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Spinoza's Religion

By PETER BERKOWITZ

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BOOKS

Spinoza's Religion

By PETER BERKOWITZ

REBECCA GOLDSTEIN. *Betraying Spinoza: The Renegade Jew Who Gave Us Modernity*. SCHOCKEN BOOKS. 287 PAGES. \$19.95

LATELY, ATHEISTS HAVE gone on a publishing offensive. Although wishing to give the impression that their highbrow books buck the trend, in reality they preach to the converted. For casual and confident disbelief in religious faith is the dominant view at our major newspapers, national TV networks and radio stations, and certainly at our leading universities. However strong faith may be in the heartland, few and far between are the reporters and editors, correspondents and anchors and producers, professors and university administrators who take seriously the idea of a mysterious and commanding God, creator of the heavens and earth, who has formed human beings in His

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image and who demands justice, kindness, and humility from humanity.

Nevertheless, best-selling author Sam Harris in *The End of Faith* and *Letters to a Christian Nation*, distinguished Oxford University biologist Richard Dawkins in *The God Delusion*, and all-star journalist and irrepressible man-of-letters Christopher Hitchens in *God Is Not Great* are mad as hell about the persistence of belief in God, and they don't want to take it anymore. Religion, for them, is the root of a great portion of the evil in the world. They decry faith as certainly false and clearly irrational, sustained today, as ever, by ignorance, obscurantism, credulity, cowardice, and, not least, the sinister skill with which crafty clerics exploit the all-too-human craving for the comforting illusion that the suffering and injustices of this world will be corrected in another. Our sophisticated and outspoken atheists, suffused with anti-theological ire, are, in short, faithful heirs of Voltaire's call — “*Écraser l'infâme!*” — to crush traditional religious belief.

They are also heirs to the progressive Enlightenment belief that freedom and popular government require a secular society. Not all thoughtful defenders of freedom and popular government in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries subscribed to the idea that modern moral and political life must be scrubbed free of religious belief. Madison, Burke, and Tocqueville, to name three of the most illustrious defenders of liberty who dissented from the Voltairean vision, regarded religion as a critical source of the moral beliefs and virtues of character on which freedom and popular government depend. But among the left-

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leaning segment of today's political and intellectual class, the Voltairean view has triumphed. Of course, there are secular Republicans and believing Democrats. But scratch the surface of the opinions of men and women of the left and you will find, more often than not, the conviction that though we are alas obliged to tolerate it, religion — and particularly biblical faith — is at its core intolerant and a menace to liberty and democracy.

Unfortunately, our neo-Voltaireans ill-serve toleration, liberty, and democracy. Nor do they advance the cause of knowledge. Their heavy reliance on scorn, mockery, and ridicule to defeat, once and for all, their self-proclaimed enemy contravenes the commitment to rational argument, grounded in observation and experience, in whose name they would consign religion to the dustbin of history. Moreover, our militant atheists distort or render invisible religious believers' self-understanding. And their polemic deprives of all interest the original arguments in the West, when biblical faith was still a living force in the lives of almost all individuals, about the connections between religion, individual freedom, and popular government. Yet these original arguments suggest that religion, or a certain understanding of religion, is the true ground of tolerant self-government. And shouldn't all reasonable friends of tolerant self-government take an interest in all the arguments that can be made on its behalf?

AMONG THE FIRST and the greatest to argue that religious belief and liberty were mutually reinforcing was Benedictus de Spinoza. Born in 1632 into a prosper-

ous Portuguese Jewish family in Amsterdam, Spinoza showed great promise as a young student of traditional Jewish learning, but in 1655, he was suddenly excommunicated by the Jewish community for “monstrous deeds” and “abominable heresies.” He accepted his fate calmly, Latinized his name from Baruch (which in the original Hebrew means “blessed”), moved to a village outside of Amsterdam, supported himself by grinding lenses (then considered a highly skilled activity), lived a quiet life, found friendship with a small circle of free-thinking Christians, and produced a work, *The Ethics*, published posthumously in 1677, the year of his death, which secured his place among the towering figures in the history of philosophy. It was in his much less well-known book, the *Theological-Political Treatise* — Spinoza published it anonymously in 1670 for fully justified fear of persecution in response to the critique of biblical faith that it put forth — that he argued that toleration and government protection of liberty were imperatives of religion rightly understood.

