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## The Significance of Spinoza's God for Christianity\*

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- I. Spinoza's Thought: Strengths and Concerns
- II. Spinoza's God and Theology
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Spinoza's philosophy represents a major turning-point in the history of thinking about God.<sup>1</sup> But what sort of God was Spinoza putting forward? Why has Spinoza's idea of God provoked so many debates and contradictory reactions over the centuries? Is his conception simply a negation of the God of Christian revelation? Or does it have something to say to Christian theology? The answer is complex; it requires first of all a clear understanding of Spinoza's position.

Spinoza (1632-1677) was born in Amsterdam, amongst the com-

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<sup>1</sup> The Spinoza bibliography is abundant. For example, on this issue: Richard Mason, *The God of Spinoza: A Philosophical Study* (Cambridge University Press, 1997).

munity of Portuguese Jews who had been forced to leave the Iberian Peninsula following the expulsion orders of 1492.<sup>2</sup> In this large community, he received the standard education given to every young Jewish male. Although singled out early as a promising scholar, he was excluded from the synagogue in 1656 by a process corresponding to an excommunication (the *herem*). The reason is not very clear: Spinoza was only 24 years old and he had not yet published anything. However, we can suppose he had already expressed positions that were incompatible with Jewish orthodoxy. In short, he accepted this decision, did not seek any compromise with the synagogue, and left his home environment in order to live and think in freedom. Nevertheless, his origins, his formation, and his knowledge of the Scriptures left their mark on him.

At that time, the city of Amsterdam was experiencing intense religious activity. Calvinism was the dominant Christian denomination, but there were other more marginal groups, at varying levels of affiliation or conflict with the established Church, such as the Mennonites (from the Anabaptist movement), and the Arminians (or ‘Remonstrants’). Spinoza frequented these groups; he had many friends among them; and it was with them that he exchanged and discussed his ideas. His correspondence shows that his links with many of them were close. In these circles he found an anti-dogmatic tendency, a critical attitude towards authority, an emphasis on tolerance, good morality, and Scripture.

Spinoza, having neither apostatized nor made any claim to be a Christian, should not be regarded as some kind of implicit Christian. Nonetheless, and as his correspondence suggests, he had many close

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<sup>2</sup> On the life of Spinoza, see Steven Nadler, *Spinoza: A Life* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

friends among diverse Christian groups, including those on the margins. He also got to know some significant theological works — we find in his library Calvin's *Institutes of the Christian Religion*. He read the writings of the New Testament, especially the Gospel of John and the letters of Paul. In 1670 he published anonymously his *Theological-Political Treatise* (TTP<sup>3</sup>), the only important work published during his lifetime. He still needed to be cautious, because his positions were potentially offensive to both the civil and religious authorities. Nevertheless, his identity was quickly recognized and the treatise prohibited in 1674. As for his other works, published very soon after his death in 1677, they too were banned in 1678.<sup>4</sup>

Despite these prohibitions, the *Theological-Political Treatise* and the *Ethics* were fairly widely disseminated. However, it was chiefly through Pierre Bayle's *Historical and Critical Dictionary* (1696) that Spinoza came to be known. The longest article in this Encyclopedia is devoted to Spinoza. That alone says something about the importance Bayle attributes to Spinoza. But it was Bayle's version of Spinoza that shaped Spinoza's subsequent reputation as "a systematic atheist who employed a totally new method (*un athée de système, et d'une méthode toute nouvelle*), though the basis of his theory was the same as that of several other ancient and modern philosophers, both European and Oriental." "We call all those who have hardly any religion and hardly bother to hide from it Spinozists"; as for the TTP, it is "a pernicious and detestable book in which he slips in all the seeds of

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<sup>3</sup> TTP: abbreviation for *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus*.

<sup>4</sup> The edition of the *Opera Posthuma* contained an introduction by friends of Spinoza, Jarig Jellesz and Lodewijk Meyer, who insisted on the compatibility of Spinozist positions with Christianity. The intention was obviously to promote the edition, but the tone at the same time testifies to the close links that Spinoza had with his Christian interlocutors.

atheism that were plainly revealed in his *Opera posthuma*.<sup>5</sup> The judgment is radical, and it is not surprising that Spinoza was considered for much of the 18<sup>th</sup> century as an atheist and an enemy of religion. Later, however, the image evolved, particularly in German Romanticism (with Goethe), to the point that some would consider him ‘mystical’ and Novalis would speak of him as a “God-intoxicated man.”

The contrast is paradoxical, but reveals something distinctive.<sup>6</sup> The contradictions indicate how Spinoza’s thought is marked by a tension between criticism and affirmation of God. He does not stay within the standard, well-trodden paths. The spinozist approach remains difficult for Christianity; at the same time, it has something to say to us if we are prepared to make an effort of interpretation. This means, however, that we have to explore closely the actual texts of *Ethics* and TTP.

## I. Spinoza’s Thought: Strengths and Concerns

### 1. God in the *Ethics*

The *Ethics*, “demonstrated in geometrical order,” consists of five parts. The first part is called *De Deo*. It is worth noticing that the question of God comes *at the beginning* of Spinoza’s philosophy, whereas Descartes in his *Meditations on First Philosophy* starts with the sub-

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<sup>5</sup> Pierre Bayle, *Historical and Critical Dictionary*, trans. Richard H. Popkin (Indianapolis: Bobbs Merrill, 1965), 288, 301 (translation altered), 291.

<sup>6</sup> Cf. Jonathan Israel, *Radical Enlightenment: Philosophy and the Making of Modernity, 1650-1750* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).

ject. Spinoza starts from God. Admittedly, the discussion of God is not intended as a treatise on metaphysics but an account of ethics: a presentation of how, in history, liberty is possible. Even so, the *Ethics* begins with a series of conceptually rigorous definitions that highlight, almost solemnly, the fundamental role of the affirmation of God.

