



## Spinoza on Religious Choice

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# Spinoza on Religious Choice

RICHARD MASON

## I

Here are three sets of circumstances:

(i) On 27 July 1656, at the age of 23, Spinoza was thrown out of his religious community—the Portuguese Synagogue in Amsterdam. During the remaining 21 years of his life it would have been easy enough for him to have returned, in practical if not in personal terms, but he chose not to do so. Despite close association with members of various Protestant sects, he chose to live without affiliation to any religious group. At that time, this was rare.

(ii) In intellectual terms, Spinoza chose to distance himself from many, if not all, of his predecessors and contemporaries. Scholars have delighted in tracing in his work the influence of Descartes, stoicism, millenarianism, marranism, Hobbes, van den Enden, Machiavelli, Christian and Jewish medieval thought and a range of other sources. They have, I believe, been less perceptive in noting how he was able to take what he wanted and to isolate and repudiate what he did not want.

(iii) Spinoza tried to state a reasoned case for free choice in religion. People should be allowed to decide for themselves on their beliefs, with rather less freedom for their practices. The main point of his *Theological-Political Treatise*, he tells us, is to establish that freedom of judgment may exist for the individual citizen 'without endangering piety and the peace of the commonwealth' [*T* 51–52]<sup>1</sup>.

For now I will not dwell on the parallels between these three sets of circumstances—Spinoza's biography, his intellectual independence and his views on religious freedom—though I shall come back to them later. The details in each area are controversial, to the extent that it would not be hard to logjam any progress with footnotes at this point. Instead, I want to move on to discuss self-location or self-identification in religious beliefs or practices: What is it to choose a religion, or make a religious choice, or to choose between religions? How is such choice created or located? On what basis is it made? If freedom of religion matters, what is it for a

<sup>1</sup> *T* = *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus*, trs. S. Shirley (Leiden: Brill, 1989) + page number.

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choice of religion, or within a religion, to be 'free'? And since any area of religious choice has often seemed to lie somewhere outside of, or beyond, one of non-free lack of choice to accept secular facts, these questions lead easily to asking about boundaries between religious and secular issues.

I believe that Spinoza has a good deal to tell us here; but there are two areas that I shall *not* be pursuing:

First, there is a good historical case that the mid-Seventeenth Century saw the tipping of the balance between the judgment of philosophy by theology and the judgment of theology by philosophy. There is a good philosophical case that exactly when the balance tipped was in the opening propositions of Part I of the *Ethics*, when God made a decisive exit from physics, never to return. But that is not for now.

Secondly, there is a huge literature on the issue of choosing—of the meaning and the freedom of choosing—to be or not to be Jewish. Spinoza was at or near the beginning of all that, and it is almost irresistibly tempting to call him in as a leading witness for one side of the case or another, either as 'the first secular Jew' or as an archetypal critic of Judaism. But he lived in the Seventeenth Century, and in a place where his choice of a quiet, non-Jewish life was possible, or at least not fatal. What choice he might have made if he was living in Amsterdam in 1944, for example, is an intriguing question for fictional debate. But I am not qualified to pursue it.

The direction I *do* want to pursue is the nature, place and scope for choice in religion for an individual, given the apparently paralysing constraints that Spinoza created.

To start on this we need to set aside at once the bogus, but philosophical-looking question: 'How far can we choose a religious position?' This looks philosophical, maybe, because it looks impressively abstract. We can imagine setting up a debate between two, equally abstract polar extremes—on the one side: We are, or should be, *wholly free* to choose-invent-create religions—as free as we may be to graze through the hundreds of forms of religion said to be on offer to potential religious consumers in the Los Angeles phone book. On the other side: No, we can never really escape our inherited locations or traditions—freedom is illusory—I can no more choose a religion than I can choose my first language. Both these extremes have evident defects; but there is no point in trying to find a middle way between them because the underlying question in both is a misguided one. The sense of 'can' in 'How far can we choose a religious position?' is of no interest. Defining it would be, circularly, the same as defining the scope of any religious

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choice. This is clear enough when someone argues that a person *can* never choose not to be Jewish; or in the view that someone not born Japanese *can* never choose to adopt Shinto. In both cases, the normativity of 'can' begs the question. (And the same point could be reinforced by thinking about who 'we' are supposed to be in 'How far can we choose a religious position?')

