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Philosophical Precursors to the Radical Enlightenment: Vignettes on the Struggle Between Philosophy and Theology From the Greeks to Leibniz With Special Emphasis on Spinoza

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Philosophical Precursors to the Radical Enlightenment:
Vignettes on the Struggle Between Philosophy and Theology from the Greeks to Leibniz

With Special Emphasis on Spinoza

by

Anthony John DeSantis

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy
Department of Philosophy
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Copyright © 2011, Anthony John DeSantis
Once again (as in my master’s thesis), to you, my father, Anthony John DeSantis, from whom I owe so much, and to whom I am deeply grateful.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

“Give honor to whom honor is due”

I learned from my parents and from a great Pentecostal preacher long ago that we are all indebted to the people who have helped us in our lives. We owe them. I have a lot of debts to a lot of people. And all these, in one way or another, helped me to get to this point.

First and foremost, I want to thank my mom and dad, to whom I dedicated my Master’s Degree. This time around, I want most to thank my father, Anthony John DeSantis, to whom I am forever deeply indebted and grateful. Thanks for your love, perseverance, and help through all the many years, Dad.

Secondly, I must thank my children for their love and friendship. They’re the creatures that I’ve been living for since they were born: Ruth, Anthony, Leah, and Keri. Were I not so greatly in debt to my father, this work most certainly would have been dedicated to you. I am therefore obligated to write further works of which to dedicate to you to express my love and dedication.

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Last but not least, I owe a lot of the pleasure and the success of this dissertation to the principal supervisor of my doctoral committee, Professor Roger Ariew. I thank him for the enormous amount of time and energy he took out from his busy, professional life to discuss a million things about philosophy with me. Working closely with one of the world's greatest early modern philosophy scholars was not only immensely exciting to me, and a privilege that I never took for granted, but there was also so much else I learned that are essential for new scholars entering the field of their choosing – how the business of philosophy works in universities and colleges, the business of publishing, finding out what
goes behind the scenes at conferences, who’s who, who’s a jerk, who’s a conniver, etceteras.

I am also obligated to write future works to dedicate to him to express my thanks and
obligation. Thanks much, Professor Ariew.

A.D.
Tampa, Florida
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My dissertation lays out some of the chief philosophical precursors to Jonathan Israel’s Radical Enlightenment. It investigates the principal question of Will Durant’s *The Age of Voltaire*: “How did it come about that a major part of the educated classes in Europe and America has lost faith in the theology that for fifteen centuries gave supernatural sanctions and supports to the precarious and uncongenial moral code upon which Western civilization has been based?” The aim of this project is both broad and specific: the first is to provide a general history of the philosophical precursors to the Radical Enlightenment up until the early modern period, and the second is to highlight one of these precursors in detail, which I do in the large Spinoza part. With the assistance of a great deal of scholarship in philosophy of religion, history of philosophy, theological analysis, biblical criticism, and historiography, my dissertation contends that the major philosophical precursors against orthodox faith in revelation and for the Radical Enlightenment have been derived primarily from several forces. I present some of the general arguments of some of the pre-Socratics and Greek philosophers, especially Socrates and Plato, emphasizing their rationalist and non-theological thinking. Then I point out how some of this Greek philosophical literature led to new philosophical and theological elements in some of the teachings of the Church Fathers, some of the medievals, and some of the scholastics, up to the early modern period. The core of my argument, however, begins to pick up steam at the Renaissance. With the Renaissance, the Scientific Revolution, and the early Enlightenment New Philosophy, everything changes. Renaissance textual criticism of
ancient texts leads to the beginnings of some genuine biblical criticism. The explosion of naturalist-leaning explanations of nature via Copernicus, Galileo, Descartes and many others in the Scientific Revolution leads many to wonder if God is needed. The rejection of Aristotelian and Scholastic metaphysics by the New Philosophers, most notably, Descartes, undermine what for many provided the philosophical underpinnings for the Church and theology. And then “the most unkindest cut of all,” the revolutionary historical and textual criticism of the Bible (by many early Enlightenment philosophers, especially Spinoza) which utterly undermines and refutes Judaism and Christianity.
PREFACE

I’m glad to be here. It has taken many years to get here. I started my studies in philosophy at Hunter College and the Graduate Center of the City University of New York in the 1980s, but, due to countervailing circumstances, I had to leave New York and move down to Florida. And that meant that I had to leave the Graduate Center. That hurt because I wanted so much to have a career in philosophy and now that dream seemed to be snuffed out. Not too long after our move down here, I was left with four small children to take care of. By this time both my parents had died and the rest of my family and friends were in New York.

Besides my enjoyment of and love for my children, I feared that my dreams for a career in philosophy were over. There were moments in which I despaired of ever making it back. Over the years, it sometimes seemed like a noose was around my neck because year after year after year I couldn’t do what I wanted to do. I had some good jobs along the way, but they were not what I wanted to do.

It has taken over 20 years to get here. I had to wait until my kids got on their own. To make a long story short: Even though it has taken this long to get here, and that I won’t have as long a career in philosophy as I had originally wished for, I’m thankful and very glad to be here.

Since my college years I had planned to do my dissertation in epistemology. Yet in the summer of 2008, with the professor of epistemology out of town, and wishing to earn further credits, I asked the chair of the department, Professor Ariew, for a Directed Study
course. But that would mean doing early modern philosophy with Descartes, Pascal, Leibniz, Spinoza, and the rest – which I disliked because I had imbibed analytic philosophy's distaste of all philosophy that smacked of metaphysics, including from the great philosophers of the 17th century.

At any rate, I threw myself into these studies to see what I could learn from them. Every day I would go to the library, read all day till about 4:00 and then go to professor Ariew's office to discuss what I had read. He would discuss these issues with me for an hour, an hour and a half, and sometimes two hours a day. Every day. All summer (and the next summer and many times in between and since then)! By the end of that summer I was so immersed in this work and so grateful that he took out so much time teaching me that I decided to switch my dissertation topic. A student could not ask for a better professor. His passion for his field is contagious. For me, Professor Ariew epitomizes the best in academia, scholarship, and even humanity (though I think he would strongly disagree with this last point).

Though the work before you might be considered too large (at least according to some reckonings of how many pages a doctoral dissertation is supposed to be), I had hoped to include much more in it. I am happy that I have completed the gist of this dissertation, but I am disappointed as well, for I have done an enormous amount of study and taken an enormous amount of notes for the purpose of writing a fuller history of the precursors to the Radical Enlightenment. I also aspired very much to impress professor Ariew with my knowledge of Galileo, Descartes, Pascal, Leibniz, and Spinoza.

I had hoped to include far more material in most of the chapters, especially the chapters on the New Testament, the Renaissance, the Copernican-Galilean Revolution, the Scientific Revolution's drift to naturalism, the 13th century's condemnations against Aristotelianism, the place of Descartes, Pascal, and Leibniz as enlighteners and counter-
enlighteners, and last, but not least, a far fuller account of the Judeo-Christian repudiating works of Spinoza (especially the *Ethics* and, even more, his *Theological-Political Treatise*). I had even aspired to add chapters on Hobbes, Locke, and Newton! My eyes were bigger than my stomach. As I say, I did the study for all these, and I have the notes for them, but I was not able to put these hundreds of pages of notes in good writing order in time. Hence the following “shorter” version of my work is the result. I will have to fill out the rest of this history as time allows in the future.

Two last notes, which I think are needed to explain the large amount of scripture quotes in this dissertation. The reason why I chose this subject for my dissertation was because in my review and study of the secondary literature on the great early modern philosophers, I noticed a glaring deficiency regarding explanations of the Church’s (the “Counter-Enlightenment”) perspective of things. This same deficit is also apparent in the best known historical studies on the Enlightenment. In fact, Jonathan Israel’s *Radical Enlightenment* also acknowledges this deficit and calls for further work in this area.

One of the things I learned over and over again during the course of my research was just how radically different the biblical world view is. In ontology, philosophy of mind, epistemology, logic, philosophy of law, philosophy of government, philosophy of nature, ethics, etc. the biblical world view is unlike anything that “unassisted” common sense or ordinary consciousness of the world could fathom. And yet I have found some people who disagree with my thesis that the New Testament is *that* radical, other-worldly, and obscurantist. Because of this, it seemed to me then that I was forced to explain and justify my case by making sure that I refer to many central scripture passages. Many more scripture passages could have been referred to in order to support my claims, but I had to settle for these so as not to turn this dissertation into a thesis on the Bible. Thus, I not only had to do a great deal of research to make sure that I got the 17th century philosophers
right; I also had to do a great deal of work to make sure I got the New Testament teachings right.