The *Theological-Political Treatise's* prefatory lines — “Wherein is set forth that freedom of thought and speech not only may, without prejudice to piety and the public peace, be granted; but also may not, without danger to piety and the public peace, be withheld” — will be as disconcerting to well-educated Americans today as they were to most seventeenth-century Europeans. Indeed, the suggestion that liberty of thought and discussion is good and necessary because it protects faith is nearly the opposite of what, from their different perspectives, our secular contemporaries believe and what seven-

teenth-century pious Europeans thought. What religious belief really requires, both groups would agree, is firm religious and political authority, willing submission by the individual and, if not comprehensive agreement on religious doctrine among all members of society, then shared belief in the God of the Bible.

So what to make of Spinoza's contention that religion and liberty are allies? Can it be squared with the repudiation of the belief in miracles and immortality of the soul to which the *Treatise* is devoted, infuriating his seventeenth-century readers and making his name throughout the eighteenth century synonymous with heresy? What, in Spinoza's understanding, is the true expression of piety? What is the proper religious role for ritual, for prayer, for divine law, for the community of believers, for spirituality? And what could have prompted the young German romantic Novalis, at the end of the eighteenth century, to call Spinoza, who had been reviled for more than a hundred years by the established authorities as godless, "the God intoxicated man" — a sentiment seconded in the middle of the nineteenth century by no less a connoisseur of the critique of religion than Nietzsche? In short, identifying the sense in which Spinoza reconciled religion and individual liberty is no small undertaking.

ACCORDING TO SCHOLAR and novelist Rebecca Goldstein, Spinoza's philosophical achievement was inextricably bound up with the Jewish question, or his specific response to the Jewish question. As Goldstein points out in her

remarkable book — part memoir, part intellectual biography, part philosophical analysis, part historical reconstruction, and part theological reflection — the excommunication of Spinoza by his community was not the ordinary sort, which was typically of short duration. Spinoza was subject to the most severe form, which left "no possibility for reconciliation or redemption." It could not but appear to the community to be a stunning reversal of fortune for a young man admired for his brilliance and humility. To the young man himself, whose philosophical writings would prize intellectual freedom as a condition of drawing nearer to, or understanding, God and argue that such understanding was the source of the highest happiness, it proved an indispensable liberation.

Goldstein believes that Spinoza's thinking is highly relevant today. Its relentless naturalism provides philosophical depth to the demand that human conduct be understood without recourse to mysterious and unobservable causes. Its attention to fundamental desires as well as the avenues to their satisfaction and the causes of their frustration advances a psychologically rich theory of the emotions. And, as I've mentioned, its reflections on the true requirements of piety furnish powerful arguments in support of the separation of church and state (before he wrote the *Letter Concerning Toleration*, Goldstein notes, John Locke spent several years in Amsterdam after Spinoza's death in the company of those who had been influenced by his thought). But most important to Goldstein, Spinoza's thinking is highly relevant to the understanding of the dilemmas of Jewish identity in the

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modern world. To bring that relevance into focus, however, Goldstein is convinced that she must betray Spinoza.

The betrayal, in her eyes, consists in understanding his philosophical achievement in a way very different from the way Spinoza himself understood it. Goldstein wishes to discover the man behind the philosophy. Yet in his masterwork, Spinoza sought to overcome the personal, the particular, and the contingent by producing a thoroughly rational account of man, world, and God. His exposition in *The Ethics* is distinguished by the relentlessness with which he purges everything that is not purely logically necessary:

Spinoza's project is metaphysics on a grand scale — the very grandest, in fact. Never had there been quite so ambitious a metaphysical project as Spinoza's. He is audacious in the claims he makes for pure reason. Logic alone, he argues, is sufficient to reveal the very fabric of reality. In fact, logic alone *is* the very fabric of reality. And into this fabric are woven not only the descript facts of what *is*, but the normative facts of what *ought to be*.

Spinoza's book “makes all the claims for reason that have ever been made.” Above all, it purports to show that rational understanding, in Spinoza's rarefied sense, is the good for a human being. Such understanding transforms our emotions and passions, sets us free, and provides “the means of our salvation,” which consists in “unifying with God” through the intellectual love of God.

