in which Spinoza could produce his writings and in which his ideas could flourish. At the same time these factors explain why his ideas were so widely reported in Europe. As "outsiders" the immigrants continued to communicate with their partners, friends and family so that local events were known in many countries. The book trade and the interest of intellectuals in the flourishing Enlightenment sciences also guaranteed him maximum exposure far beyond the confines of his Dutch setting. Spinoza wrote in this favourable political and social context.

It was, at the same time, a complex context: On the one hand the political situation in Spinoza's time was diverse and tolerant.[22] No better illustration of this can be found than in the fact that Spinoza was able to publish his *TTP*. But the Dutch authorities also remained sensitive to the consequences of radical religious positions. The country consisted of seven provinces that had to formulate political policy through negotiations and compromise. It was also a time of tensions with England and France, because they envied Dutch affluence. This, in turn, created the need to avoid internal strife caused by extremists. This was especially the case under the leadership of Johan De Witt (1625-1672) as Councillor Pensionary of Holland, who was an important leader at the time when Spinoza's texts were published. Dutch authorities are known to have consulted religious leaders before major political decisions were taken. Spinoza was aware of the vast influence of religious institutions and figures. Israel (2001:323-327) provides an interesting illustration of the spirit of his age when he notes how a book (*De ingebeelde chaos*) by an unschooled and self-taught merchant clerk, Hendrik Wyermars, (300 of the 450 copies were sold within 10 days of publication in June 1710) was branded Spinozist by church authorities and lead to the extremely harsh punishment of imprisonment of its author for 15 years and afterwards, if still alive, banishment from the province for 25 years. This major threat could not stop copies of Wyermars's book (impounded in the Netherlands) being taken to Germany and Sweden, which illustrates how the dynamics of this time represented a major challenge to the authorities and also how communication structures allowed the spread of Enlightenment thinking. The Wyermars' book was described as a major

influence in Germany by the Lutheran theologian Heuman as early as 1716, with key passages translated into German. It was regularly cited as a backbone of Spinozist thought in German publications of the eighteenth century (Israel 2001:327).

Spinoza knew that any victory of the Orangists with their Reformed policy over the States who promoted tolerance would endanger his own position more seriously than ever before. Gregory (1989:19ff) described the struggle between Gomarists (representing an orthodox Calvinist position) and Arminians (Remonstrants). The victory over the Arminians (ending in the execution of Arminius in 1619) and the condemnation of the Remonstrants at the Synod of Dordrecht created a context that was not conducive for Spinozist ideas, although significant groups of political authorities and leaders were tolerant and non-Calvinist in their convictions. The conservative church groups were powerful and even dangerous. Spinoza understood that their power threatened not only his own work, but freedom of expression in general. Within this context he spelt out his thoughts about politics and religion. The basic thrust of the *TTP* is to articulate a commitment to secular, liberal, republican politics as opposed to authoritarian, fundamentalist thought. Thinkers, he argued, should have the freedom to reflect on ideas, free from any religious dogma and interference (cf. Shulman 1995). Spinoza therefore sought to provide the intellectual basis for liberal democracy in which religion and the state were separated (cf. Elazar 1995).

In taking on these powerful authorities, Spinoza was not doing something completely new. He stood firmly in the tradition of such authors like Thomas a Kempis, Grotius, Erasmus and other brave intellectuals who questioned the corruption, greed and power games of religious authorities. Once again, his time and context in general suggested and promoted this type of challenge to authoritarianism and to freedom of expression. Given Spinoza's emphasis on freedom and independence (cf. Piccinini 2004), it is not difficult to recognise an Enlightenment thinker who refused to be told what to think and who did not use authority as a basis for rational thought.

5 CONCLUSION

There can be little doubt that Spinoza's writings radically challenged the conventional Christianity of his time. They solidified the foundation on

which Enlightenment thought was later to be built. His rejection of faith in a personal God, his approach to biblical content as being moralistic rather than revelatory, his emphasis on the human character of the Bible, his work on the critical and historical problems of its text, and especially the way in which he emphasised the primary role of reason in theology and biblical studies, were insights that were incorporated into a comprehensive system of thought that embodies much of what Enlightenment thinking is about.

Within his social setting, Spinoza stands out as someone who understood and represented important trends in the spirit of the age and who was extraordinarily gifted at actually presenting them in such a pointed, articulate manner. His research takes on special nuances of meaning when his context is taken into account: the prosperous Dutch society with its cosmopolitan character and its toleration of immigrants and refugees, with its complex political and religious character in which diverse groups were brought together and religious authorities had extraordinary power. It also takes on special meaning in terms of his remarks about the legitimacy of religion, his perspectives on the value of Christian traditions and his own sober lifestyle. He intensified a movement towards freedom of expression, democratic governance and liberation from religious tyranny with its crude readings of the Bible. The Enlightenment cannot be properly understood without understanding Spinoza, and the debate about the nature and contents of theology and biblical studies will benefit greatly if we engage in a dialogue and confrontation with his writings.