Though the title of this dissertation has to do with the “precursors to the Radical Enlightenment,” to many, to call the Radical Enlightenment “radical” is something of a misnomer. To their thinking, it is the theological world-view that is radical. As such, they feel the need to stress this point because most people don’t know the degree to which contemporary Christianity is ignorant of much of its history and the history of its interpretation of the Bible. One is reminded of a powerful passage by the poet James Russell Lowell on this issue: “Thoughts that great hearts once broke for, we breathe cheaply in the common air.”
“That which was holiest and mightiest of all that the world has yet possessed has bled to death under our knives” – Friedrich Nietzsche
PART I

INTRODUCTION: RADICAL VERSUS RELIGIOUS ENLIGHTENMENT

"It was the best of times, it was the worst of times; it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness; it was the epoch of belief, it was the epoch of incredulity; it was the season of Light, it was the season of Darkness; it was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair; we had everything before us, we had nothing before us; we were all going directly to Heaven, we were all going the other way"

– Charles Dickens.

Introduction

To adapt Charles Dickens’ memorable opening lines from his Tale of Two Cities (which took place in the late Enlightenment during the French Revolution) somewhat to the Radical Enlightenment of Jonathan Israel: How did the west go from the age of faith to the age of Enlightenment? From the devout believer’s perspective: How did Europe go from the best of times (when much of Europe was Christian, e.g. Roman Catholic) to the worst of times (when the Church was rent in many pieces and lost its hegemony), from the age of wisdom (when the theologians held sway) to the age of foolishness (when deism and atheism gained a hold)? How did western culture go from the epoch of belief to the epoch of incredulity, from the season of Light to the season of Darkness? We had everything before us, and now we have nothing before us. We were all going directly to Heaven, but now many are going the other way.

How did Europe go from men whose lives were “looking forward to the city with foundations, whose architect and builder is God” (Heb. 11:10) to men and women whose
lives looked only upon this world as their heavenly city (q.v. Carl Becker’s The Heavenly City of the Eighteenth-Century Philosophers)? How did we go from “The fool hath said in his heart that there is no God” (Ps. 14:1) to the view that the God of religion represents only “the relics of man’s ancient bondage”? How did we go from Jerusalem to Athens, from Jesus to Spinoza, from the age of the miracles of the Bible to the age of the materialism of Hobbes, and from a Christian culture to an “Enlightenment” culture?

In like fashion, the pages of the following study tell the tale of two cities, the City of God and the city of man (as Augustine likened it in his The City of God). We will talk about the two cities both from the perspectives of the City of God and the city of man, both from the perspectives of the heavenly city of spiritual enlightenment and the earthly city of the radical enlightenment. This is a tale of two enlightenments: the spiritual and the unspiritual, the sheep and the goats, the good and the bad, the righteous and the wicked, of believers and unbelievers. It is a tale and a history of the struggle between the two.

The question I wish to ask in this dissertation is similar to the question historian Will Durant poses in the Preface to his Age of Voltaire. He asks: “How did it come about that a major part of the educated classes in Europe and America has lost faith in the theology that for fifteen centuries gave supernatural sanctions and supports to the precarious and uncongenial moral code upon which Western civilization has been based?”

2 Of course, as the Dickens’ quote wonderfully exemplifies, the historical periodization of “the Age of Faith” and the “Enlightenment” is not so neat and tidy as the general construal of them seems to suggest. In this study, however, we will be focusing on some clear differences in philosophy of religion between the two periods and not their commonalities.
more dramatically, how has it come to pass that “That which was holiest and mightiest of all that the world has yet possessed has bled to death under our knives”? 4

The subject and plan of this dissertation

The following doctoral dissertation offers a general and selective history (or vignettes, if you will) of the struggle between rationalism and theology from the Greeks to Leibniz, and a more particular and thorough study of Spinoza, in relation to religion - especially against religion. At the same time it offers partial accounts of some of the principal philosophical precursors to the Radical Enlightenment. But to make clear what “precursors” and “rationalism” and “theology” and “revelation” and the “Radical Enlightenment” are, we will have to explain how we are using these terms. We will also have to discuss what the Radical Enlightenment is primarily against (e.g. revelation [the Bible], prophecy, visions, theology, miracles, the supernatural, animal sacrifice, faith, and so forth). This means that we will need to juxtapose some of the work of radical and moderate rationalist enlighteners with some of the work of orthodox and moderate religious enlighteners (or “counter-enlighteners” depending on how you wish to interpret these terms).

My plan is to provide a sort of partial supplement to Jonathan Israel’s Radical Enlightenment: Philosophy and the Making of Modernity 1650-17505, especially with respect to explaining the “Counter-Enlightenment”, which he admits has not received much study by Enlightenment historians. What we mean by this is that instead of merely referring to

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the “Counter-Enlightenment” or religious beliefs and theologies in general terms, we will show the very specific roots of these beliefs and theologies from the sources, that is, from the texts of revelation themselves. In this way, some of the central issues at stake will be made clearer and readers will be at a better vantage point to judge what they think of this revelation-versus-rationalism dispute.

By the “Radical Enlightenment” Israel means several things, which will be explained in more detail below; but for now it may best be summarized as “the most dramatic step towards secularization and rationalization in Europe’s history.”

Throughout this study we will be using this term also to connote what is usually called “rationalism”, that is, a philosophy or explanation of things that relies either completely or largely on “human reason” and empirical or natural experience rather than on supernatural revelation and religious experience.

But to tell this story within the scope of a doctoral dissertation, its range will have to be delimited. This study will therefore limit itself to the following constraints: Firstly, instead of delineating the whole story of what led to the Enlightenment (social, economic, political, legal, technological, etc.), this study will focus on the tension between the philosophical and the theological. Secondly, to accomplish this we can of course only cover some of the texts in each of the periods from the Greeks to Leibniz. Thirdly, we will delimit our scope by giving attention to aspects on this subject that have not been given much attention to in contemporary scholarship in early modern philosophy (especially in the English speaking world). Thus, as was said above, instead of merely referring to “Counter-Enlightenment” or religious beliefs and theologies in general terms, we will point out the specific texts from which these beliefs and theologies stem and show how they militate against naturalistic or rationalistic thinking. Finally, the ultimate aim of this focus is to see

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6 Ibid. vi.
how the development of this tension led to what is perhaps the most consequential aspect
of the Radical Enlightenment: the repudiation of Christianity and all traditional religion.

A summary view of the chapters and periods that will be covered in this study

According to western Enlightenment historians, the seeds of the European Enlightenment
ultimately stem from the ancient Greeks. It is with the Greeks then that this project of
tracking the precursors to the Radical Enlightenment will begin. From there we will see
how Greek philosophy is attacked by orthodox Jews based on the Jewish scriptures in the
Hellenic period, and then how it is attacked by Christians based on New Testament
revelation from the New Testament period to the Church Fathers to the medieval period.
With the Renaissance, something new under the sun occurs. Europe experiences a cultural
awakening thanks in large part to the translation of humanist, philosophic, and scientific
texts from the ancient pagan Greeks and Romans. The Renaissance seems to have
established a kind of beachhead for further developments which led to the Scientific
Revolution and the “New Philosophy.”

Finally, we will explore some of the key issues in the struggle between orthodox
theology and unorthodox philosophy in the writings of Galileo, Descartes, Leibniz, and
Spinoza during the early modern period. We give especial attention to Spinoza because he
more than any other philosopher of the period best represents the Radical Enlightenment.

All along the way, we will juxtapose religious enlightenment criticisms against
rationalist philosophy with the philosophical radical and moderate enlightenment

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7 The "New Philosophy" (according to Jonathan Israel and many other historians of philosophy) may
be simply and generally characterized here as that movement in 17th century philosophy that
diverged from Platonic and Aristotelian scholastic views of the world to a more "mechanical",
naturalistic, or materialistic way of explaining the world.
criticisms – especially Spinoza’s - against the religious enlighteners. But before proceeding to our chapter on the Greeks, we need to say a few words about the nature and meaning of the Enlightenment and then about the nature and meaning of what Jonathan Israel calls “the Radical Enlightenment.”
Chapter One

Defining the "Enlightenment"

"That which was holiest and mightiest of all that the world has yet possessed has bled to death under our knives".

Introduction: Defining the "Enlightenment":
The need for clarity on the use of this term

Because one cannot assume that all readers will know what the Enlightenment and the Radical Enlightenment are, it is necessary to provide at least some explanation of both, and of the forces opposed to them, e.g. the "Counter-Enlightenment." After all, how can one appreciate an account of the precursors to the Radical Enlightenment if one is not clear on what the Radical Enlightenment itself was? In fact, most people not only do not know what the Radical Enlightenment was, but they have never even heard of it.

It turns out that the problem of understanding the Enlightenment is more difficult than what even many historians have recognized. In the preface of his Enlightenment Contested, Jonathan Israel tells his readers that “there still remains great uncertainty, doubt, and lack of clarity about what exactly the Enlightenment was.”