The real interest must be in the shape given to choice—how it can be created, located or represented—not in its alleged 'possibility', because that sort of possibility is not even worth investigating in theory.

### II

In Spinoza's case, the general framework looks, to us now, surprisingly conventional. There seems to be a familiar enough alignment of philosophy (i.e., for him, natural science, modelled on mathematical physics) with knowable truth, where choice is irrelevant. Then there seems to be an alignment of theology with the area of faith, outside or beyond the scope of knowledge, where questions of truth would not arise and where we might seem to be in the territory for some kind of choice. Anyone glancing at the titles of Chapters 14 and 15 of the *Theological-Political Treatise* would find support for that familiar, conventional picture: 'Faith is finally set apart from philosophy. . . . It is demonstrated that neither is theology ancillary to reason, nor reason to theology' and so on. And this, indeed *was* more or less Spinoza's position. Although his approach—based within a dichotomy between the territories of faith/theology and truth/philosophy—may seem ordinary enough now in superficial outline, our interest in him is justified by the quite extraordinary constraints in which this approach was pursued. Here are only some of them briefly:

(i) Choice, for Spinoza, was always an illusion. Where you think you are acting most freely, you are in fact most enthralled to unknown causes. You are only free to the extent that you realize that, when you discover what those causes are. So how to make a free choice of religion?

(ii) In particular, to choose what to believe is, for Spinoza, an absurdity. If you know something is true then you have to believe it. There is no place for decision. You can never decide to believe. You find out what is true. If it is true then there is no logic in imagining that you don't—or even may not—believe it.<sup>2</sup> He had in

<sup>2</sup> This point is independent of any particular theory or account of truth. See B. Williams, 'Deciding to Believe' in his *Problems of the Self* (Cambridge University Press, 1973).

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mind, as often, a geometrical metaphor. Accept the axioms and proofs in geometry, then don't imagine you can decide whether or not to accept the resulting theorems. Following that pattern, how could anyone have a worthwhile choice of beliefs in religion?

(iii) Spinoza's rejection of the private, self-conscious Cartesian ego made the choosing self, for him, elusive. 'I' can never be identified with my private consciousness. Although he did distinguish the 'inward worship of God' from 'outward forms of religion' in the *Theological Political Treatise* [T 280],—where religion consisted in 'honesty and sincerity of heart rather than in outward actions' [T 159]—Part II of the *Ethics* had removed the support that could be used to vindicate that distinction.<sup>3</sup> An act of faith cannot be an act of assent or volition in my mind. And whatever the *personal* is, for Spinoza, it is definitely not the realm of unexplained choices issuing from a black box of the romanticized self: humanity, after all, is describable in the same manner as we can describe lines, planes and bodies [*Ethics*, III, Preface; and see *Political Treatise*, I, 4].

(iv) And since, for him, the will and the intellect were the same, an *act of will* would be a wholly inappropriate image for a matter of faith, or religious choice, in any event.

(v) Nor could a choice in religion, or between religions, be modelled upon a choice of ends against means, or of values against facts. These dichotomies were dismantled in Spinoza's thinking. One well-trodden route has been to argue that we don't or can't choose which facts to believe, but we can choose our values, ends or meanings. But the choice of ends is ruled out by the onslaught on teleology in the Appendix to Part I of the *Ethics*. 'By the *end* for the sake of which we do something, I mean appetite', he tells us briskly [*Ethics*, IV, definition 7]<sup>4</sup>. And values were wholly naturalized. We *find out* what is good or bad *for us*: this is no matter for choice. 'To act in absolute conformity with virtue is nothing else in us but to act, to live, to preserve one's own being (the three mean the same) under the guidance of reason, on the basis of seeking one's own advantage' [*Ethics* IV, 24]—not much room for free choice there. So the standard escape routes are barred. Choice in religion, whatever it is, is not reduced to approval.