*Causa sui*: “By cause of itself I understand that whose essence involves existence, or that whose nature cannot be conceived except as existing.”<sup>7</sup> The definition comes abruptly and makes no sense if we are thinking about God in terms of efficient causality and how effects imply a previously given cause. But, here the idea of God is supremely positive. God is the one whose *raison d'être* lies within himself; he is his own cause. He is his own ‘*raison d'être*’ and knows himself; he is his own source, the self-affirmation of himself. The ontological argument is surely in the background, as it is in Descartes’ fifth *Meditation*. But for Spinoza, unlike for Descartes, the point of talking about *causa sui* is not to affirm the incomprehensibility of God. On the contrary, *causa sui* has richly positive overtones and is not an attempt to obscure the presence of God. Something of great value is being evoked. The idea of *causa sui* is positive, connoting a dynamic without limitation.

*Substance*: “By substance I understand what is in itself and is conceived through itself, i.e., that whose concept does not require the concept of another thing, from which it must be formed” (definition 3). The two noun clauses at the beginning here indicate both a real (“what is in itself”) and a logical (“conceived through itself”) independence. Substance is therefore a “thing” — in a provisional sense as yet neu-

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<sup>7</sup> *Ethics* I (E), definition 1. The translations of the *Ethics* are those of Edwin Curley, *The Collected Works of Spinoza*, Volume I (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985). I sometimes modify them slightly.

tral or indeterminate — which is absolutely self-sufficient. Nothing else is required for it to exist and to be conceived of. It is unique. It follows that substance can be attributed only to God, not to finite being. Indeed, “this concept is the most general and the most abstract in the whole of the *Ethics*, but it means something absolutely primary: the reality of being, of being absolutely. This notion comes in the first part of the *Ethics*; later it disappears,<sup>8</sup> or rather it becomes the concept of God.

*Attribute*: “By attribute I understand what the intellect perceives of a substance, as constituting its essence” (def. 4). The definition of “attribute” and its relationship to substance is undoubtedly one of the most difficult aspects of Spinozism. What needs to be recognised is that attributes exist of themselves. When the understanding apprehends a substance, it is not in any sense reconstructing or deducing it. The understanding apprehends substance as it is, precisely in and through the attributes that constitute it. Attributes are thus not something external to substance; they are its very reality. There is no relation of priority between substance and attributes: this would imply dissociation, inequality, hierarchical subordination. There is rather a real identity of the substance and its attributes. Substance and attributes are equally real. But it is through the attribute that we know the substance; the attribute expresses the substance, it makes us understand what the substance necessarily is, in itself. The understanding knows the attributes as they are in themselves, and therefore the substance as it is. Thus for Spinoza, unlike for Descartes, God is not incomprehensible.

*Mode*: “By mode I understand the affections of a substance, or that which is in another through which it is also conceived” (def. 5). Mode

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<sup>8</sup> With a few exceptions in the second part.

is therefore contrasted with substance (*in alio/in se; per quod/per se*). All beings of this world, all finite realities (ideas, bodies [...]), are thus finite modes. They differ from substance in that their existence does not follow from their essence. But they continuously depend on substance.

*God:* It is after having presented these different notions that Spinoza then puts forward his definition of God: "By God I understand a being absolutely infinite, i.e. a substance consisting of an infinity of attributes, of which each one expresses an eternal and infinite essence" (def. 6). God is nothing other than substance, that is, the totality and infinity of attributes, or forms of being. Of these attributes we know only two: *thought* and *extension*.<sup>9</sup> God is neither one nor the other of these alone, since he is an infinity of infinite attributes. Yet, when we know him through one of his attributes, it is truly him that we know, even if we do not know him fully. All this is developed further in the first part of the *Ethics*. After this definition, the first mention of God comes in proposition 11: "God, or a substance constituting of infinite attributes, each of which expresses eternal and infinite essence, necessarily exists." What is shown here is not only that God exists, but that he *necessarily* exists; the affirmation of his existence is thus full and absolute.

These definitions, which are certainly complex, mark a radical break in our way of thinking about God. We can see this if we start from the notion of *expression*, strongly highlighted in the definitions.<sup>10</sup> Thus, substance is *expressed* in attributes that then *express* themselves in modes in an infinite number of ways; in other words,

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<sup>9</sup> E II, propositions 1 and 2.

<sup>10</sup> Cf. Gilles Deleuze, *Spinoza et le problème de l'expression* (Paris: Editions de Minuit, 1968).

“Whatever exists expresses the nature or essence of God in a certain and determinate mode, i.e. whatever exists expresses in a certain and determinate mode the power of God, which is the cause of all things. So some effect must follow.”<sup>11</sup> All this marks a double break with previous conceptions.

Firstly, Spinoza is breaking with the idea of emanation (emanationism). One might be tempted to think that his three notions of substance, attribute, and mode correspond to the three levels of reality found in the well-known model of Plotinus and Neoplatonism. In this school of thought, there is an origin, a Principle (the One, God) that allows, without willing it, a part of its capacity of being to overflow; from the Principle other beings are born, “as a light is diffused” says Plotinus. But here, between the Principle and the other beings, there is a hierarchy of beings. By contrast, for Spinoza there is no hierarchy; the beings are not at some lower level, nor do they desire to return to the origin. We are dealing, rather, with one single being, of which all the other beings are merely modifications. The unique substance expresses itself and develops itself in an infinity of attributes that are not other to itself; rather, the substance remains itself, the substance itself continues to be, in all that follows from it. The relationship between God and the modes is one of immanence or presence, not, as in emanationism, one of distance.<sup>12</sup>

Secondly, Spinoza is breaking with the idea of creation. According to the model developed in Christian theology, and which is found also in Descartes, God makes things exist outside himself that are not himself. This creation happens through an act of his will. But for Spinoza, the attributes, and the modes that unfold from them, do not

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<sup>11</sup> E I, prop. 36, demonstration.