Such an understanding of happiness is difficult to grasp and quite foreign to

the contemporary sensibility. To assess Spinoza's argument on its behalf requires careful study, and this, as a professional philosopher and veteran university teacher, Goldstein has certainly given it. In this book, however, she keeps philosophical argument amazingly accessible. While celebrating Spinoza's “magnificent reconfiguration of reality” and putting the emphasis on bringing his philosophical ambitions to life, she also highlights *The Ethics'* Achilles heel, noting that it fails on its own terms because it presupposes but does not prove that “all facts have reasons.”

Goldstein calls this the “Presumption of Reason” and argues that it is critical to Spinoza's argument: “There simply cannot be, for Spinoza, the inexplicably given, a fact which is a fact for no other reason than that it is a fact. In other words, no inexplicable dangling threads protrude from the fabric of the universe.” But this supposed fact about the nature of all facts, even if it is a fact, cannot, contrary to Spinoza, be derived from the laws of logic:

The laws of logic are such so that they cannot be logically denied: if you deny them, you end up contradicting yourself. The logical laws therefore stake no claim on how the world is. Their negation describes no possible world. The Presumption of Reason is not like that. It stakes a claim — a reasonable claim, but a claim nevertheless — on what our world is like and that claim may be true or it may not.

In other words, Spinoza's ambition to deduce the true character of man, the

world, and God from mere logic, to produce a rationally complete and satisfactory account of the whole of existence *a priori*, or independent of experience, rests on an assumption that his system of thought cannot prove and which may be, but may well not be, true.

Consequently, the assumption and the system that rests on it remain open to reasonable doubt. This is not always a flaw in philosophical investigations. Lacking strict logical necessity, though, Spinoza's system falls short of its own explicit requirements. And as Maimonides, the greatest philosopher of the Jewish tradition to uphold the authority of Jewish law, points out in *The Guide of the Perplexed* (in identifying the limits of Aristotle's philosophy), such reasonable doubt provides an opening for reasonable belief in God's creation of the world out of nothing, the foundation of all the Bible's teachings about miracles.

Articulation of this fundamental flaw in Spinoza's system, however, merely lays the groundwork for Goldstein's larger goal, which is to discover the deeper and truer source of his philosophizing, the "moral (or immoral) intention" that Nietzsche contended in *Beyond Good and Evil* is the real seed out of which all serious philosophizing grows. It is in searching for this moral intention, Goldstein believes, that she betrays Spinoza, who staked his philosophical system on its self-certifying rationality. And her conclusions about the moral and intellectual sources of Spinoza's system involve not just any old sort of betrayal, but one, she stresses, that is highly paradoxical:

... the language in which the most universal of systems was excogitated — a system designed to bleach out any reference to personal point of view determined by the contingencies of historical narratives — was itself maculate with the extraordinary history of Spinoza's community.

So to understand Spinoza's philosophizing more fully, Goldstein sets out to understand the man. And to understand the man, she undertakes to recover both his struggle to overcome and, in the end, his refusal to close his heart to the Jewish community, forged in blood and fire, that formed him.

IT WAS AS A student in the mid 1960s at an all-girls orthodox Jewish high school on the Lower East Side of New York in a class on Jewish history that Goldstein "first heard the name of Baruch Spinoza." When she did, she heard it "uttered as an admonition, a cautionary tale of unbridled human intelligence blindly seeking its own doom." Mrs. Schoenfeld, her severe but compelling teacher, explained that Spinoza was the child of Marranos, Spanish Jews forced by the Inquisition to convert to Christianity, who nevertheless continued to practice Judaism in secret despite the death that surely would ensue were the authorities to suspect them of obeying the Torah, or Jewish law. Eventually, Spinoza's family made its way from Portugal to tolerant Amsterdam. But instead of displaying gratitude for the security and freedom to be a Jew that his family's many sacrifices over many generations had made possible, Spinoza, according to Mrs.

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Schoenfeld, became a renegade, a heretic, an atheist, “a monster of arrogance,” the first modern and enlightened Jew who rebelled against Jewish faith in order to live entirely by the light of his own intellect. Yet what did Spinoza get for his rebellion, Mrs. Schoenfeld asked indignantly. In the end, she explained to the rapt

Spinoza exercised a crucial Jewish virtue: respect for his parents. He was careful to observe the year-long ritual of mourning for his father before provoking the community to banish him.