Even “in recent decades”, Israel explains, “both the friends and foes of the Enlightenment are arguing about a historical phenomenon which ... continues to be very inadequately understood and

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8 Spoken by Friedrich Nietzsche in the famous passage in which he announces to the world that “God is dead.” I take it (and so do Nietzsche scholars) that this passage metaphorically encapsulates Nietzsche’s history of precursors to the repudiation of Christianity (which, for our study, is called the Radical Enlightenment). Friedrich Nietzsche. Translated by Walter Kaufman. The Gay Science (New York: Vintage Books, 1974), 181, section 125. For the full context of this quote see Appendix A.

One may take this as a polite way of saying that even those who think they know what the Enlightenment is all about often do not get it quite right. As a consequence of their assumed knowledge, many supporters and detractors of the Enlightenment often talk at cross-purposes on this subject.

The first thing that we need to do, therefore, before giving our account of the precursors to the Radical Enlightenment, is to try to get clearer on the meaning of the terms “Enlightenment”, “Radical Enlightenment” and “Counter-Enlightenment.” As in many technical terms in the study of the history of philosophy, these terms are actually quite complicated and therefore need some space to explain them.

Defining the “Enlightenment”: first definition

What is the definition of “Enlightenment”? How should the Enlightenment be defined? The short answer to these questions is: “It all depends on who is doing the defining.” For anyone who has read in the literature, the “Enlightenment” has been defined or explained in many different ways. Various historians and philosophers interpret it differently. It would be very useful, therefore, if we could come to at least some agreed understanding of these key terms.

Standard dictionaries typically give at least two general definitions of the term “Enlightenment”: one of them usually having to do with an 18th century movement in philosophy that relies on reason, and the other a religious meaning of the term that relies on God (we will take up this definition below). In this Introduction, we will treat both

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10 Ibid. See also Roger Ariew’s “Modernity” for further insights into the problems and blurring of the lines of what are usually taken to be essential characteristics of modernity. Roger Ariew, “Modernity,” Cambridge History of Medieval Philosophy, ed. R. Pasnau (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 114-126.
definitions along with new contributions to our understanding of the Enlightenment from Jonathan Israel and other Enlightenment historians.

The first dictionary definition of “Enlightenment” typically goes something like this: “Enlightenment: A philosophic movement of the 18th century marked by a rejection of traditional, social, religious, and political ideas and an emphasis on rationalism.”11 A couple points need to be said about the accuracy of this definition right from the outset. First, Jonathan Israel’s work argues for (and to my mind conclusively proves) that the Enlightenment really began in the mid-seventeenth century and did not commence in the 18th century as so many dictionaries and histories of the Enlightenment would have it. And second, Israel does more than change the traditional dating scheme for the Enlightenment. In order for us to better understand this period (and of comparable enlightenment movements in other times and places), he argues that it is necessary to distinguish between at least two Enlightenments. This is so especially with respect to the early modern European Enlightenment.

One should not think that there was only one Enlightenment, as Peter Gay’s 1966 classic, two-volume work on the Enlightenment claimed. Instead, Israel argues, ”From the outset [of] the late seventeenth century, there were always two enlightenments”, a “moderate enlightenment” and a “radical enlightenment.”12 Contrary to Gay’s ground breaking work, Israel argues that “conceptually, there were always two – and could never have been ‘only one Enlightenment’ – because of the basic and ubiquitous disagreement about whether reason alone reigns supreme in human life or whether philosophy’s scope must be limited and reason reconciled with faith and tradition.”13 Whether “reason alone reigns supreme in human life” is part of the position of the radical enlightenment (which Spinoza,

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12 Enlightenment Contested, op. cited, 11.
13 Ibid. 10.
for example, exemplifies); whether “philosophy’s scope must be limited and reason reconciled with faith and tradition” is the position of the moderate enlightenment (which Leibniz, for example, exemplifies).

This distinction between the moderate and radical enlightenment is extremely helpful for gaining a greater insight into the dynamics of the 17th and 18th century Enlightenment (as it is for other enlightenment movements in history, as we will see). Without this dual Enlightenment distinction in mind, confusion about how to understand the Enlightenment is bound to result.

Take another historian’s work on the Enlightenment besides the aforementioned Peter Gay, for instance. For R. G. Collingwood the Enlightenment is defined as “that endeavour, so characteristic of the early eighteenth century, to secularize every department of human life and thought. It was a revolt not only against the power of institutional religion but against religion as such.”14 If this definition is sufficient, then we are left with a serious problem. Someone knowledgeable about the Enlightenment might retort to the characterization of the Enlightenment by Gay and Collingwood as wholly secular and anti-Christian by asking: “If your characterization of the Enlightenment as wholly secular and anti-Christian is true, than how is it that so many Christians created the Enlightenment? How is it that many Christians campaigned for an Enlightenment in philosophy, science, government, law, and so on? Descartes, Leibniz, Mersenne, Malebranche, Locke, Newton, and many others were all in some shape or form, Christians, and they labored for a more enlightened world, and one emancipated from excess superstitions and unprofitable thinking inherited from the medieval world. How should we explain this apparent contradiction?

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I think that the best way to answer this question is as follows. First, only the radical elements of the Enlightenment are patently wholly secular and anti-Christian; and second, some of the moderate enlighteners (such as Descartes) in some respects unknowingly led to further secular and radical

Defining the war between moderate Enlightenment, radical Enlightenment, and the counter-enlightenment

Before discussing the second typical dictionary definition of the term "Enlightenment", we need to say a few more words about the Enlightenment’s dual, and indeed “triangular”, nature because of its centrality in Israel’s account. This is important to note because, as Israel argues, “from its first inception, the Enlightenment in the western Atlantic world was always a mutually antagonistic duality... the ceaseless internecine strife within it – between moderate mainstream and Radical Enlightenment – is much the most fundamental and important thing about it.”

Since this is so, Israel contends that

Neither the historian nor the philosopher is likely to get very far with discussing ‘modernity’ unless he or she starts by differentiating Radical Enlightenment from conservative – or as it is called in this study – moderate mainstream Enlightenment. For the difference between reason alone and reason combined with faith and tradition was a ubiquitous and absolute difference ... ‘modernity’ is the richly nuanced brew which arose as a result of the ongoing conflict between these two enlightenments, but also (or still more) between both these enlightenments, on the one hand, and, on the other, the successive counter-enlightenments.

In essence then, the Enlightenment was a tripartite war, or what Israel calls a “triangular battle of ideas”: “In this triangular battle of ideas what was ultimately at stake was what kind of belief system should prevail in Europe’s politics, social order, and institutions, as well as in high culture and, no less, in popular attitudes.”

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15 *Enlightenment Contested*, 10.
16 Ibid. 11.
17 Ibid.
succinctly, what was at stake in this triangular battle of ideas was nothing less than the fate of God.

This war, than, was not only waged by the Counter-Enlightenment (i.e. orthodox or traditional Christianity in government, the schools, and the pulpit) against the radical enlightenment. The moderates also saw the radicals as a grave threat against the truth and against a moral culture: "Frequently, the moderate mainstream were consciously, even desperately, reacting to what was widely perceived as the massively dangerous threat posed by radical thought." But the moderate proponents of the Enlightenment were also battling the Counter-Enlightenment and vice versa:

Down to the 1750s the principal luminaries of the moderate Enlightenment were uninterruptedly battling on several different fronts simultaneously. Divided among themselves into three main separate factions contending for the middle ground, they were at the same time engaged in fending off traditionalists on one flank and radicals on the other. Hence it became a typical feature of intellectual conflict that moderates endeavoured to shield themselves against conservatives by stressing, even exaggerating, the gulf dividing them from the universally reviled and abhorred radicals while, simultaneously, traditionalists sought a tactical advantage, in their public discourse, by minimizing the gap separating the latter from the moderates as much as possible.

Israel also makes the case several times that the Counter-Enlightenment actually helped the Radical Enlightenment because the Counter-Enlightenment attacked the inconsistencies and contradictions in the moderate mainstream Enlightenment:

For [the moderate mainstream Enlightenment] was always fatally hampered by its Achilles heel, namely that all its philosophical recipes for blending theological and traditional categories with the new critical-mathematical rationality proved flawed in practice, not to say highly problematic and shot through with contradiction. Cartesian dualism, Lockean empiricism, Leibnizian monads, Malebranche’s occasionalism, Bishop Huet’s fideism, the London Boyle Lectures, Newtonian physico-theology, Thomasian eclecticism, German and Swedish Wolffianism, all the methodologies of compromise presented insuperable disjunctions and difficulties.
The radical enlighteners eschewed these dualisms and saw them as rationalizations and cowardly adjustments. They traced their genealogy from the “Presocratics through Epicurus, the Stoics, Strato the naturalist, and Machiavelli and then on to Spinoza, Bayle, Fontenelle, Diderot, d’Alembert, Helvetius, d’Holbach, and Condorcet.” Thus they judged moderate enlighteners such as Bacon, Descartes, Leibniz, Locke, and Newton as not going far enough. But there was a problem: at this time the radicals could not win their case against the moderates: “During the eighteenth century, moderate mainstream Enlightenment with its insistence on reconciling reason and religion and support for (modernized) monarchy, aristocracy, and ecclesiastical authority was culturally and politically preponderant in much of the western Atlantic world.” Put more succinctly: “Of the two enlightenments, the moderate mainstream was without doubt overwhelmingly dominant in terms of support, official approval, and prestige practically everywhere.”