<sup>12</sup> E I, prop. 18: “God is the immanent, not the transitive, cause of all things.”



belong to a created reality distinct from God. The very idea of creation is unintelligible, since everything is God. God does not create; God produces, and he is what he produces in such a way that everything is God. Substance is not something transcending its modes; substance rather is their unity or their perpetual becoming. This reasoning implies that God is not a personal God in the sense imagined by theology. One central proposition of Spinoza's runs: "From the necessity of the divine nature there must follow infinitely many things in infinitely many modes" (i.e. everything which can fall under an infinite intellect).<sup>13</sup> The reality expressed in God is the deployment of an infinity of consequences in an infinity of manners. Nothing is outside God; what exists is not bound up with divine self-projection in the way human beings might imagine. When Spinoza speaks of "*natura naturans*" to designate substance and "*natura naturata*"<sup>14</sup> to designate the modes of attributes, he is not subtly reintroducing the idea of creation. The non-standard verb *naturare* indicates all that gives power to nature. Nature, substance — and all that it holds together — is dynamic. The reality is properly expressed by a verbal form — "naturing" — rather than a noun. Origin and effect are held together in the permanent development of their unity. In God, being, existence and acting are one.

At the end of this brief presentation of Spinozist terms, the rupture with the Christian conception of God is clear. Nevertheless, one can also sense that this forceful understanding of God's presence might have some overlap with Christian language. The extent and condition of this intersection would obviously need to be explored. Three questions are worth asking.

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<sup>13</sup> E I, prop. 16.

<sup>14</sup> E I, prop. 29, scholium.

1) In such a system, is the power of God denied? To address this, we need to establish our concepts. Latin — like the modern Romance languages that descend from it — has two terms: “*potentia*” — the power to be in general; and “*potestas*,” the power of an authority, for example that of a king. However, God cannot be conceived according to the anthropocentric model of an earthly personal authority. God’s nature, rather, is his *potentia*: the *potentia* which is an infinite capacity of production. Everything that is expresses God’s *potentia*. Everything, every finite mode, is alive, and this life is God. Life is “the force through which things persevere in their being.”<sup>15</sup> Things have a movement within them (a force), and that movement is God. Thus, there are two ways of knowing God. Knowledge in the true sense comes about through understanding, and that is the task of philosophy; the other knowledge is a matter of imagination and occurs especially in religion. The first one evokes God’s *potentia*; the second evokes his *potestas*, and as such lacks the rigour of the truth. Spinoza is not denying God’s power; he is simply insisting that it must not be conceived along the lines that human beings imagine it. Talk of God is thus possible — but the language is strictly philosophical. This talk obviously does not correspond to that of a personal God.

2) Is Spinoza a pantheist? The question is always asked about Spinoza; all the more justifiably so, since the fourth part of the *Ethics* contains these famous formulations: “Nature does nothing on account of an end. That eternal and infinite being we call God, or Nature, acts from the same necessity from which he exists.”<sup>16</sup> The identity of God

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<sup>15</sup> *Cogitata Metaphysica* II, 6.

<sup>16</sup> E IV, preface.

and Nature is clearly affirmed, in a way that evidently poses a problem for the conception of a creator God. But Spinoza is not reducing Nature to matter.<sup>17</sup> At this point of his doctrine, Spinoza is aware that a conflict with Christianity is inevitable, but he does not believe that the theory of God's immanent causality contradicts Christian doctrine. Thus, to support his thesis, he invokes St Paul, according to whom "all things are and move in God."<sup>18</sup> True, if we define pantheism as a doctrine of the immanence of the original principle, or of absolute necessitarianism, or of the perfect intelligibility of reality, Spinoza is a pantheist. But the deification of Nature or the nature mysticism generally marking the romantic forms of pantheism are absent in Spinoza. Spinoza's thought should not be interpreted in terms of our pre-existing categories, or as if he was using his key words in what we regard as conventional senses. He is doing something different which is his originality and what makes it worth asking whether he has something specific to say.

3) Is Spinoza an atheist? This question is linked to the previous one and, likewise, requires us to clarify our terms, especially since it is difficult to appreciate what atheism meant in different historical periods.<sup>19</sup> The debates here have been long, complex, and may never be settleable. Nevertheless, it is important to make two observations. Firstly, Spinoza himself disclaims the title of atheist<sup>20</sup>: the atheist is

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<sup>17</sup> Letter 73: "Nevertheless, some people think the TTP rests on the assumption that God is one and the same as Nature (by which they understand a certain mass, or corporeal matter). This is a complete mistake." Edit. and trans. Edwin Curley, *The Collected Works of Spinoza*, Volume II (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016), 467.

<sup>18</sup> *The Collected Works of Spinoza*.

<sup>19</sup> Pierre-François Moreau, *Problèmes du spinozisme* (Paris: Vrin, 2006), 51-62.

<sup>20</sup> Letter 30.

the epitome of immorality, a subversive and anti-institutional figure (the “libertine”), and Spinoza can only deny that he fits such descriptions. Secondly, there is a fundamental, speculative reason for denying that Spinoza is an atheist: the central presence of God in his philosophy. Admittedly, he identifies God with Nature. Spinoza might then well have spoken only of Nature — in the way that some commentators on his work have no hesitation in doing. But Spinoza talks of God, explicitly, and the first part of the *Ethics* is called “*De Deo*.” Moreover, the fifth and final part is marked by an experience of God referred to as “God’s intellectual love.” Here we find also the following proposition that takes up the language of part 1 and gives it a new tone: “The more we understand singular things, the more we understand God.”<sup>21</sup> If God is present in all things and if he can be the object of a knowledge that is also a love, he has not been eliminated.

At the end of this first part, then, we can get some sense of the force and complexity of Spinoza’s approach. Spinoza, indeed, speaks of a God, but without the specific characteristics of the Judeo-Christian revelation. Yet at the same time, Spinoza develops his concept of God with a rigour that also shows great respect. Spinoza’s God is not to be understood only on the basis of definitions and speculative propositions. This God evokes, or seems to evoke, an experience. The notions associated with him at the end of the *Ethics* are love, wisdom, salvation, vision (*scientia intuitiva*), and eternity, as we will see below. Of course, Spinoza understands all these notions in a distinctive way. That is why his formulations have scandalized some because of what appears to be atheism, and seduced others because they seem so spiritual. But at any rate, we are not dealing with the kind of positivist

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<sup>21</sup> E V, prop. 24.

materialism particularly common in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. What we are dealing with in Spinoza is a renewal of the ways of thinking about God. And this raises the question of how Spinoza's thought relates to actual religion.