(vi) According to Spinoza, 'faith is based on history and language' [T226]. All religious practice, including the social enforcement of morality, is a matter of tradition or history. All the charac-

<sup>3</sup> Most commentators believe that Parts I and II of the *Ethics* were written before the *Theological-Political Treatise*.

<sup>4</sup> *The Ethics and Selected Letters*, trs. S. Shirley (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1982).

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teristic features of specific religions are given political, historical, psychological or anthropological explanations (but *not* reductions), to the extent that *reasons to accept* the elements within a specific tradition, or even sect, could scarcely be said to apply.

Now these constraints seem to paint Spinoza into a corner. He wants to advocate freedom of thought and religion, yet the individual appears to be deprived of any means to make use of such freedom. Religious choice, and hence religion, could not retreat into the sphere of the personal or the irrational, along the tracks laid by Pascal: there can be no reasons for faith, so any considerations in favour of faith must be outside reason. . . . (Nor, we need scarcely add, could Spinoza have been attracted by another, equally irrationalist corollary: No reasons could suffice for us to choose God. . . . So it must be that God has to choose us . . .). This, together with the exclusion of the will, placed Spinoza well to one side of the German theological and philosophical traditions which might otherwise have traced their roots in his thought (although this did not prevent the German romantics from actually doing just that, with a spectacularly partisan disregard for all the evidence).

### III

The real interest in his perspective is, I believe, quite hard to grasp—largely because the advocacy of the *Theological-Political Treatise* makes rhetorical use of every supporting argument at hand—some of them not too impressive—and not all of them entirely consistent with each other. Then, there are some threads which we must disentangle and put aside—not because they are without value, but only because they do not relate to the uniqueness of Spinoza's approach. Such threads include:

(i) His own pietism: his own taste in religion was more towards plain spring water than vintage claret, as we know from his life and from his numerous, characteristically Protestant statements in favour of simplicity, inner conviction, plain virtues and dislike of external ritual. But this should not be relevant. It is tempting to think that freedom of religion suggests minimalist, lowest-common-factor religion: a temptation surely reinforced by Spinoza's own minimalist creed set out in Chapter 14 of the *Theological-Political Treatise*—what he called 'the dogmas of the universal faith' [T 224]. His understanding of piety as 'the desire to do good which derives from our living by the guidance of reason' [*Ethics* IV, 37, Scholium 1] does seem restrictive, in that reason might

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seem unlikely to offer *varied* forms of guidance. Yet if freedom of religion means anything, it surely means freedom to adopt radically differing forms of observance and piety. (There is a parallel here between Spinoza and the later Wittgenstein, whose equally puritanical religious temperament bore no logical relation to his philosophical understanding of the status of religious beliefs and language.)

(ii) We can also put aside Spinoza's pragmatic thinking on religious freedom—thinking also implicit in Locke, Hobbes and in anyone else tired of religious warfare. Here are some excellent considerations in favour of a kind of toleration: you can't kill all your opponents; they might kill you if they get on top; and, anyway, you can't control what people think, however hard you try. Some of this is in Spinoza, and in historical terms it may be what mattered most, but it has little to do with his contribution to religious and intellectual freedom.

(iii) Nor need we pursue the platonic political framework to his epistemology, where types of object known were matched against levels of knowledge, which were matched implicitly against degrees of status or approval for those who had knowledge. At one end of the scale, the masses could only be expected to achieve a practical grasp of religion, informed through imagination, where faith was solely obedience. At the other, the enlightened might understand truth through reason or intuition. This is a controversial area, which I have only caricatured here,<sup>5</sup> but it is not particularly relevant now. It may be that unthinking, but pious and virtuous practitioners within a religion are best left undisturbed by criticism or argument, and it may be that any case for religious freedom ought to allow for this. But if religious freedom has anything to do with freedom to make choices that people may want to make, then reasons, or at least considerations, for and against choices, must be taken into account.

Much has been written about these three fields: Spinoza's personal pietism, his wider defence of free thought and his political epistemology. They may appear predominant in the *Theological-Political Treatise*, and they may be where its historical impact was greatest, but they are not where I believe we can now learn most about choice in religion.