21 Ibid. 38.
22 Enlightenment Contested 38. See also 43.
23 Ibid. 11.
The Counter Enlightenment and its definition of “Enlightenment”

The Counter-Enlightenment

The moderate mainstream Enlightenment was the most powerful and popular during the early years of the 17th century, but this would not last, for “in the end it failed, or at least was thwarted, being unable to overcome its own internal intellectual inconsistencies and contradictions.” (We take up the issue of its failure and the successes of the Radical Enlightenment in the next section of this introduction, The Meaning and Triumphs of the Radical Enlightenment). The moderate mainstream also lost ground because of “Counter-Enlightenment attacks showing the pitfalls of mixing faith with reason, and Scripture with philosophy.”

Rather paradoxically, then, radical thought was powerfully aided in the work of secularizing western thought, culture, politics, and society, by its greatest enemy – the Counter-Enlightenment, the very grouping which most denounced it ... The [Counter-Enlightenment] vigorously encouraged popular faith-based hostility to ‘philosophy’, proclaiming the power and sanctity of tradition; but by attacking reason and extolling the simple faith of the masses, such anti-philosophie harshly polarized matters in a way which often played straight into the hands of their radical foes.

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24 Israel uses the term “Counter-Enlightenment” to express “the tremendous power of the traditional counter-offensive, a veritable ‘Counter-Enlightenment’” unleashed against the Radical and even Moderate Enlightenment movements (Radical Enlightenment 7). But it should be pointed out here that there are other “counter-enlightenments” very different from the orthodox, conservative, or fundamentalist religious beliefs. Jonathan Israel’s 2010 A Revolution of the Mind: Radical Enlightenment and the Intellectual Origins of Modern Democracy mentions that there have been “various Counter-Enlightenment movements ... from the mid-seventeenth century down to the crushing of Nazism, the supreme Counter-Enlightenment, in 1945” (xi). But there is one Counter-Enlightenment that Israel particularly takes to task (in his 2006 Enlightenment Contested). This counter-enlightenment has some diverse interpretations (such as from various Romantics or from Isaiah Berlin), but since the 1960’s it is usually known by contemporary terms such as “post-enlightenment” or “postmodernism.” Because this movement lies outside the focus of this dissertation, we cannot discuss it in any great detail here. Having said that however, we should admit that no contemporary analysis of the Enlightenment can be considered well-informed without at least some knowledge of this counter-enlightenment. Because of this, we refer the reader therefore to Appendix B at the end of this study, which gives a general account of some of the meanings of “post-enlightenment” or “postmodernity” in relation to the Enlightenment and modernity.

25 Ibid. 38.

26 Ibid. 38.
The Counter-Enlightenment movement (since the inception of Christianity by Jesus and his followers) has usually reacted hostilely against any changes or differences from the gospel and teachings that they believe God revealed to them: “I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me,” says Jesus (Jn. 14:6).

Christianity is extremely exclusivist. The apostle Paul made this patently clear when he laid down the following dogma.

But even if we or an angel from heaven should preach a gospel other than the one we preached to you, let him be eternally condemned. As we have already said, so now I say again: If anybody is preaching to you a gospel other than what you accepted, let him be eternally condemned! (Gal. 1:8-9).

There have always been those in the ranks of the religious who have rejected philosophy and rationalism altogether in favor of faith, piety, and submission to God. While the moderate or liberal strains of Christianity are committed to harmonizing revelation and philosophy, the radicals reject revelation, and the obedient counter-enlightenment condemn both the radicals’ rejection and the moderates’ compromises. And indeed they must, for the scriptures, which they believe to be the very oracles of God, explicitly state that they ought to reject all such compromises with the world and philosophy. As the New Testament emphatically puts it:

Do not be yoked together with unbelievers. For what do righteousness and wickedness have in common? Or what fellowship can light have with darkness? What harmony between Christ and Belial? What does a believer have in common with an unbeliever? What agreement is there between the temple of God and idols? (2 Cor. 6:14-16).

This attitude is dutifully followed in the next generation of the Church Fathers, some of whom received an excellent pagan and philosophical education. To take only one example:

In the spirit of the New Testament texts just cited above, Tertullian, proclaims:

“What likeness is there between the philosopher and the Christian, the disciple of Greece and the disciple of heaven, the trader in reputation and the trader in salvation, the doer in words and the worker of deeds, the builder up and destroyer
of things, the friend and the enemy of error, the corrupter and the restorer and exponent of truth, its thief and its guardian?

And again:

What indeed has Athens to do with Jerusalem? What concord is there between the Academy and the Church? What between heretics and Christians? ... Away with all the attempts to produce a mottled Christianity of Stoic, Platonic, and dialectic composition! We want no curious disputation after possessing Jesus Christ, no inquisition after enjoying the gospel! With our faith we desire no further belief.27

We will see this characteristic attitude throughout our study which we will take us from the ancient Greeks to 18th century Europe. Thus, even in the midst of the 17th and 18th century European Enlightenment, many thinking Christians came to realize that “a philosophical accommodation of reason and faith” was futile. This pattern (in which thinking Christians and Jews tried to reconcile biblical teachings with the new findings in the sciences, textual criticism, and the new philosophy only to realize that this was impossible) played out again and again in these centuries. This turn away from reason to exclusive faith happened to all sorts of educated men throughout Europe. It happened to the philosophically trained Albert Burgh. It happened to the great geologist Nicolas Steno. And, of course, it happened also to many of the century’s greatest theologians.

Take Huguenot theologian Isaac Papin (1657-1709), for instance. He was originally an “ardent champion of reason and toleration.” He “explored every path towards a philosophical accommodation of reason and faith”, [but] in the end, after years of peregrination ..., he abandoned such research as self-defeating and hopeless, turning his back on reason and toleration alike.”28

Or take Bishop Pierre-Daniel Huet: “Despite having, in earlier years, been a zealous Cartesian himself and converted others ... to that philosophy”, he eventually turned away from it and began attacking Cartesianism.

28 *Enlightenment Contested*, 39.
The root cause of the spiritual malaise gripping France, the ‘sickness’ of the age [as he calls it], was, according to his diagnosis, the insidious and growing tendency to subordinate Revelation to reason, an impulse deriving from Descartes and culminating in ‘Benedictus Spinoza, the author of the *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus* ... that horrible and sacrilegious book full of impiety, ignorance and madness’. Cartesian ‘reason’, he urges, leads directly and inevitably to the triumph of Spinoza and therefore the ruin of everything.²⁹

One simply cannot properly understand the Radical Enlightenment unless one also learns what the Radical Enlightenment was fighting against and seeking to replace. Indeed, in most respects, many of the teachings of the Radical Enlightenment have their origins in this very reaction. Therefore, the student of the Enlightenment who does not accurately understand Christianity will not accurately understand the Radical Enlightenment.

One last word here about the Counter-Enlightenment before delineating their definition of “Enlightenment” and then concluding this Introduction with an account of the Radical Enlightenment’s triumphs. From his almost exhaustive research into the history of the Enlightenment, Jonathan Israel makes a curious claim about the Counter Enlightenment. He says that the “Counter-Enlightenment has been little studied by historians.”³⁰ This is an interesting thing to say because the various published histories of the Enlightenment have a lot to say about the Counter-Enlightenment. How can they not say a lot about the Counter-Enlightenment since the Radical Enlightenment stems from, or is a reaction against, the Counter-Enlightenment? How is it that they can say so much about it without having studied much about it?

Based on my research on this subject, I think I understand what Israel means here. I think he is implying that Enlightenment historians and historians of the philosophy of this period both focus (and therefore most study) about the new guys on the block, that is, the moderate and radical enlighteners of the 17th century. They are not as interested in the religious thinkers of the day. After all, aren’t the religious people saying what they've

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²⁹ *Radical Enlightenment*, 487.
³⁰ *Counter Enlightenment*, 38.
always been saying since Christianity’s beginning 1600 years ago from then? While the
hero of their studies (philosophers like Leibniz or Malebranche) do not bifurcate between
religion and philosophy to the extent of not allowing theology to enter into one’s
philosophizing, contemporary historians tend to do just this. Each of the great early
modern philosophers (Galileo, Descartes, Hobbes, Pascal, Spinoza, Leibniz, Locke, Newton)
all knew, published, and dealt in detail with Christian theology and biblical interpretation.