## 2. Spinoza's Critical but Respectful Attitude to Religion

The *Theological-political Treatise* puts forward a very strong critique of religions, particularly of the Christian religion. Three passages are particularly significant in this regard.<sup>22</sup>

1) The preface to the *Treatise*. The critique here starts from an anthropological and socio-political analysis of human behaviour. Human beings are exposed to "fortune," to uncertainty, and to fear of what might happen to them. Ready to believe anything in which they will find hope, they seek signs that will reassure them; they indulge in the interpretation of all kinds of omens. Influenced by the interpretation of nature that their fevered imagination proposes, they are ready to appease the divinities by religious practices (sacrifices, prayers [...]). They are in a state of superstition: "all the things they have ever worshipped in illusory religion have been nothing but apparitions, the delusions of a sad and fearful mind."<sup>23</sup> The consequences of this attitude condition the exercise of power: the authorities, whether political or religious, take advantage of the fear of the masses to establish and exercise their power. They impose particular ways of behaving by pre-

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<sup>22</sup> For an in-depth analysis of the question of religion in Spinoza, see my *Imagination et religion chez Spinoza* (Paris: Vrin, 1993).

<sup>23</sup> TTP, Preface, in *The Collected Works of Spinoza*, Volume II, edit. and trans. Edwin Curley (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016), 67.

venting freedom of thought. The judgment is sharply critical, and it is not surprising that the *Treatise* was quickly banned:

I've often wondered that men who boast that they profess the Christian religion — i.e., love, gladness, peace, restraint and good faith toward all — would contend so unfairly against one another, and indulge daily in the bitterest hatred toward one another, so that each man's faith is known more easily from his hatred and contentiousness than from his love, gladness, etc. Long ago things reached the point where you can hardly know what anyone is, whether Christian, Turk, Jew, or Pagan, except by the exterior dress and adornment of his body, or because he frequents this or that Place of Worship, or because he's attached to this or that opinion, or because he's accustomed to swear by the words of some master. They all lead the same kind of life.<sup>24</sup>

2) The critique of miracles. People give the title “miracles” to events that they cannot explain by natural causes, or where they can no longer put together the sequence of events that led to them. What seems unusual they thus attribute to a divine act of will. The critique here is fully in line with what we have already seen of Spinoza's God. If God is nature, nature and God cannot be conceived as two numerically distinct powers; that would be inconsistent. Common opinion is therefore mistaken about the nature of God, and this “metaphysical” or “religious” error has political consequences. At many points in the biblical narratives, the Hebrew people claim superiority over the other nations on the pretext of God's preference for them. The doctrine of election, strongly rejected by Spinoza, represents a perfect illustration

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<sup>24</sup> *The Collected Works of Spinoza*, 70.

of this.<sup>25</sup> The critique applies also to the miracles of the New Testament, which appeal to human passions in contravention of rational knowledge of the facts.

3) The discussion of the Scriptures.<sup>26</sup> On this point too, Spinoza criticizes the power of authorities. They claim to say what the text means, but the claim is arbitrary, and serves their own interests. This critique is of a piece with that in the preface to the *Treatise*. If we want to establish the freedom to think about God and honour him in a way that respects everyone, we must confront superstition and refute the prejudices that result from it, because these have destructive effects on the body of civil society. The question was particularly typical in the 17<sup>th</sup> century. Religious quarrels threatened civil peace; conversely, the Churches could not convince people except by controlling the State, either directly, or by else by imposing rules and morals derived from their dogmas. In both cases, they claimed biblical authority for doing so. It follows that anyone wanting to preserve civil cohesion needs to ask what Scripture really teaches. This need was what led Spinoza to develop a new method of interpreting Scripture, one that sought the meaning of the texts in terms of their history. But this new method, which prefigured the historical-critical method in modern exegesis, inevitably provoked objections from various authorities.

Spinoza's critique of religion is certainly radical. But the target is principally religion practised and understood as superstition: behaviours that enslave people by exploiting their emotions and vulnerabilities. Critique as such is not the main aim of the *Treatise*. The *Treatise* seeks to defend freedom of thought, and therefore also freedom of

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<sup>25</sup> TTP III.

<sup>26</sup> Particularly in TTP VII.

belief, by regulating the relations of Churches and States. Spinoza developed a new method of interpreting the Scriptures in order to determine their true meaning and to reveal what they really say. This methodology implied discarding what in fact they do not say but what some claim that they say. Spinoza's rules enable everyone to access the meaning of the texts in a defensible way. Believers can thus approach their foundational texts in freedom. The reading of the texts becomes an enterprise open to all, something shared, and therefore something democratic.

The meaning of Scripture then becomes clearly apparent. The two Testaments are a lesson in obedience to God; they ask us to practise *justice* and *charity*, the attributes of God pointed out by the prophets. Spinoza may use the word "theologians" always in a negative sense, referring to passion-driven behaviours that exploit human superstition, but he never disparages "theology" itself. "Theology" refers to the ethical core of religion, the encouragement to do good, which is the very content of Scripture. Theology's teachings converge with those of reason because they pursue the same goal: justice and charity towards all. They may labour under the weakness of coming from an external law, whereas the teachings of reason come from the mind itself, but theology leads to the same practical behaviours.