## IV

To see what we *can* learn we should look again at the triple parallel

<sup>5</sup> For a full study: A. Matheron, *Le Christ et le salut des ignorants chez Spinoza*, (Paris: Abouier-Montaigne, 1971).

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at the beginning of this paper—for example at Spinoza's detachment from his intellectual forebears. Whatever may be disputed about the details, it must be obvious that a model of *choice between alternatives* is hardly suitable in thinking about his intellectual predicament. Spinoza was not choosing, as from a menu, between Cartesianism, Aristotelianism, the orthodoxy of his synagogue and so on. What he was doing was assessing critically what he wanted and what he did not want from a number of sources of which he was quite plainly aware. And he would have been the first to acknowledge that there would have been other influences of which he might have been unaware; but he would have wished to haul those into the daylight as much as he could. The extent to which he did this may be controversial, but the principle that he *did* do it is, I think, not.

An individual's critical relationship to his or her past intellectual history may be a better model than a choice 'of' religions. (It may be a better match with actual experience, too.) Important choices are seldom much like selecting dishes from a menu or alternative routes on a map. The old joke that if I were going there I would not start from here contains a valuable truth. It is a truism—not an interesting consequence of any form of determinism—that I can't choose where I am literally now. I have to start here. Yet the ways in which I have chosen to get where I am now, and what has influenced my choices, is something I can research, sometimes with fruitful results as to where I might be next. (And none of this need be denied by any form of determinism or anti-determinism.)

This is one way in which Spinozistic freedom falls between the territories mapped out in some debates about it—for example, most famously, between Stuart Hampshire's 'Spinoza and the Idea of Freedom' and Isaiah Berlin's 'From Hope and Fear Set Free'.<sup>6</sup> Perhaps the process of intellectual self-identification is too familiar to intellectuals for them to recognize it easily, although (in my view) the thoroughness with which it was carried out by Spinoza is less familiar. His insistence on the causal order in the mental world—in what he considered as 'nature conceived through the attribute of thought'—is usually read in personal, psychological terms (as it is read by Hampshire: in terms of freedom of will as applied to physical actions). But it has equal application, and perhaps more interest, in terms of intellectual history and background, and in consequent personal choices.

Vast scholarly labours have been devoted to exploring what led

<sup>6</sup> *Proceedings of the British Academy*, 46 (1960) and *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, 64 (1964).

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Spinoza to, say, the point where he emerged into our sight at the time of his first writing, in about 1660. Yet even someone who thought that *none* of Spinoza's building-blocks were original, could still not argue that his view consisted *only* of an unreflecting cocktail of earlier influences. There had to be *some* weighing of what to retain, to emphasize or to reject.

Uncontroversially, to understand one's past and one's influences can be a step towards moving beyond them. There is a sense in which intellectual freedom presupposes some understanding of context and history. Here, *freedom from* the past is not to be distinguished sharply from *freedom to* choose between future alternatives, and we lose useful insights by stressing either at the expense of the other.

That should show us what can be wrong with relativistic metaphors of location that can seem irresistible here. We choose *where to stand*, we choose to *locate* ourselves *within* or *outside* a tradition, or set of *traditions*; we choose between different *positions*, or between the validations *within* different *fields* of inquiry. Such language is natural enough (it has its *place*) but it is likely to *mislead*: crucially, I think, *towards* a form of relativism. In one *place* are the *areas* occupied by traditional beliefs, legitimized by 'language and history'. Spinoza can choose to *step outside* them by his search for truth and consistency. But then his freedom of choice, *where to stand*, looks diminished, as though his alternative *positions* have been restricted, or as though he has *taken up one position* at the expense of others. (And you can't be in two *places* at the same time.)

The adoption of spatial metaphor obscures our ability to pick, mix and criticize intellectually, and it ignores the results of reflective understanding. There is no *room* in this language to *locate* the freedom gained from appreciating *where* I may be. To be freed in that way is neither to be *inside* nor *outside* an intellectual *position*: the relativism suggested in the imagery of *areas* is wholly illusory. *You must be somewhere* is a truism, but it is one of limited applicability. The suggestion that someone may be *nowhere* if they are not *within* one or another separated sets of beliefs should have evident failings.