While making many general pronouncements about the Counter-Enlightenment in
their works, some contemporary scholars nevertheless bypass several important details
(for example, specific details on such matters as the ultimate causes and motivations of the
Counter-Enlightenment; why they have censured and persecuted those who with different
opinions; why doubting is considered sinful; why toleration is unacceptable). It might be
that they assume that most people know the answers to these questions. Upon closer
inspection however, this is often not the case. Many people do not know why the Church
censored, persecuted, excommunicated, jailed, and even burnt to the stake its opponents.

The neglect of expounding the nature of the Radical Enlightenment’s enemy occurs,
I believe, for a number of reasons, including what the Radical Enlightenment itself has
caused (that is, its pervasive secularization of not only government and law, but of
education, as well). For now, let only a couple points suffice. (I will take this issue up in
more detail in other sections of this study.) In our 21st century world, most people are
educated in secular institutions of learning. Consequently, students are no longer publically
taught to believe or study the Bible or Church history as in the early modern period. As a
result, many Enlightenment scholars and historians of philosophy are simply not as
educated or trained in the things of Christianity as the 17th and 18th century Enlightenment
proponents and opponents were – especially regarding scripture and theology.
The status of the Eucharist or the Trinity is no longer a living issue for many academics today as it most certainly was for those during much of the Enlightenment. Contemporary scholars are understandably more interested in issues closer to their field in contemporary philosophy, for instance. (But how can one competently judge Hobbes’s \textit{Leviathan} or Spinoza’s \textit{Theological-Political Treatise}, which are literally filled with scriptural and theological argumentation, unless one knows the scriptures and theology well?) I make it a point in this dissertation to deal with this deficit by addressing the various Counter-Enlightenments’ positions not only in general, wide-sweeping summations, but from multiple, specific, and documented sources from their own scripture, church fathers, and key theologians throughout their history up until the Radical Enlightenment.

Now that we have said something about the Counter-Enlightenment, let us see how \textit{they} define “Enlightenment.” We will find that it is upon this rock that they base their claims. It is the foundation upon which Christianity was founded and continues.

Defining “Enlightenment”: second definition

The second dictionary definition of “Enlightenment” is very different from the first. The second definition that dictionaries usually give to explain “Enlightenment” is one which does not refer to philosophy or to any particular century, but rather to spiritual revelation and transformation. This older understanding of the term is religious. The religious meaning of enlightenment is something that the divine does in one’s soul and not something that the devotee gains through any kind of pure or secular reasoning. As one New Testament recipient of some of the highest levels of enlightenment put it: “I want you to know, brothers, that the gospel I preached is not something that man made up. I did not receive it from any man, nor was I taught it; rather I received it by revelation from Jesus Christ” (Gal. 1:11-12).
Religious teachers insist that this kind of enlightenment is a spiritual experience or revelation from God. The source of these enlightenment experiences or revelations is not derived by intellectualistic, rationalistic, curiosity-driven means. One experiences this enlightenment. It is passively received and not actively thought up like the radical enlightenment’s call “to use one’s own mind without another’s guidance.” This latter individualist, rationalist call is one of the principal characteristics the German Enlightenment philosopher Emmanuel Kant defines as essential for understanding the true meaning of enlightenment (See his classic definition of the Enlightenment in his “An Answer to the question ‘What is Enlightenment’”). Kant’s newer meaning of the term has to do with thinking and philosophy, society and politics, and not with spiritual illuminative knowledge.

Long before the proponents of the secular or radical enlightenment (such as Kant) got their hands on this term, religious men such as St. Paul were using this word not only in a very different way, but in a totally opposite way. For St. Paul enlightenment is something that God does in you and not something you can learn on your own: “I keep asking that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the glorious Father, may give you the Spirit of wisdom and revelation so that you may know him better. I pray also that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened in order that you may know...” and then goes on to cite all sorts of spiritual or theological claims (Ephesians 1:17-18). There are literally hundreds of such passages throughout the New Testament on this doctrine of enlightenment of the spiritual kind.

Kant’s definition of the Enlightenment is not meant to be restricted to the historical Enlightenment movement of the 17th and 18th centuries. It is meant to be an attitude, a philosophy, and a commitment. What is this new Enlightenment? Kant summarizes the answer to this question in the following words: “that man must use one’s own mind without another’s guidance” and “Have the courage to use your own understanding’, is therefore the motto of the enlightenment.”
“Without another’s guidance”! Relying and using “your own understanding”! This is the exact opposite of the enlightenment that the New Testament teaches. Instead of this kind of self-reliance, the heroes of the spiritual enlightenment brag that: “we take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ” (2 Cor. 10:5). The only guidance that the New Testament commands believers to submit to is to that of the Word of God, the apostles, and the leaders of the Church.

To the devout Christian, the notion of personal independence or of having the courage to dare think for one’s self and not in line with Christian thought is audacious – that is, outrageous. A significant example of this may be cited. In his famous letter to the Romans, the apostle Paul explicitly denies to human beings the right to question God or to judge according to human powers (see chapters 9 and 11 in Romans). One does not have a right, for example, to question God’s ways even when from the human perspective it appears to be unjust. In three whole chapters Paul lays out a case for what is known as the sovereignty of God.

This is the doctrine that before the foundations of the earth were laid, God had already determined the many unto eternal damnation and the few to eternal bliss. As God says to Moses, “I will have mercy on whom I have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I have compassion.” Paul then asks, “What shall we say? Is God unjust?” You probably can anticipate his response. His response to what human nature would call a horribly abuse of arbitrary power is: “Not at all!” and then goes on to quote scripture verses that he thinks justifies any and all of God’s actions. “Who are you, O man, to talk back to God? ‘Shall what is formed say to him who formed it, ‘Why did you make me like this?’”

31 Thousands of examples of this attitude may be documented throughout the history of Christianity, but one will be cited here in response to the growing philosophical enlightenment in Europe. In France, “the celebrated court preacher Father Jean-Baptiste Massillon” interpreted the growing Enlightenment movement with its “thirst for philosophy … as a form of rebellion against religion and the Church.” At the royal chapel at Versailles, he denounces philosophy as an arrogant bid for personal independence” (Radical Enlightenment, 63).
Does not the potter have the right to make out of the same lump of clay some pottery for noble purposes and some for common use?"

Paul goes on to suggest that God wills some to destruction “to show his wrath and make his power known” (Rom. 9:14-22). He explicitly states that God purposely hardens and blinds those he has previously prepared to destroy. “God gave them over to a spirit of stupor, eyes so that they could not see and ears so that they could not hear” (Rom. 11:8). And how does he respond to this what to all appearances looks like outrageous cruelty? He breaks out into praise: “Oh, the depth of the riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable his judgments, and his paths beyond tracing out!” (Rom. 11:33).

Paul is not going to follow Kant’s Enlightenment motto to “use one’s own mind without another’s guidance” or “Have the courage to use your own understanding.” On the contrary, he does the exact opposite. This is the great divide on what constitutes enlightenment between those who believe by faith and those who will only believe what passes muster according to human reason.

How can such a believer, who will not critique or question God in any way, do philosophy, for the existence of God, the nature of God, the problem of evil, and the truths or falsities of the various teachings of religions are essential issues that every philosopher must take up. If one is denied the freedom to honestly and fully explore the premises that one works with, one cannot do the subject sufficient justice. Kant understood this challenge well. Of the modern European Enlightenment and its philosophical requirements, he says:

Our age is, in especial degree, the age of criticism, and to criticism everything must submit. Religion through its sanctity, and law-giving through its majesty, may seek to exempt themselves from it. But they then awaken just suspicion, and cannot claim the sincere respect which reason accords only to that which has been able to sustain the test of free and open examination.32

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The further Enlightenment demand to critique even religious beliefs based on one’s own reason here is also the opposite of what the New Testament teaches. Jesus often taught that “If any man follow me, he must deny himself and take up his cross.” The Radical Enlightenment from the perspective of the heroes of the New Testament (if they could have known the radical enlighteners) is spiritual blindness and death. Christianity teaches that one should submit one’s thinking to God. Jesus’s brother James wrote “Submit yourselves, therefore, unto God and resist the devil” (James 4:7). One does not question, criticize, or doubt God or Christ or the Scriptures. One does not rely on one’s self, or one’s own powers, or one’s own mind on religious matters. Instead, one trusts in the Lord: “Lean not unto thine own understanding, but trust in the Lord with all thine heart” (Prov. 3:5). To think for one’s self and to seek to advance the cause of man, undirected by God, is evil hubris according to the scriptures. It is tantamount to the sinful attitude of those who sought to build the fabled Tower of Babel – to reach heaven on their own, that is, through secular means (Gen. 11:1-9).