Spinoza therefore shows great respect for religion: it is a way of salvation for the masses, for those who do not have access to the wisdom lessons of philosophy.<sup>27</sup> He particularly uses the writings of St John to emphasize the love of God and neighbour. And Christ, far

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<sup>27</sup> "Everyone, without exception, can obey. But only a very few (compared with the whole human race) acquire a habit of virtue from the guidance of reason alone. So, if we didn't have this testimony of Scripture, we would doubt nearly everyone's salvation." TTP XV, 468.



from being criticized, has a particularly important status. Of course, he is not the Son of God — the idea of the incarnation has no meaning in this philosophy of immanence.<sup>28</sup> Christ is, nevertheless, a unique historical figure, the wise man *par excellence*, exemplary in the holiness of his life and death. And more speculatively, he can be understood as the spirit of God, a model of the rationality that can express itself in any human being. While, for him, the resurrection is impossible, Spinoza speaks of the doctrine with extreme respect, in terms that purport to express its deepest meaning:

I conclude, then, that the resurrection of Christ from the dead was really spiritual, and was revealed only to the faithful, according their power of understanding, that is, that Christ was endowed with eternity, and that he rose from the dead (here I understand 'dead' in the same sense in which Christ said, 'let the dead bury the dead'), and at the same time that he gave, by his life and death, an example of singular holiness.<sup>29</sup>

All this might make it seem very difficult to see the slightest connection between the God of Spinoza and the God of Christians. For Spinoza, God is infinite substance, the unity of all that is; he is neither personal, nor creator, nor transcendent, nor present in history. Christ is the wise man *par excellence*, exemplary in every respect, but he is not God. The biblical narratives are largely shaped by human imagination, guided by a teleological and anthropomorphic conception of the universe. Religions are characterized by violence, serving the interests of the authorities who administer them; and they create division. The Christian religion is no exception to this pattern. It is therefore not surprising that Spinoza's philosophy was rejected as atheism and pan-

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<sup>28</sup> Letter 73, in *The Collected Works*, Vol. II, 281-282.

<sup>29</sup> Letter 75, 472.

theism, and that no-one tried to read his writings in different terms. Yet, it is important to understand Spinoza carefully. For him, God is infinite. He is not a human projection. He can be known and loved, with an “intellectual love,” and he can lead us into an experience of eternity within time itself. Christ may not be God, but his message is of the utmost importance for the salvation of humanity. Bible stories are subject to critique because of the false conceptions of God they encourage, and because of the violent ways in which they have been used. Spinoza, however, holds that they should also be analysed carefully, so that we can identify the ethical core of their message. The same is true of religions, which can be authentic ways of salvation. This contribution is considerable and makes it worth our while to ask about the relevance of Spinoza for Christian theology today.

## II. Spinoza’s God and Theology

Spinoza’s philosophy should be understood according to its own logic. There is no point in trying to find points of convergence with theological statements, or to show how it might support positions within dogmatic theology. His idea of God is original and suggestive; it is this that might be creative for theology. By contrast, it may be worth exploring its general significance, because it is this which can be inspiring. This will not be easy — but Spinoza’s work, for all that it seems foreign to Christianity, is attractive, commands respect, and invites us to explore its resources. Thus, the young Fr. Henri de Lubac (1896-1991), who was to become one of the greatest theologians of the twentieth century and a cardinal of the Church, wrote to a fellow

student as early as 1925<sup>30</sup>: “Work on him a lot [Spinoza]: he is the most important of all; he and Kant, but him first of all — I am more and more convinced that they are the two men to know. I say ‘him first’ because I believe that his influence was really much more extensive and profound, as well as more harmful. He is the great man and the main founder, whether or not we are aware of it, of ‘modern thought’ and ‘free thought’.” And again, about the TTP: “It is the breviary of naturalism and rationalism.” Spinoza is important because he is dangerous: he must therefore be refuted; but he is dangerous because his arguments form a coherent whole. And this coherence can be appreciated in a more positive way. What can we learn from it?

### 1. The Depth of Spinoza's Affirmation of God

God is “at the beginning” of Spinoza's philosophy, as we have seen. But we must recognise that the definitions of *causa sui* and of substance, both of which are identified with God himself, mark a break from the idea of God as personal and creator. They put forward an immanentism that cannot be reconciled with the transcendence implied by Christian faith. But nevertheless, true though this is, Spinoza's vision may also help to think about the movement of creation in God. The standard way of thinking about creation, on the model of a craftsman shaping an object that will exist independently of him, does not apply in Spinoza — but it is also not the only way of thinking theologically about creation. Now the power of all that is expressed, is constituted, and complexified in infinite sequences — in other words, the productivity that characterizes Spinoza's God —

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<sup>30</sup> Letter from Henri de Lubac to Henri de Montcheuil, quoted in Georges Chantraine, *Henri de Lubac. Les années de formation 1919-1929* (Paris: Cerf, 2009), 555-556.

is not unconnected with what happens in creation. It might even be said to deepen this doctrine. Spinoza does not assign any limitations to the power (*potentia*) of God.

All this is in line with the definition of God: “an absolutely infinite being; that is, a substance constituted by an infinity of attributes, each of which expresses an eternal and infinite essence.” There are three occurrences here of “infinity” in the same definition, with one even being emphasized as “absolute.” Spinoza could not have affirmed God’s power any more strongly, a power which he goes on to say, “necessarily exists.” Admittedly, this language cannot be directly translated into theological terms (in what sense does Spinoza’s substance “exist”?), but we can at least acknowledge its implied affirmation of God, and not just of some vague “divine.” This immanence is infinite, complex, diversified in its expressions, unified in its principle, rich and evolving; it is not the immanence of a positivism confined to matter immediately perceived by the senses. Spinoza’s theory is part of a quest for truth guided by the force of understanding, an understanding that conceives and *perceives*: in other words, what it expresses it has received from the substance, or from God. Philosophy here is parting company with any attempt by the imagination to forge a God from presuppositions or emotional behaviour. Philosophy here is seeking truth through a quest to correct the operations of the mind. Christian theology shares this kind of concern for truth, even though the two intellectual activities each have their own procedures.

The terms in which Spinoza affirms God explain his critique of miracles. For Spinoza, the idea of miracles in natural or historical phenomena contradicts the nature of God, and thus amounts to atheism.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> TTP VI, 159.