## V

It may still not be clear how Spinoza might have been able to evade the cage of constraints he built for himself.

We can see this more clearly—oddly—by realizing how rigid his

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constraints actually were. In essence, they are embodied in Parts I and II of the *Ethics*: Truth is endowed with a magnetic and unifying effect. If I possess a truth, in some sense I can't disbelieve it. And there can be no order or sense of truths which are detached from any other. I must seek truth. When I have it I cannot suspend my belief in it, and I must seek to minimize its inconsistency with other truths that I accept. We can now read these tenets as an ideological or methodological manifesto for the development of the natural sciences, which indeed they were.

Their effect on religion should not be underestimated. (And here it is strange that anyone might be puzzled by the alleged absence of the metaphysics of the *Ethics* from the *Theological-Political Treatise*.) A straightforward example is provided by Spinoza's Biblical criticism. Usually this is seen as being outside his central philosophizing, as it obviously is in one way. But in another way it is not, because it exhibits a paradigm of the subsequent effect of scientific discovery on religion, and on religious choice.

In no sense should it be contentious to take as a specimen of a discovered truth—a fact: *the Pentateuch was not written by Moses* [see *T* 167]. This can hardly be denied as it stands. Spinoza's enunciation of it—together with less articulate statements by his predecessors and contemporaries—forces evident consequences. If I accept it, I cannot believe, for example that *the Pentateuch had a single author* without inconsistency, unless an attempt is made to claim that there was a single author in some different *sense* from the sense in which there were a number of authors. But to make that claim is to concede everything important to Spinoza: that the truth, even about the composition of a sacred text, can be ascertained and established by wholly non-religious means, and that a value of no specifically religious import—consistency—has become paramount, even in religion. And of course, as Spinoza must have realized, this sort of truth (about the composition of the Pentateuch) might as well stand proxy for the torrent of other truths to be unearthed by the natural sciences over the subsequent years.

But still, the appearance is of the opposite of freedom. If I accept the premises, the method and the arguments, I am left with no freedom to believe that the Pentateuch was composed by a single author, without some qualification in sense. To believe *that* is no longer a choice that is available. On the other hand, as Hampshire might put it, I am freed *from* possible error, and maybe from certain superstitions. The possession of a truth and a desire for consistency allow me the freedom *to* integrate my beliefs

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with each other, whereas before I may have been a slave to inconsequential inconsistencies. (Here the obvious parallel would be in ceasing to accept astrology: what I then believe may be *less*, quantitatively, but it fits together better.) Yet this sort of argument does look casuistic, overly assisted by tendentious rhetoric: 'enslaved by ignorance' and so on, as Berlin argued well.

### VI

Spinoza did set up a direct opposition: ' . . . between faith and theology on the one side and philosophy rests on the basis of universally valid axioms, and must be constructed by studying Nature alone, whereas faith is based on history and language, and must be derived only from Scripture and revelation . . .' [T 226]. The (correct) impression is of alternative forms of legitimation; philosophy by the study of Nature, faith by Scripture and revelation. Yet what we have here are not equal and separate alternatives in the sense that I might choose to adopt one or the other, but an assertion of relative dominance or priority. Philosophy is based on *universal* axioms. This universality we can take to cover (that is, include) whatever is learnt from Scripture and revelation.

Spinoza offers an interesting inversion of the priority asserted by Pascal: 'We know the truth not only through our reason but also through our heart. It is through the latter that we know first principles, and reason, which has nothing to do with it, tries in vain to refute them. . . . The heart feels that there are three spatial dimensions and that there is an infinite series of numbers, and reason goes on to demonstrate that there are no square numbers of which one is the double the other. Principles are felt, propositions proved, and both with certainty through by different means. . . .'<sup>7</sup>

In both Spinoza and Pascal there are claims that religion and philosophy are discrete alternatives. Both, in reality, made them interdependent, though in different ways. Spinoza, despite some rhetorical protestations to the contrary [T 235], subjected what could be accepted in religion entirely to what can be 'apprehended from Nature's fixed and immutable order' [T]. His view that each man's faith ' . . . is to be regarded as pious or impious not in respect of its truth or falsity, but as it is conducive to obedience or obstinacy' and so on [T 223], may have been entirely sincere, but it was subject to two crushing reservations, one understated, the other in the background. First, faith: 'that requires not so much dogmas as

<sup>7</sup> Pascal, *Pensées*, trs. and ed. A. J. Krailsheimer (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1966), p. 58, §110.