Goldstein and her classmates, his philosophy amounted to nothing more than the belief that the Torah is a human creation, that God is identical with nature, that pleasure is the good, and that there is no world to come.

But her teacher’s warnings only intrigued the young Goldstein. Wasn’t identifying God with nature an awfully roundabout way of denying God’s existence? If Spinoza meant to overthrow morality, why did he take the trouble to write a book called *The Ethics*? And, after the passage of almost 500 years, were Jews still forbidden to read his writings?

Then Mrs. Schoenfeld made a concession that touched Goldstein’s young heart and planted a seed in her pre-

vious mind. Despite his godlessness, Mrs. Schoenfeld noted, Spinoza exercised a crucial Jewish virtue: respect for his parents. His mother died when he was a child. And both his father and stepmother died when he was a young man. But Spinoza was careful to observe the year-long ritual of mourning for his father before provoking the community to banish him. Such is the importance that the Jewish tradition attaches to respect for parents and “a household free from resentment, rancor, discord” that even an outstanding scholar and rabbi would sacrifice his study to preserve peace and order in his family. In this crucial respect, Goldstein’s teacher allowed, Spinoza acted as a good Jew.

With this revelation, Goldstein felt as if she “suddenly knew” Spinoza: “Though he was a man who had given himself over entirely to the search after truth — I knew this instinctively — still he would not speak the truth so long as doing so might hurt those whom he loved.” And such a man would not have left Judaism out of arrogance: “An arrogant person would not have shown such heightened consideration for others’ sensibility.” It was only much later, after her graduate studies in analytic philosophy and after teaching *The Ethics* for many years to college students, that Goldstein came to see that her high school teacher was also wrong to insist that Spinoza’s philosophy, written, as Mrs. Schoenfeld would have said, in the language of modern disbelief, revealed nothing of the spirit of Judaism.

But how does a philosophical system which teaches that as we become rational beings we transcend our personal identity and that immortality is

achieved by understanding through the exercise of pure reason, “the infinite web of necessary connections” that “can be conceived alternatively as God or nature,” reflect a distinctively Jewish identity? Or, in plain language, how does the ambition to overcome the particulars of any and all faiths give expression to the Jewish spirit? The answer, according to Goldstein, requires a historical and theological inquiry.

THE SEVENTEENTH-century Portuguese Jewish community in Amsterdam into which Spinoza was born was profoundly shaped by its experience on the Iberian Peninsula stretching back more than five centuries. Particularly under the Muslim rule of the eleventh and twelfth centuries, the community flourished during what came to be known as the Golden Age of Spanish Jewry. It produced outstanding philosophical reflection, religious poetry, and mystical speculation. Jews prospered in commercial and diplomatic life and in the science and the arts. And they retained their own culture while drawing from and contributing to the surrounding Muslim culture.

This Golden Age was brought to an end by the Christian reconquest of Spain in the thirteenth century, which also brought the Inquisition that was to last 350 years. While the first mass burning of Jews took place in 1288, the Inquisition did not reach its full ferocity until the relentless Tomas de Torquemada was appointed inquisitor-general in 1483. Then, early in 1492, Ferdinand and Isabella, having at last expelled the Muslims, ordered Jews either to convert or to emigrate. Some

left Spain, but most chose to convert. By fall 1492, Spain was officially free of its Jews. Spinoza’s family descended from Marranos, those Jews who had stayed and conformed outwardly to Christian faith but sought inwardly to preserve their Jewishness. Marranos feared discovery by the authorities, while steadily forgetting over the next century the texture of the religion to which they risked their lives to cling.

By the early part of the seventeenth century, opportunity beckoned in Amsterdam. Those Jewish families that had struggled to keep their Judaism alive for so long at such high cost took advantage of the freedom and toleration they found there to recover what had been lost. Their recovery took a variety of forms. Some embraced the law with fervor and found in its rigor and comprehensiveness a spiritual vocation. Others, with equal fervor, devoted themselves to messianism and mysticism. Still others embraced Christianity. Spinoza took yet another route. According to Goldstein, he fashioned or discovered “something rather new under the seventeenth century’s European skies: a religion of reason.” But what he fashioned or discovered was in response to a shared experience and a shared opportunity. The experience was the trauma of Jewish suffering for its ancient faith. The opportunity was to pursue without fear of death or repression the ancient Jewish quest to find redemption in the world.