When we speak of miracles, when we remain with the signs, we are imagining a God on the model of a sovereign authority, or simply on the model of human beings exercising their will on things and repairing them when they judge them imperfect. This anthropomorphism fails to do justice to God's infinity. It even opens the way to all kinds of passion-driven behaviour, serving the interests of those who claim the ability to explain the signs — so, for example, the doctrine of the Hebrew people attributes to God a will that is favourable to one people over all others. The critique of miracles here is thus simply the corollary of Spinoza's way of affirming God. Christianity can accept this critique — not, of course, its challenge to the personal God, but certainly what it says about how the search for signs can be disordered and fail to respect the reality of faith. Indeed, authors in the Christian tradition itself have denounced uncritical talk of miracles as diverting attention from the purity of faith: take for example the Christian philosopher Malebranche, or a mystic like John of the Cross.<sup>32</sup> In these cases, the critique is coming from within Christianity, it differs radically from that of Spinoza, but we can draw on Spinoza in learning how to exercise caution in the interpretation of events, how to recognise superstitious or emotional deviations in religious practice, and above all how to seek the absoluteness of God above and beyond the images of him that we can apprehend. The same consideration applies regarding the establishment of peace in society, because this task also necessarily involves peace between religions. The task requires us to mobilise the capacities internal to religion that hold in check the emotional disorders of their adherents that nourish violence.

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<sup>32</sup> That argument is, of course, not without precedent in the Gospels themselves: Jesus condemns the obsession with signs at the expense of faith, eg. Mt 12:39.

## 2. The Positive Elements in Spinoza's Pantheism

Likewise, and surely unexpectedly, Spinoza's abovementioned version of pantheism allows us to grasp a complementary dimension of his affirmation of God. Pantheism is always mentioned in connection with Spinoza, usually as a way of writing him off. Yet, as the theologian Joseph Moingt points out, while this word "frightens theologians, it is nevertheless the literal translation of the name of God-all, of God-Pleroma."<sup>33</sup> The thought of Pierre Teilhard de Chardin can shed light on this point.

In a 1923 talk,<sup>34</sup> Teilhard aims "to narrow that gap between Pantheism and Christianity by bringing out what one might call the Christian soul of Pantheism or the pantheist aspect of Christianity." Certainly, he acknowledges that "Pantheism has become synonymous with Spinozism, Hegelianism, Theosophy, Monism," and that these are "heterodox forms of the pantheist impulse." But there is a true Pantheism that these philosophical currents do not acknowledge, one that meets a fundamental "intellectual need." This true pantheism is a legitimate tendency of the human soul, which is "the *importance, in one's religious calculations, of the Whole*," "a Whole, in which alone Unity can be effected" and which "holds together only through its future fulfilment." Teilhard concludes with two Pauline quotations: "In him we live and move and have our being" (Acts 17:28 — Paul to the Athenians), and Paul's ultimate vision of God as "all in all" (1 Cor 15:28).

It is surely significant that Spinoza takes up the first of these re-

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<sup>33</sup> *Dieu qui vient à l'homme*, volume II-2 (Paris: Cerf, 2007), 1144.

<sup>34</sup> "Pantheism and Christianity," in *Christianity and Evolution* (San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1974), 56-75.

ferences: "That all things are in God and move in God, I affirm, I say, with Paul, and perhaps also with all the ancient philosophers, though in another way — I would also be so bold as to say, with all the ancient Hebrews [...]." <sup>35</sup> "Teilhard's pantheism" is of course not identical with Spinoza's because it explicitly calls for a "personal relationship" with the centre of the world, who is Christ. But this brief reference to Teilhard points up the complexity of the notion of pantheism. There is a pantheism that is something other than a confusion between God and the objects of nature, or a romantic celebration and spiritualization of matter. Abstracting from the Christian orientation that is central for Teilhard, Spinoza's pantheism too can indicate an orientation towards the Whole, apprehended in its unity, and experienced by humanity as an infinite desire to persevere in being. And Christianity can thus be helped to hear the full depth, the full strength of mind, within the most rigorous forms of immanence, those that are thought within the movement of the infinite. Amid the range of meanings of 'pantheism,' there is truth: a movement of unity in God, the attraction of everything towards God. Christians in their theology will acknowledge this orientation as part and parcel of their affirmation of God, even though they will live out this affirmation in terms of a more personal relationship with Christ.

### 3. An Experience of God

The first part of the *Ethics* presents God in a very speculative way. But this is not the whole story. References to God continue throughout the work; and the language used about God takes on a completely

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<sup>35</sup> Letter 73, 467.

different tone at the end, in the final propositions of the fifth part, so much so that commentators are often led to wonder if we are still dealing with the same God. It is, at any rate, clear that we must read to the end in order to understand what Spinoza says about God. The first definitions are “geometric” and even formal; they seem abstract. But the final statements indicate feeling and experience. The tone is quite different. This final section reveals what Spinoza’s argument has really been about: it may have been a quest to explain reality, but it is also, and at the same, time, an experience that engages human beings within the wisdom itself that is guiding them.

Three concepts are essential here: what Spinoza identifies as the “third kind of knowledge”; eternity; and God’s intellectual love. The third kind of knowledge “proceeds from the adequate idea of the formal essence of certain attributes of God to the adequate knowledge of the essence of things.”<sup>36</sup> Behind the technicality of the definition lies a metaphysics. The movement of knowledge occurs within a two-way relation with God: I grasp myself as I exist in and through God; and I also grasp God, or the totality, through my singularity, through the concrete singularity that I am myself. I perceive both that I exist in God and that God exists through me. In an intense intuition, I discover the thing that I am through how I derive from this immanent cause that is God. When I know things by intuition, I grasp the mode in its content and in its dependence on the attribute from which it proceeds. And this is accompanied by an intense joy, that of knowing oneself and other things perfectly, at the very principle of being. This is connected with an experience, that of eternity: “We feel and experience that we are eternal.”<sup>37</sup> Not only, for Spinoza, is there something of us

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<sup>36</sup> E V, prop. 25, demons (cf. E II, prop. 40, sch. 2).