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pious dogmas, that is, such as move the heart to obedience; and this is so even if many of those beliefs contain not a shadow of truth, *provided that he who adheres to them knows not that they are false* [T 223, my italics]. Which proviso, taken to any point beyond that of the utterly naive simple believer, imposes a requirement of consistency. Then secondly, and equally restrictively, we should not forget the elimination of the will (separate from the 'intellect'). There should be no question of really *deciding* how to behave in the absence of adequate information. Nor is there any realm of value in which pious obedience can operate (as it were) independently of the facts. In deciding how to act, my prime duty is to find out what is so. The value of my actions relates to the truth of my discoveries. Any ill-informed *willing* or choosing that I may do in the absence of full information is, at best, morally irrelevant [see T 106].

Surely relevant to questions about freedom of religious choice is the indifference shown by Spinoza to any issues where actual religious choices might arise. Perhaps this is explained by his own quakerish pietism. It is given some justification by his socio-historical analysis of religious differences: the *reason why* some people are, for example, Jewish and others Muslim, or why some observe some rituals and others different ones is usually that they were brought up in societies which, for understandable historical causes, had developed like that.<sup>8</sup> But Spinoza's indifference seemed to go beyond theory into personal feeling. His letter of December 1675 to Alvert Burgh may be tendentious evidence—it is his contemptuous response to a zealous Roman Catholic convert. In that context, he went to the extreme of non-sectarian open-mindedness (undoubtedly reinforcing Burgh's worst prejudices). But, even so, his lack of concern for partisan theology must have been real:

. . . you must allow that holiness of life is not peculiar to the Roman Church, but is common to all. And since we know through this ... that we dwell in God and God dwells in us, it follows that whatever it is that distinguishes the Roman Church from the others, it is something superfluous, and therefore based merely on superstition

and:

. . . all those outside the Roman Church make the same claims with the same right for their Church as you do for yours.<sup>9</sup>

His criticism of Islam was directed far less towards what may have

<sup>8</sup> For Spinoza, reason and cause were the same: *Ethics* I, 11, Proof 2.

<sup>9</sup> *The Correspondence of Spinoza*, trs. and ed. A. Wolf (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1928), Letter LXXVI, pp. 351 and 353.

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been believed than towards its alleged attitudes on free discussion. Positively, if the ‘Turks and other Gentiles ‘worship God by the exercise of justice and charity towards their neighbour, I believe that they have the Spirit of Christ and are saved, whatever convictions they may in their ignorance hold about Mahomet and the oracles’.<sup>10</sup> But then negatively: ‘They hold even discussion of religion to be sinful, and with their mass of dogma they gain such a thorough hold on the individual’s judgment that they leave no room in the mind for the exercise of reason, or even the capacity to doubt’ [T 51].<sup>11</sup>

It is ‘the exercise of reason’ and ‘the capacity to doubt’ which may be in question. What might Spinoza’s Muslims be discussing? How would they be exercising their reason or even their capacity to doubt? Not in respect of any beliefs or practices that might differentiate them from followers of other faiths. If they were worshipping God ‘by the exercise of justice and charity’ they would have no more *reason* or need to alter their beliefs than to start speaking Dutch rather than Arabic.

If the scope for religious arguments is diminished, religious freedom seems to be reduced to arbitrariness. Or it might be restricted to a freedom of inner conviction, shorn of any external symptoms. As we have seen, Spinoza’s philosophy of mind would have left him on weak ground if he had pursued *that* route seriously, though there are signs that he found it both personally attractive and rhetorically useful. Obedience, for example, he tells us, ‘is not so much a matter of outward act as internal act of mind’ [T 251]: a distinction he surely could not really want to defend.