True enlightenment for the biblical believer is when one trusts God despite what one thinks or knows or reasons! This is why the heroes of the scriptures (read Hebrews 11 for a quintessential example) can in no way be secular rationalists, humanists, or individualists, but men and women of faith, men and women who submit their thinking to God’s way of thinking (“Not my will be done, but thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven”, Mt. 6:10). The enlightenment (of Kant and Spinoza and the radical enlightenment) then, according to the counter-enlightenment, is self-centered (not Christ-centered). It is humanistic, not theistic. It bases its beliefs on the principle of man. It relies on or depends on the arm of the flesh, and not on God Spirit: “Not by flesh, nor by [human] power, but by my Spirit, saith the Lord” (Zech. 4:6) is the oft-repeated message of biblical religion. These claims, as we will see throughout this dissertation, are the arguments or claims of the counter-enlightenment.
Defining the history of the “Enlightenment”

Since the difference between the two dictionary definitions of Enlightenment are so radically different (at least with respect to the radical Enlightenment), the following question naturally arises: “How comes it that the term ‘Enlightenment’ comes to be used in reference to a movement and period of time in which religion or spiritual enlightenment are questioned, doubted, and even rejected?

In an essay which seeks to determine to what extent Kant’s predecessor Gottfried Leibniz could be considered enlightened (in the Spinozistic, Kantian, or radical sense), Leibniz scholar Mogens Laerke gives a brief summary of the history of the term ‘Enlightenment’:

Let us first consider Kant’s position a bit more, and in particular the meaning of his Enlightenment motto: Sapere aude! Kant also used the motto as an epitaph in the Prolegomena. Where does this famous “motto” (Wahlspruch) come from? Contrary to what is often presumed, Kant is not its inventor. The expression originally stems from a letter from Horace to Lollius, where it appears in a context which has nothing to do with the Enlightenment. However, other thinkers before Kant have taken it up in interesting contexts. Pierre Gassendi suggested it as an intellectual motto to the French erudite libertine Samuel La Sorbière. In 1718, the poet and arch enemy of Alexander Pope, Ambrose Philips, also known as “Namby Pampy”, launched a Whig journal called The Freethinker the subtitle of which was “Sapere aude.” Finally, and much closer to Kant, “Sapere aude” was the motto of the German learned society called the Aletophilen, i.e. the “friends of truth”, founded by Count Ernst Christoph Manteuffel in 1736 to promote Leibnizian-Wolffian philosophy. The logo and motto of the society however was invented by someone who was not a member of the society and certainly not a Leibnizian-Wolffian, namely the persecuted and poor philosopher Johann Georg Wachter, best known for two books that combine Spinozism with the branch of Jewish mysticism known as Cabbalism.

To be sure, these facts concerning the historical background of the motto will not teach us what Kant meant by it, but they are still indicative of the heritage he took up when adopting it.33

Laerke then concludes:

So what kind of conclusion can we draw from the fact that an early modern philosopher close to the erudite libertines, a British freethinker, and a persecuted Spinozist introduced the ideal of ‘Daring to know’ in the Republic of Letters? What do they have in common? It is, in my view, first of all indicative of the fact that audacity is an ideal in important respects connected to the ‘radical enlightenment’, to speak like Jonathan Israel. Following Israel’s description, the radical enlightenment ... actively worked on the subversion of religion .... Their common source was Spinoza’s philosophy ... mainly the splendid *Tractatus theologico-politicus*.34

The acceptance and use of the term “Enlightenment” by the intellectuals, philosophers, and historians of the time appears to be a great piece of irony. In truth, the use of the term 'Enlightenment’ (in its radical, Kantian sense) seems insulting to what had previously been considered enlightened in that it calls ‘enlightened’ all that the essence of Christianity calls un-enlightened. To be enlightened, according to the New Testament, is to have “the eyes of your heart enlightened in order that you may know the truth” (Eph. 1:18). But according to the Radical Enlightenment all such explanations are considered “enthusiastic” and therefore things that must be routed out.

And so we see that at least some understandings of the “Enlightenment” entail the rejection (or at least the questioning or doubting of) claims to spiritual enlightenment. In these senses then, this use of the term must be taken to be ironic or antagonistic; for what the use of this term actually means to imply is that some people (those of the Enlightenment) have found out that claims made by religious people about enlightenment experiences are in reality untrue or false. And, given that they and they themselves, have become privy to this knowledge, they see themselves, rather than the spiritually enlightened, as the ones who are truly enlightened. As Karl Marx “stood Hegel on his head”, so also some of the proponents of the historical Enlightenment turned the hitherto historically sanctioned meaning of Enlightenment on its head such that they gave it the

34 Ibid. 3.
exact opposite meaning. So, for these proponents of the Enlightenment, the old use of the term Enlightenment is tantamount to superstition, falsehood, error, and the like; and the new and better meaning refers to greater insight into the truth of nature and life.

We must bear in mind, however, that my use of the phrase, ‘some proponents of the Enlightenment’ means not all proponents of the Enlightenment thought this way. Some proponents of the Enlightenment understood Enlightenment not as the repudiation of revelation or Christianity (and all this entails), but rather some kind of harmonious synthesis of both Christianity and the findings of reason, science, and biblical criticism. For these (and they are all believers), the Enlightenment and spiritual enlightenment need not contradict each other. In fact, to them, since God is the God of all truth (as they must say because of their faith in scripture which says this), therefore all truth (philosophical, scientific, moral, aesthetic, political, etc.) – if it is truth – can and must harmonize. Thus, for these thinkers, the Enlightenment meant something very different from the Enlightenment of the unbelievers. For the former, the Enlightenment demands some kind of new interpretation of Christianity (and all that it entails) ranging from some moderate reforms to the total repudiation of Christianity (this latter meaning is usually closer to the meaning of the ‘Radical Enlightenment’).

The meaning and triumphs of the Radical Enlightenment

In the section above, we laid out the general contours of the Enlightenment (moderate and radical) with which we have to do in this study, but we still have not clarified enough what specifically the Radical Enlightenment was, when it started, who were its principal
proponents, or the approximate dates for these. As we cited in an earlier footnote, in order to fully assess “the Enlightenment”, one needs to know what “post-enlightenment” thinkers have said. Israel acknowledges this and takes up some of these issues in his next work on the Enlightenment called Enlightenment Contested.

Thankfully, to understand most of what Israel means by the Radical Enlightenment in his monumental, 800-page book, The Radical Enlightenment: Philosophy and the Making of Modernity 1650-1750, one need only read his two-page Preface and his twenty-page Introduction. But the most succinct and comprehensive definition of the Radical Enlightenment that I have been able to find in the

35 There’s a lot more involved in defining the Enlightenment than either my introduction does or Israel in his Radical Enlightenment. As we cited in an earlier footnote, in order to fully assess “the Enlightenment”, one needs to know what “post-enlightenment” thinkers have said. Israel acknowledges this and takes up some of these issues in his next work on the Enlightenment called Enlightenment Contested.

For a long time I wrestled with post-enlightenment interpretations of “the Enlightenment.” There is a vast literature out there on many and various aspects of “the Enlightenment” and the “Counter-Enlightenment.” Right off hand, one thinks of the historically and philosophically important works of Rousseau, Haaman, Wordsworth, Schleiermacher, Emerson, Schopenhauer, Nietzsche, Foucault, Adorno, Isaiah Berlin, Jung, Charles Taylor, and so on. These valuable and extremely stimulating discussions involve all sorts of aspects of “the Enlightenment” – political, epistemological, psychological, philosophy of history, philosophy of science, philosophy of language and meaning, philosophy of economics, and much more. There’s no way that I can do justice to all this great literature within the scope of this dissertation. Nor am I pretending to have read or comprehended it all; but, thanks to reasoning, I think I have found a way to some agreement despite the many differences and difficulties of these philosophical opinions. The aspect of the “Enlightenment”, or better, the “Radical Enlightenment”, that this study is mostly concerned with is the status of the truth claims of Christianity (though we also touch on Greek religion and Judaism). For instance, the chapter on Greek rationalist philosophy concerns the status of some of the claims of the Greek “Bible” of Hesiod and Homer regarding such things as how the gods fornicate with mortal women and war among themselves, and the like). We can make the issues that we mean to focus on clearer, more concrete, and more specific, still, to eliminate any confusion about what we may mean. By “the truth claims of Christianity” let us have specifically in mind strong biblical claims such as the following: That God commanded His people to go into the Promised Land to slay all of its inhabitants, adults and infants; that God has predestined a minority unto eternal bliss and the many to be tormented for ever; that only through Christ, God’s Son, is there salvation; that there is an evil, extremely powerful angel called the devil or Satan who deceives and keeps most of the world in spiritual darkness; that there was a “Fall” of man such that all humans inherit a “sinful” nature that puts them in need of a propitiary blood atonement (animal sacrifice or Son of God sacrifice); that the Bible is an accurate written record of God’s revelations to man – and many more such teachings may be listed that most Christians down through the centuries have assented to, whether they be Roman Catholic, Eastern Orthodox, or Protestant.