<sup>37</sup> E V, prop. 23, sch. This particularly complex issue cannot be explored further here. I



that subsists eternally in God, but we also, within the finiteness of our singularity, experience the desire for an ever freer, rooted and active existence in a relationship with all that is. This is lived as God's intellectual love: a love that is not emotional, not susceptible to life's variations, but self-sufficient in perfect contentment. This experience is summed up in one word: salvation. "Our salvation, or blessedness or freedom" consists "in a constant and eternal love of God, or (*sive*) in God's love for men."<sup>38</sup> Though the philosophies of modernity rarely use the term, the notion of salvation gives direction to the whole of Spinoza's philosophy. The concern for salvation indicates the existential significance of Spinoza's thought, expressing the depth of its quest, even if always within a logic of (infinite) immanence. The salvation here is not salvation in Jesus Christ, but the dimension of personal engagement that the term implies is something that any interpretation of Spinoza's philosophy must reckon with. Perhaps, indeed, it indicates that the ultimate interpretation of Spinoza's work must remain an open question.

#### 4. An Attention to History

Spinoza was long thought of as a solitary sage who developed an intellectualism somewhat detached from historical reality. In the last few decades, this image has been corrected. We have come to see the importance of historical processes in Spinoza's reflections on politics and religion. In discussing the *Ethics*, people used to focus rigorously on the first definitions and reflect on the wisdom at the end, but did

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am simply suggesting a way of thinking about the experiential dimension in Spinoza's treatment of the question of God.

<sup>38</sup> E V, prop. 36, sch.

not pay attention, or at least not sufficient attention, to the process leading from the one to the other. But between the beginning and the end, between the God of geometry and the God of love, our sense of reality, and thus of God, has been enriched by the plurality of finite realities encountered. The process involves body and mind, desire, affects, the passions, politics, the quest for freedom: in short, all aspects of human life. The affirmation of God is not extra-historical; it seeks within history the passage from servitude to freedom. For its part, Christian revelation is constituted in history. Of course, Christianity understands the major questions of ethical life differently: the concept of freedom, the meaning of history, the problem of evil. But it can also accept many aspects of the anthropology (the body, the imagination [...]), the ethics (the system of affections, the mechanisms of finiteness), and the political philosophy (harmony in the City, freedom of thought), which form the framework of the *Ethics*.

## 5. Attention to Christ

What can Christianity make of Spinoza's Christ? Obviously, as we have seen, this Christ is not the Son of God: there is no question of incarnation or resurrection. There is no doctrinal convergence. However, Spinoza's Christ is a uniquely significant person in history, the example of human excellence: in him God's wisdom was manifested to the highest degree. He knew things in truth. Whereas the prophets knew God in ways linked to perception and imagination, he perceived God's justice in an immediate way, transcending the limitations imposed by particular contexts. He showed himself to be above human nature while fully belonging to humanity: he was a perfect man; he is therefore to be imitated.

How in particular is he an example? Firstly, he taught an indisputably valid ethical message. Already the Old Testament had taught this message, in the prophets who called for love of God and neighbour. It is a message about obedience and piety, the realization of justice and charity. The New Testament underlines this message, particularly in the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew's Gospel. For Christians, this way of seeing Christ may indeed be too reductionist, too ethical and too unspiritual, but at least it encourages us to take seriously the historical and human figure of Christ. In the seventeenth century this may have been particularly significant, with its religious conflicts, and its speculative debates that were sometimes so abstract that they obscured the historical, fleshly figure of Jesus. But the point is always an important one, particularly today when research into the historical Jesus is renewing our knowledge of how Christ is to be understood within the culture of his time. Though he did not have the resources we have now, Spinoza is directing us along a way of thinking that is important for Christianity. In particular, he put forward a way of interpreting Scripture that took seriously the history of the texts, thus anticipating by two centuries the historical-critical method.<sup>39</sup>

But there is a second dimension of Christ that Spinoza perceived: the universality of his message. The teaching of the prophets was principally directed at a particular people, even if there was a growing movement of interiorization that prefigured a wider application. Israel's election concerned this same people, within a quite unique configuration of theology and politics. By contrast, Christ's message was addressed to all. Thus: "Before the coming of Christ, the prophets were accustomed to preach religion as the law of their country and by the

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<sup>39</sup> See in particular Chapter VII of the TTP, "The Interpretation of the Scriptures."

power of the covenant entered into in the time of Moses; but after the coming of Christ the apostles preached the same [religion] to everyone as a universal law, solely by the power of the passion of Christ.”<sup>40</sup> Or, in explicit opposition to the privileged election claimed by the Hebrews, Paul teaches that “God sent to all nations his Christ, who would free all equally from bondage to the law, so that they would no longer act well because of the Law’s commandment, but because of a constant decision of the hearts.”<sup>41</sup> Openness to the universal becomes a criterion of truth of ethical practice; conversely, it is also the principle enabling the critique of any social body seeking to impose its teaching simply through external obedience.

Clearly Spinoza’s Christ was not God, and what is said about Christ in the Scriptures does not apply to the God of the *Ethics*. But Spinoza did acknowledge the uniqueness and absolute nature of Christ’s teaching: its wisdom, its ethical excellence, its openness to all nations. And given that he also recognised the authority of Scripture as a way to salvation for all, Spinoza’s Christ is not without relevance for what Christians call the Christ of faith. Spinoza’s Christ is not God, but in his very finitude, shot through as it is by infinity, he expresses something of God’s truth.

Moreover, the *Ethics* includes one reference to Christ, a unique reference, in a text which leaves all the commentators asking questions. The first man lost his freedom when he ate the forbidden fruit, but this freedom “was recovered by the Patriarchs guided by the Spirit of Christ, i.e., by the idea of God, on which alone it depends that man should be free, and desire for other men the good he desires for him-

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<sup>40</sup> TTP XII, 253.

<sup>41</sup> TTP III, 121-122.

self.”<sup>42</sup> This text, then, is not about the Jesus of history, but about the idea of God: a philosophical notion arising from the pure discourse of understanding. However, the sentence does echo the first letter of St. Peter: the prophets “made careful search and inquiry inquiring about the person or time that the Spirit of Christ within them indicated” (1 Pet 1:10-11). In other words, Spinoza considers neither the Jesus of history alone nor the true being of philosophical thought alone, but Christ in his eternity. His thinking unites historicity and universality. Interpretation cannot go too far here, under penalty of reintroducing a personal transcendence that is not in the *Ethics*, but it may nevertheless see Spinoza's conception as in some way *reflecting* Christ's truth.