Spinoza’s religion of reason, as Goldstein evokes it, seeks to provide man with the only form of redemption which is truly available. It

asks us to do something that is far more difficult for us than the most

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severe practices of asceticism. It asks us to be reasonable. It asks us to look at ourselves with unblinking objectivity. It asks us to subdue our natural inclinations toward self-aggrandizement, our attempts to shore up our dreadful fragility by fictions of a God who favors us because we were born — thank God! — into the right group, or have gone through the nuisance of converting to it. And it asks us, as well, to face squarely the terror of our own mortality.

In Spinoza's religion of reason Goldstein sees not only a response to the Marranos' wrenching history but a reworking of their spiritual experience. Salvation for the Marranos consisted in "inner acknowledgment" of the "outwardly unperformable" commandments of Jewish law. So too Spinoza's religion of reason called for the individual's inner acknowledgement, which took primacy over any outward conduct, of the rational necessity that governs the world.

Despite his uncompromising philosophical repudiation of the merely contingent, "the false fire cast by our finitude," Spinoza never forgot his particular Jewish origins. Goldstein tells of a young former student who converted to Catholicism and, in 1675, wrote to his teacher to berate him for failing to appreciate that the testimony of Christian believers and martyrs stretching back to the time of Jesus vindicated the claims of Christian faith. Rather than observe that such testimony was inconclusive, the ailing Spinoza instead evoked the "heroic martyrdom" of loyal Jews who preferred death to letting go of the Torah:

But their chief boast is, that they count a far greater number of martyrs than any other nation, a number which is daily increased by those who suffer with singular constancy for the faith they profess; nor is their boasting false. I myself knew among others of a certain Judah called the faithful, who in the midst of the flames, when he was already thought to be dead, lifted his voice to sing the hymn beginning, "To Thee, O God, I offer up my soul," and so singing perished.

Even the *Theological-Political Treatise*, as Goldstein points out (and as Leo Strauss argued 45 years before), can be seen as an act of Jewish fidelity. Although the *Treatise* trades on common Christian anti-Jewish prejudices, it does so to gain the trust of Christians whom it is primarily addressing in the attempt to convince them of the reasonableness and piety of a tolerant society that would necessarily grant security and freedom to Jews as well as Christians.

GOLDSTEIN DOES NOT solve the riddle of Spinoza. It is still fair to say at the end of her book what she says at the beginning: that Spinoza, whose name derives from the Portuguese word for thorn, "strangely suits" because "Spinoza, as a Jew, presents himself to us adorned in a crown of eternally thorny questions." And yet she has burnished and brightened the crown, giving the eternally thorny questions Spinoza's philosophy and life raise a new luster and urgency.

It is not only for this reason that, in declaring her book a betrayal of

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Spinoza, she is too hard on herself. Indeed, Goldstein's book is, in a deeper sense, an expression of loyalty to the man and his philosophizing. For deeper than Spinoza's rarefied rationalism, as she had already intuited in high school, was his courageous commitment to the truth. If his relentless rationalism led him into error, to a misunderstanding of man, the world, and God, then, in the name of the search for truth to which he devoted his life, his systematizing rationalism would need, on his own most fundamental terms, to give way. For the love of truth in Spinoza runs deeper than the "Presumption of Reason." Or at least so suggests Nietzsche, an authority on such matters. Although declaring the will to a system a will to stupidity, Nietzsche nevertheless discerned in Spinoza a comrade-in-arms, a fellow seeker, a genuine philosopher who placed the demands of intellectual integrity ahead of the defense of any particular answers. Goldstein vindicates Spinoza's love of truth through her intrepid search for the moral intention out of which his system-building arose.

Never purporting to know more about faith or reason than that to which she is entitled by her argument and evidence, Goldstein enlarges our understanding of Spinoza and the varieties of Jewish faith. Without offering an ultimate judgment about his philosophical achievement or drawing final conclusions about the status of traditional Jewish claims, she manages to uncover passions and interests latent in Spinoza's inner life and reflected in his outward doctrine. She reads Spinoza differently than he would have wanted to be read but with a driving desire to understand that he would have very

much admired. This is in contrast to our contemporary publicists for atheism. They put forward a critique of religion that renders the world smaller and narrower based on claims to knowledge that far exceed their evidence and argument. They do not respect either the varieties or the limits of human understanding. They are the ones betraying Spinoza.