In this way then, I think that most interpreters of the Enlightenment can find some agreement. I think that most of the great literature on the Enlightenment mentioned above can agree on at least a couple of these central doctrines, so that whether you’re a “post-modernist” like, say Richard Rorty, or whether you have some “counter-enlightenment” concerns, such as Isaiah Berlin, in the end, you will agree that some or most of these revelatory claims are false. My brief is not against Christianity or religions as a whole. Christianity and many religions mean far more than only the holding of such theological doctrines. There are other factors, very valuable, that are also at work. They serve all sorts of human services from love of the downtrodden to care for the sick to the preaching against excess selfishness. These goods, and many other virtues, need to be taken into consideration in anyone’s overall judgment of religion.
almost 1800 pages of Jonathan Israel's *Radical Enlightenment* and its successor volume, *Enlightenment Contested*, comes at the end of the latter work. Here professor Israel summarizes the most important aspects of the Radical Enlightenment into eight points.

Radical Enlightenment conceived as a package of basic concepts and values may be summarized in eight cardinal points: (1) adoption of philosophical (mathematical-historical) reason as the only and exclusive criterion of what is true; (2) rejection of all supernatural agency, magic, disembodied spirits, and divine providence; (3) equality of all mankind (racial and sexual); (4) secular ‘universalism’ in ethics anchored in equality and chiefly stressing equity, justice, and charity; (5) comprehensive toleration and freedom of thought based on independent critical thinking; (6) personal liberty of lifestyle and sexual conduct between consenting adults; safeguarding the dignity and freedom of the unmarried and homosexuals; (7) freedom of expression, political criticism, and the press, in the public sphere; (8) democratic republicanism as the most legitimate form of politics. This then is the essence of ‘philosophical modernity’ and [its] crucial core.36

Israel treats all of these points in his works. This dissertation, however, will concentrate mostly on the second most important aspect of the Radical Enlightenment cited above, that is, on the “rejection of all supernatural agency, magic, disembodied spirits, and divine providence.”

The focus of Israel’s works is Spinoza and his history of Spinozism. According to Israel, Spinoza was the chief architect of the Radical Enlightenment because his work argued for the rejection of revelation, miracles, prophecy, divine providence, ecclesiastical

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36 *Enlightenment Contested*, 866. When one looks over this list, one can’t help wondering why is it that those who held to these values were considered “radical” (with its pejorative connotations). The real radicals, from this perspective, are those who don’t accept this world as it is, but instead see it filled with demons and angels. “Therefore, be strong in the Lord and in his mighty power. Put on the full armor of God so that you can take your stand against the devil’s schemes. For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms” (Eph. 6:10-12). The real radicals are those who preach “Enter the narrow gate. For wide is the gate and broad is the road that leads to destruction, and many enter through it. But small is the gate and narrow the road that leads to life, and only a few find it” (Mt. 7:13-14). The real radicals are those who hold to such other-worldly views, including that the world and all its inhabitants are knowingly or unknowingly involved in a cosmic struggle for the eternal fate of their souls. All end up either in the fires of hell for ever or in the glories of heaven. We would do well to remember this point because throughout Jonathan Israel’s presentation of the history of the 17th and 18th centuries, he usually uses this term “radicals” to identify those who were arguing for the liberal, humanist values cited above.
authority, and the beliefs in reward and punishment in an afterlife.\(^ {37}\) The spotlight of this dissertation will be on some of the most prominent precursor “radical enlighteners” from Greece up to Spinoza.

Let me now briefly explain the 8-point definition in historical and geographical context. For Israel, “the Enlightenment marks the most dramatic step towards secularization and rationalization in Europe’s history”, but “it does so no less in the wider history not just of western civilization, but, arguably, the entire world. From this, it plainly follows, it was one of the most important shifts in the history of man.”\(^ {38}\) In fact, for Israel, the shift is more important than either the Renaissance or the Reformation. He thinks this because those cultural movements

are really only adjustments, modifications to what was essentially still a theologically conceived and ordered regional society, based on hierarchy and ecclesiastical authority, not universality and equality.

By contrast, the [Radical] Enlightenment – European and global – not only attacked and severed the roots of traditional European culture in the sacred, magic, kingship, and hierarchy, secularizing all institutions and ideas, but (intellectually and to a degree in practice) effectively demolished all legitimation of monarchy, aristocracy, woman’s subordination to man, ecclesiastical authority, and slavery, replacing these with the principles of universality, equality, and democracy.\(^ {39}\)

As for part of Jonathan Israel’s argument for the dating and pervasiveness of the Radical Enlightenment from 1650 to 1750, he says the following.

During the later Middle Ages and the early modern age down to around 1650, western civilization was based on a largely shared core of faith, tradition, and authority. By contrast, after 1650, everything, no matter how fundamental or deeply rooted, was questioned in the light of philosophical reason and frequently challenged or replaced by startlingly different concepts generated by the New Philosophy and what may still usefully be termed the Scientific Revolution. But throughout the sixteenth century and the first half of the seventeenth, there was still much, intellectually and spiritually, that the western segments of Christendom shared. Mid-seventeenth-century Europe was still, not just predominantly but overwhelmingly, a culture in which all debates about man, God, and the World which penetrated into the public sphere revolved around ‘confessional’ – that is Catholic, Lutheran, Reformed (Calvinist), or Anglican issues, and scholars fought

\(^ {37}\) *Rad. Enl.* op. cited, 8, 11, 13.

\(^ {38}\) Ibid. vi.

\(^ {39}\) Ibid.
above all to establish which confessional bloc possessed a monopoly of truth and a
God-given title to authority. It was a civilization in which almost no one challenged
the essentials of Christianity or the basic premises of what was taken to be a
divinely ordained system of aristocracy, monarchy, land-ownership, and
ecclesiastical authority.

By contrast, after 1650, a general process of rationalization and
secularization set in which rapidly overthrew theology's age-old hegemony in the
world of study, slowly but surely eradicated magic and belief in the supernatural
from Europe's intellectual culture, and led a few openly to challenge everything
inherited from the past – not just received assumptions about mankind, society,
politics, and the cosmos but also the veracity of the Bible and the Christian faith or
indeed any faith. Jeremiads were heard everywhere....

Whereas before 1650 practically everyone disputed and wrote about
confessional differences, subsequently ... the main issue now was the escalating
contest between faith and incredulity. Instead of theological controversy, ... “now
religion in general is the question; religion is the thing stabb’d at; the controversie
now is, whether there ought to be any form of religion on earth, or whether there be
any God in heaven.”

Israel contends that the Radical Enlightenment was pervasive and notoriously well-known
throughout European culture. It was not restricted to the educated classes, but also
percolated down to popular culture (to a degree far more than has been previously
known). Indeed, surely no other period of European history displays such a profound and
decisive shift towards rationalization and secularization at every level as the few
decades before Voltaire. ‘The triumph of the mechanical philosophy,’ it has been
rightly asserted, ‘meant the end of the animistic conception of the universe which
had constituted the basic rationale for magical thinking.’ ... Certainly the Radical
Enlightenment arose and matured in under a century, culminating in the
materialistic and atheistic books of La Mettrie and Diderot in the 1740s....
Consequently, even before Voltaire came to be widely known, in the 1740s, the real
business was over.

Things were very different in the generation before the Radical Enlightenment: “For
the age of confessional antagonism, broadly the period 1520-1650, had equipped Europe's
governments, churches, courts, schools, and universities with newly devised or reinforced
mechanisms of spiritual and intellectual control which proved extremely effective in
tightening the cohesion of society and culture, and strengthening the State and ecclesiastical

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40 Ibid. 3-5.
41 Ibid. 5-6.
42 Ibid. 6-7.
These confessional divisions were mostly geared to preserve their identities, and therefore spent much of their time and labor on denominational antagonisms “to eradicate theological dissent”, but “were soon partly, if not largely, outflanked and neutralized by the advance of new philosophies and scientific ideas which posed a much tougher problem for ecclesiastical authority to deal with than had religious heresy”44, for now “the main thrust of dissent ceased to be theological and became philosophical.”45

To make matters worse, the church was now broken up into many pieces and so had no unified or cohesive response to the challenge against all of Christianity itself. Should the moderate Enlightenment be suppressed or should they suppress only the Radical Enlightenment? Should the Church attack Neo-Cartesians and Newtonianism and Christian Wolff, “to forge a new orthodoxy and a more cogent front against the radical wing?”46

Israel further explains this point, reminding us that: “Historically, State and Church had worked closely together and since the mid-sixteenth century had met the challenge of confessionalizing the population with spectacular success. Whether Catholic, Lutheran, Calvinist, or Anglican, the people of western and central Europe had everywhere been grouped into cohesive doctrinal blocs formidably resistant to rival theologies.”47 Locke was considered dangerous, Cartesianism damaging, and Pierre Bayle pernicious, “yet all these were innocence itself … compared with the threat to Church and society posed by the radicals.”48

Thus far we have shown how professor Israel has answered the what, when, where, and some of the who of the Radical Enlightenment, but we have not yet said much about the how of the Radical Enlightenment. This will be explicated in the course of this study, but for

43 Ibid. 7.
44 Ibid.
46 Ibid. 8.
47 Ibid.
48 Ibid. 9.
the present we can cite at least three of the major causes: (1) a growing reliance on natural reason [footnote: By “natural reason or philosophy” is understood reasoning without the assistance of the Holy Spirit] and philosophy over revelation, (2) the use of natural reason and philosophy in critiquing the holy scriptures, and (3) the overturning of scholasticism (which was considered by many or most to be the best Christian philosophy to support its theology) for a more naturalistic or mechanistic or scientific interpretation of nature.