### III. Thinking about Faith

At the end of this account, we need once again to pose the basic question: what is the significance of Spinoza's vision of God for the Christian account of God? Where do they converge? Where do they differ?

At first sight, differences are all that there are. The definitions of *causa sui*, of substance and of its attributes, the expressions about infinite immanence — none of these are in any way comparable with the idea of a personal, transcendent creator God, who became incarnate as a human being for the salvation of all and thus promised the future Kingdom. It is no surprise that Spinoza's works were accused of atheism or pantheism and therefore banned. If we stay at the surface

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<sup>42</sup> E IV, prop. 68, sch.

of Spinoza's text, there is no room for discussion.

But my concern has been to suggest that discussion is nevertheless possible. There is something to be learnt from the different approach represented by Spinoza's philosophy.<sup>43</sup> What can we take from him? The affirmation of God's infinity, of his infinite presence in all reality; the affirmation of this infinity as the principle of everything, encompassing all history; the conviction that this infinity can be experienced by human beings, as eternity here and now. Moreover, Christianity can only gain from Spinoza's critiques of miracles, of the misuse of religions, and of distorted readings of the Bible — particularly since Spinoza honours the teaching of Scripture, religion as a path to salvation, and the excellence of Christ.

What can Christian theology today learn from Spinoza? In one sense, just everything, provided its approach is indirect, avoiding fundamentalism. When theological interpreters approach Spinoza's text, they must reserve the right to express their differences and disagreements. The point is not to search for ideas or themes in Spinoza's work so as to use them in an alien context: that would be artificial. Rather, theologians can see in Spinoza's work an example of powerful thought, inspiring them to think powerfully in their turn; they can make the effort to use categories that make sense today, to go beyond formulations that have become tired and conventional, to become radically self-critical. It is in this spirit that theology will explore philosophy in general, and Spinoza in particular, who, of all the great philosophers of modernity, is the one who seems the most remote from Chris-

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<sup>43</sup> For a more general reflection on the relationship between philosophy and theology, see my "New relations between philosophy and theology: from a logic of territories to a logic of commitment," in *Theologies and Truth, The Challenges of History: Recherches de Science Religieuse 1910-2010* (Leuven: Peeters, 2010), 207-215.

tianity, but whose thought is nevertheless far from being alien to Christianity's God.

Spinoza has also been seen as a "God-intoxicated man," and as in his own way a "mystic." We need to be very careful here. Such talk can lead to confusion if it suggests that it wants to "spiritualize" Spinoza, or even make him out as a crypto-Christian. It should probably be avoided. Nevertheless, the idea of mysticism can indicate an exploration of the depths of human experience, a transformed understanding of the ways of reason, and an affirmation of the infinite in and through the variety of modes found in history. In this sense, we can acknowledge and honour Spinoza's questioning of all our ways of thinking and speaking, and in particular of Christianity.

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## ■ Abstract ■

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Christianity finds Spinoza's account of God problematic: for Spinoza, God is in effect assimilated to Nature, rather than the personal God of Christian revelation. Spinoza also mounts a critique of religion: it engenders fear and superstition among its adherents; it foments division; it seeks to control the State so as to impose its own laws. The critique is radical; one understands why Spinoza's works were soon forbidden by authority.

Nevertheless, Christianity has been able also to find creative stimulus in Spinoza's thought: a deep affirmation of God as the source of Blessedness in history; a reflection on the conditions for freedom of thought and belief in society; a way of interpreting Scripture that brings out its universal message of justice and charity; and an understanding of religious salvation through following the teachings of Christ, the wise man *par excellence*.

Spinoza's work was regarded by some as atheist or pantheist, while others saw in it the expression of a pure mysticism. The tension here indicates the originality of Spinoza's work, and also its depth. It raises questions and poses criticisms. It certainly does not converge with Christian doctrine, but its commitment to truth enables there to be a meeting of minds, out of which Christian theology can find resources for thinking about the ways in which Christian experience unfolds.

► Key Words: Atheism, Pantheism, Religion, Scripture (Bible).

## 그리스도교를 위한 스피노자의 신의 의미

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그리스도교는 신에 대한 스피노자의 설명에 문제가 있다고 생각했다: 스피노자에게 신이란 사실상 그리스도교 계시의 인격적 신이 아니라, 자연과 동화된 형태였다. 스피노자는 또한 종교를 비판하기도 했다. 종교가 그 추종자들 사이에 두려움과 미신을 유발하고, 분열을 조장하며, 자신만의 법률을 시행하기 위해 국가를 통제하려 한다고 말이다. 그의 비판은 매우 급진적이었으므로, 스피노자의 저술들이 왜 당국에 의해 곧 금지되었는지 누구든 이해할 수 있었다.

그럼에도 불구하고, 그리스도교는 스피노자의 사상에서 창의적인 자극제를 찾을 수 있다. 역사상의 신성의 원천으로서의 신에 대한 깊이 있는 단언, 사회 안에서의 사상과 믿음의 자유를 위한 조건에 대한 숙고, 정의와 관용의 보편적 메시지를 선포하는 성경을 해석하는 방법, 그리고 탁월한 현자 그리스도의 가르침을 따름으로써 얻는 종교적 구원에 대한 이해가 그것이다.

스피노자의 저술은 일부에 의해 무신론적 혹은 범신론적인 것으로 간주되었으나, 어떤 이들은 그 안에서 순수 신비주의의 표현을 보았다. 둘 사이의 긴장감은 스피노자의 저술의 독창성과 또한 그 깊이를 보여 준다. 또한 질문들을 생성하며, 비평을 제기

한다. 그것은 분명 그리스도교 교리와는 상이하지만, 그 진실에 대한 헌신은 여러 마음들을 함께 모이게 하며, 그중에서도 그리스도교 신학이 그리스도교 경험이 전개되는 방식에 대해 생각해 볼 수 있게끔 하는 자원을 발견하게 한다.

▶ 주제어: 무신론, 범신론, 종교, 성경.