## VII

There is a more interesting possibility, though. In Spinoza’s metaphysics, right (*just*) is related to power (*potentia*). And ‘. . . since the universal power of Nature as a whole is nothing but the power of all individual things taken altogether, it follows that each individual thing has the sovereign right to do all that it can do; i.e. the right of the individual is co-extensive with its determinate power’ [T 237]. The political consequences were pursued along Hobbesian lines in Chapter 17 of the *Theological-Political Treatise*, where Spinoza tried to devise a theory for the limits to the transfer of individual rights to a sovereign. The consequences for individual

<sup>10</sup> Letter XLIII, Wolf, op. cit., p. 259.

<sup>11</sup> Henri Laux considers Spinoza’s critique of Islam as the extreme point of his critique of religion. See *Imagination et religion chez Spinoza* (Paris: Vrin, 1993), p. 238.

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choices are more relevant now. An ability to reason is what constitutes a freedom to reason, and: 'A man is free, of course, to the extent that he is guided by reason' [*T* 307; see also *Political Treatise II*, vii and xi].

So freedom of choice is co-extensive with an ability to choose. The thought that any application of reasoned or defensible choice might be possible in religion might well be *the* crucial epistemological step. For Spinoza, the freedom we have is the capacity to measure religions, or elements within religions, against what we have discovered to be true. It is not obligatory to measure them in terms of truths that we may have to accept. Instead, as we have seen, we find the stealthy proviso that we should not adhere to anything which we know to be false. This is a maxim to be followed along with a policy to search for truths about nature, and to aim to relate those as far as possible in a connected, causal-explanatory system.

There is an implicit use of a destructive dilemma. The individual faced with a choice, or a decision, within a religion or between religions, can have no recourse to historical tradition for support. Tradition may explain fully why certain beliefs are held, or practices maintained, but the very exhaustiveness of such explanation subverts any value it might have to legitimize or defend practices or beliefs. On the other horn of the dilemma, if the individual does seek reasons (in a wide sense), there will be a need to rely on reasons that are not inconsistent with beliefs not known to be false. So one court of appeal is unqualified to give a verdict; the other may apply criteria that have tended to turn out to be devastating.

This destructive dilemma is not as over-simplistic as it might seem. There is a misleading resemblance to the dichotomy wielded by logical positivists: either your statements are verifiable or they are not . . . either way 'religious statements' come out badly. But the point is not that some class of statements can either be 'proved', 'rationally' or not. Nor need we think of 'reason' in terms of a stereotype from Eighteenth Century rationalism (or Humean anti-rationalism), as logical proof. Spinoza's letter to Burgh suggests that even common-or-garden, non-logical *persuasion*, taken in the most relaxed sense, may not be germane in any decision that might be taken between one religion or sect and another. You do not *have* to be reasonable—you can be one of the unthinking faithful, relying on 'history and language'—but if you *do* seek reasons then they must meet *some* standard of persuasiveness, even if they are only ones that you might accept yourself.

Spinoza's insistence on religious freedom can be seen as normative. Freedom amounts to a capacity to choose. And choice is only

free in so far as it can be justified. Any such justification must meet corrosive standards. This thinking is analogous to the logic that drove God out of physical, causal relationships with the created world. Normative insistence on a unified causal order means the end for physical miracles and divine providential intervention. Perhaps less palatably today, Spinoza's moral theory would have had the same effect on God's role in personal life, morality and politics.

### VIII

But all this may just look like a restating, rather than a resolution, of our problems: How can there be choice in religion? There is choice because we can choose. If we choose non-arbitrarily we need reasons. But reasons, for Spinoza, can only lead in one direction: towards the thinking in Part V of the *Ethics*.

That gives a misleadingly clear picture, losing much of the interest in what Spinoza shows us. (Also misleadingly, it makes him the mirror-image of Pascal: how can I choose rationally?—I can't—so I can only choose irrationally: the leap of faith.)