We still have much to gain from reading him – not only in order to discover useful insights, but also to challenge what is problematic in his thinking. There are obviously fundamental issues on which one can dialogue and disagree with him. But we can begin the challenging debate by at least recognising who the main participants should be. A reappraisal of Spinoza is therefore a matter of urgent concern for all those who wish to account with integrity for the history of the Enlightenment and of contemporary theology.

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ENDNOTES

1 This article is the first of a trilogy on Spinoza. In the other two articles to be published elsewhere, his interpretation of the Bible and his views on the link between philosophy and theology will be more specifically investigated. The other contributions complement this orientational essay and will focus more on the contents of Spinoza's thought.

2 Some of the contributions will be discussed below.

3 Zahn (1991:135), for example, points out how, in 1880 during the oration at the unveiling of a Spinoza statue in The Hague, he was hailed as the good messenger of the coming of age of humanity.

4 It is widely known that people like Russell and Einstein greatly admired Spinoza.

5 The only other comparable figure seems to be that of Descartes. For a discussion of the relationship between Descartes and Spinoza, cf Trapnell (1988:32ff.).

6 The recent work of Stewart (2006) extensively documents this intense opposition and hatred.

7 For the influence of such seminal insights as those of Galileo on Spinoza, cf Gross (1995).

8 On the important and formative role of Renaissance thought generally and its influence on the Enlightenment, cf. De Villiers 2002; Bayle 1975; Bentley 1983; Ebels-Hoving 1988; English 1989; Gain 1969; Green 1964; Hulkin 1994 and Shuger 1994.

9 For a discussion of the history of the Latin text, cf Gawlick & Niewöhner (1979:VII-XVII). For this essay this Latin text was consulted, but the English translation cited here is taken from Shirley (1989). The work is abbreviated consistently in this essay as *TTP*.

10 He observes, for example, that the *TTP* is the result of extensive reflection over a long period of time (*TTP* 9:13; Shirley 1989:179).

11 Trapnell (1988:32) refers, for example, to his geometrical procedure that "obscures his thought without tightening his logic, which is less rigorous than he assumes". Israel (2001:499) quotes the observation of Houtteville that Spinoza's thought was *obscur et confus presque par tout*.

12 Cf. the discussion in Israel (2001:451), who does not reflect on the anti-Semitic nature of the language, though. Cf. also his remarks (2001: 645-51) on Wachter. "Most readers interpreted Wachter's *Spinozismus* as a vigorous assault on Spaeth, Judaism, cabbala and Spinozism and warmly applauded" (2001:646).

13 The intellectual climate within Amsterdam was stimulated by the presence of the synagogue, where refugees from Spain and Portugal found a safe haven. In this Jewish context young boys had an unusually good education, not only in matters Biblical, but also in philological and classical material (cf. Stewart 2006; Elazar 1995). Spinoza was educated in this stimulating environment (cf. further below).

14 Scholars (e.g. Stewart 2006) have often pointed out that the excommunication prohibited members of the synagogue from having any social contact with him.

15 He had a strong relationship with nonconformist Christian groups like the Collegiants and the Quakers who emphasised the discovery of truth through inner light (Gregory 1989:7; Israel 2001:204, but esp.341-344). Spinoza lived in Rijnsburg in a house that belonged to the Collegiants. Zahn (1991:58-59) notes that the Collegiants were the best known religious sectarian group in the seventeenth and eighteenth century who promoted the aims of the Enlightenment and tolerance. Their presence in society indicates to what extent it was possible to deviate from the status quo when it came to religion, certainly within a Dutch context. Spinoza was not alone in his association with the Collegiants. Rembrandt was another well known person who upheld contact with Collegiants, illustrating the special link between them and creative thinkers/leaders of that era.

16 It is fascinating to note how personal, national issues played a role in controversies between leading figures in the sixteenth century. Note, in another context, how the Spaniard Stunica, criticizing Erasmus' *Annotations,* "passed Erasmus off as a simple Dutchman, drenched in beer and butter, who obviously could not possess much understanding of classical and biblical literature. More than once he lectured Erasmus on the greatness of Spain, when he seemed to sense in Erasmus a slur on, or at least a lack of appreciation for his native land" (Bentley 1983:198-9).

17 In a letter to Henry Oldenburg in 1665 Spinoza notes that his *TTP* is motivated by his wish to reject the prejudices of theologians that are restricting philosophy. He then wrote that he also wanted to prove that the often repeated smear of common people

that he was an atheist was unfounded. Finally he observed that he wanted to defend freedom of expression, because it was being suppressed by the great power and brutality of the clergy.

18 In recent times some revisionist historiographies have provided valuable insights to address this historiographical gap. Of these the important and carefully researched publication of Israel (2001) provides extensive documentation of and cogent argumentation for the revision.

19 Later on they would actually invite people to move there in advertisements placed in a country like France. Cf. further Bots (1998).

20 Gregory (1989:19) describes the Netherlands as one of the most urbanised countries in Europe.

21 Cf. Israel (1998) for a description of the advanced position of the Netherlands.

22 The tolerance of the Netherlands has been subjected to interesting criticism in several recent essays. Bots (1998), e.g. argued that the tolerance was not a matter of ideology or of Christian consideration, but was deeply rooted in economic considerations.