We should pick up some of the threads from earlier in this paper. Despite Spinoza's claim to the contrary, his work enables us to realize that 'faith' and 'philosophy' (rarely 'reason') are neither separate, equal nor even symmetrical. His reasons for stressing their separation are self-evident in his arguments: plainly, he was *not* in the business of trying to *prove* the tenets of faith. The God whose existence was proved in Part I of the *Ethics* (I, 11) was wholly unrelated to religious belief or practice.

Faith is defined as 'the holding of certain beliefs about God such that, without these beliefs, there cannot be obedience to God, and if this obedience is posited, these beliefs are necessarily posited.' [T 222]. But, as I have been arguing, what is believed—what *can be* believed—is subject to tests of truth and consistency (or of not-falsity and not-inconsistency)—a kind of minimalist rationality. In historical or sociological terms this can be seen just as an assertion of dominance: new criteria are to apply, or rather—since they were hardly new in themselves—they were to acquire new importance.

Leo Strauss saw Spinoza like that. In his 1962 preface to *Spinoza's Critique of Religion*, he concluded that '... the antagonism between Spinoza and Judaism, between unbelief and belief, is ultimately not theoretical but moral'.<sup>12</sup> But the lack of symmetry

<sup>12</sup> The English version of *Spinoza's Critique of Religion* (1930), (New York: Schocken, 1982), p. 29.

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between 'faith' and 'philosophy' is not a matter of moral assertion and counter-assertion. In Spinoza it is more a matter of the lack of symmetry between less knowledge and more knowledge, of the basic fact that what is once known cannot easily become unknown, and that what is once realized to be true can be adapted, or can be fitted into what is accepted already, but cannot simply be forgotten. Whether or not it is worthwhile to think about *choices* between traditions (in religion or elsewhere), the existence of choices is itself something that cannot be unlearned. This kind of asymmetry was caught memorably in an image produced by al-Ghazâlî in the Eleventh Century:

. . . There is certainly no point in trying to return to the level of naive and derivative belief (*taqlid*) once it has been left, since a condition of being at such a level is that one should not know one is there; when a man comes to know that, the glass of his naive beliefs is broken. This is a breakage which cannot be mended, a breakage not to be repaired by patching or by assembling of fragments. The glass must be melted once again in the furnace for a new start, and out of it another fresh vessel formed.<sup>13</sup>

In a way, in Spinoza, the best evidence for this is the very existence and nature of the *Theological-Political Treatise* itself. Much of the book bores philosophers today, especially in the English-speaking world. Its relationship to the obviously philosophical achievements of the *Ethics* seems oblique. Moreover, at one level it shares the self-cancelling status of Wittgenstein's *Tractatus*. The argument for the right of the sovereign in matters of religion was realized in the most concrete form when the *Treatise* itself was banned in 1674 by the sovereign power in the Netherlands, along with *Leviathan*, and for reasons which could have been justified quite adequately from its own pages (if the members of the States-General had troubled to read them) [see *T* 293–4].

Yet the real force of the *Theological-Political Treatise* came not from its arguments for free thought, based flimsily on what could be done without harm in the privacy of the individual conscience. It came from bringing out the effects of discovered truth on religion in a systematic way. This was not truth produced 'rationally' as opposed to 'irrationally'—by 'reason' rather than 'faith'. It consisted only of a series of results produced by methods of research, discovery and argument that could as well have been used by

<sup>13</sup> *Deliverance from Error*, al-Ghazâlî, in *The Faith and Practice of al-Ghazâlî*, W. Montgomery Watt (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1953), p. 27.

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Spinoza's critics themselves. For example: the textual evidence produced on the composition of the Hebrew Bible; or the anthropological account of the original and force of Judaic law and practice; or the evidence of discrepancies in scriptural chronology. Many of the results of the *Theological-Political Treatise*—whether correct or not—are much more like those from a scientific work than from a philosophical one, in a modern sense. As with results from the past history of the sciences, we can absorb and use them if they are correct, and forget them as curiosities where they are not. But in any event, it becomes necessary to adjust what is believed, or believed to be true, in the light of whatever does come to be accepted. More knowledge, if that is what it is, is not an *alternative* to less knowledge:

. . . *he that increaseth knowledge increaseth sorrow*  
*Ecclesiastes I, 18*

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