This summary account of the Radical Enlightenment according to Jonathan Israel should give the reader a much better appreciation of not only the momentousness of the historical changes the Radical Enlightenment caused, but also of the philosophical and spiritual importance this radical turn has made in the world. Now we can proceed to the seedbed, to the foundations, to one of the most significant spiritual progenitors of the European Radical Enlightenment – the Greeks.
PART II
PRECURSORS TO THE RADICAL ENLIGHTNEMENT: THE GREEKS

Chapter Two
The Greeks as Precursors

Introduction: Subject and Plan of Chapter

As mentioned in the introduction to this study, the question I explore in this dissertation is similar to the question historian Will Durant poses in the Preface to his *The Age of Voltaire: A History of Civilization in Western Europe from 1715 to 1756, With Special Emphasis on the Conflict Between Religion and Philosophy*. He asks: “How did it come about that a major part of the educated classes in Europe and America has lost faith in the theology that for fifteen centuries gave supernatural sanctions and supports to the precarious and uncongenial moral code upon which Western civilization has been based?”

One can ask this same question with respect to the history of the ancient Greeks. How did it come about that a culture which believed in all sorts of the most mind-boggling myths came to produce philosophers who denied the literal truth of such claims? How did

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49 Durant’s question can be translated into our question: “How did the European Radical Enlightenment come about?” Durant wrote this in 1965. Curiously, 42 years later Charles Taylor writes the same thing in the opening of his book *A Secular Age*: “One way to put the question that I want to answer here is this: why was it virtually impossible not to believe in God in, say, 1500 in our Western society, while in 2000 many of us find this not only easy, but even inescapable.” Charles Taylor. *A Secular Age* (Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2007), 25.
The Greeks get from Hesiod to Xenophanes, from mythological accounts of things to a more rationalistic and naturalistic account of things? And how did these radical thinkers come to be precursors to the 17 century Radical Enlightenment?

The purpose of this chapter is not to present an exhaustive account of the history of the ancient Greek moderate and radical Enlightenments; nor of all the dynamics between their philosophies and their myths; nor with any of the social, political, economic, or military causes for their growing reliance on natural reason at the expense of revelation, inspiration, prophecy, visions, trances, dreams, ecstatic states, daemonic leading, talismans, theurgy, oracles, omens, mediums, sorcerers, magicians, taboos, rites, rituals, and so on.

Our aim is less ambitious. We wish only to show some representative examples of that evolving struggle between Greek theology and Greek rationalism, and that only as told by a few scholars. As we do so, we will also come to recognize them as precursors to Europe’s Radical Enlightenment which occurred not only before the Christian era, but also provided the philosophical groundwork for what would become models both for later moderate enlightenment Christian thinkers (to justify their treatment of Christian revelation) and also for radical anti-Christian writers (to use against the Christian world view).

I first present some of Jonathan Israel’s history of the Greeks as precursors to the Radical Enlightenment, especially relating to their influence on scholarship. We then go on to fill out Israel’s account by adding some of the major enlighteners in the history of ancient Greece. Because of their central importance in early (and later) Christian thought I focus on

50 The radical transformation from Hesiod and Homer to Plato and the Sophists is like that from Jesus and St. Paul to Descartes and Spinoza.

51 I say “and that as only told by a few scholars” because there are some scholars who offer a richer context and more philosophically sophisticated (and more skeptical) appraisal of some of these claims.
the status of Plato and Socrates as enlighteners in relation to the Greek and Christian religious view of things. (Not much will be said here about Aristotle because his major philosophical influence in European culture comes much later on in the latter Middle Ages up to the early modern period.) After this we note the decline of Greek Enlightenment thought to Hellenism and religious enlightenment thinking.

Jonathan Israel’s account of the Greeks as precursors to the Radical Enlightenment via Renaissance humanist scholarship to Enlightenment new scholarship

What Kant said in 1784 was as true for the high Enlightenment in Europe as it has been of Enlightenment movements in other times and places:

Enlightenment is man’s emergence from his self-incurred immaturity. Immaturity is the inability to use one’s own understanding without the guidance of another. This immaturity is self-incurred if its cause is not lack of understanding, but lack of resolution and courage to use it without the guidance of another. The motto of enlightenment is therefore: Sapere aude! [Dare to know] ‘Have courage to use your own understanding!’ – that is the motto of Enlightenment.”

Long before the European Radical Enlightenment that Jonathan Israel plots from 1650 to 1750, there were other radical enlightenments. Take the “radical enlightenment” which occurred among the ancient Greeks, for instance. Echoing the words of a preacher writing in 1712, Israel compares the shaking of the foundations of early modern European religion and civilization to the ancient Athens of the warring Hellenistic philosophy schools, a land racked by intellectual controversy where rival schools of thought battled ceaselessly ... and even the common people were proving susceptible to new ideas, ... the helpless prey

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52 Immanuel Kant, “An Answer to the Question: ‘What is Enlightenment?’”, my emphasis. We ought to point out here that Kant’s definition of human enlightenment is not without its critics. There is a rich and extremely important discussion of weaknesses and problems with the Enlightenment’s concept of the self and many other philosophical issues made by postmodernists. We refer the reader to Appendix B on postmodernism for this discussion. For the purposes of this dissertation, however, this discussion lies outside the purview of our thesis.
of philosophical seducers and, through new ideas, becoming entrapped in the ‘Devil’s snares’.  

Greek influence in the shaking of the foundations of early Enlightenment Europe takes on life in the Renaissance. We cannot give a complete account of the Renaissance’s role as precursor to the Radical Enlightenment here. We will instead focus on the role that Renaissance humanist scholarship of the Greeks played in its development.

The Greeks as precursors to the Radical Enlightenment via Renaissance humanist scholarship.  

Though Israel does not go into exhaustive detail about the influence of the Greeks as precursors of the 17th and 18th century Radical Enlightenment, in several places he does acknowledge that they exerted considerable force. He plots their sway through the *libertinisme erudite*, for instance. He shows how these Renaissance writers veiled or masked their ideas which were opposed to prevailing theological and metaphysical orthodoxies by presenting opinions and quotations culled mostly from classical authors in innovative and seditious ways, paying particular attention to skeptical, irreverent, and atheistic sources such as Lucian, Epicurus, and Sextus Empiricus, and historians of philosophy such as Diogenes Laertius. This was a potent intellectual undercurrent, especially in France and Italy, and one which played a notable role in preparing the ground for the rise of the Radical Enlightenment…. The *liberins erudits*... were essentially precursors of the Radical Enlightenment operating behind a dense layer of camouflage.  

But, as Israel shows in his chapter on “The Overthrow of Humanist Criticism” in his

*Enlightenment Contested*, humanist scholars failed in many ways to do justice to Greek

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53 *Radical Enlightenment*, op. cited, 3.
54 A note perhaps is in order here regarding the meaning of “humanist” in this context. While “humanist” has come to mean many things, including what today is meant by “secular humanism”, Israel’s use of the term with regard to Renaissance scholarship is meant in a less radical sense. Thus, there are also “Christian humanists” such as Erasmus. For a brief, but excellent summary of the Renaissance meaning of “humanist”, see for instance James Handkins essay “Humanism, scholasticism, and Renaissance philosophy” in *The Cambridge Companion to Renaissance Philosophy*, p. 30-32.
55 Israel has in mind writers such as Bodin, Bruno, Vanini and even Machiavelli and Pomponazzie (*Radical Enlightenment* 14-15.)
literature. For all their erudition, the humanists’ “prime concern was still mainly to exhort pious submission and emulation, not explore meanings.”56 Both moderate and radical enlighteners agreed that the Renaissance humanist approach needed drastic changes. The new interpreters charged the humanists with two basic failures in their scholarship: one, that of accurate translations, and two, that of explaining the texts in their historical milieu.57 Thus the humanists “had utterly failed to introduce and expound ancient literature to educated lay society.” Instead of doing the work of competent exposition, the older scholarship mostly cultivated eloquence, rhetorical skill, and moral qualities.

The Renaissance humanist studies seemed to be “constantly skirting around the fundamental questions” of the meaning and truth of the central works of the Greeks because of the pervasive hold that Christianity had on their minds: “Inability to free themselves from basically theological, traditional, and magical views of the world had left them imprisoned within … a hopelessly disfigured and superficial perspective not just on antiquity but likewise philosophy, morality, ecclesiastical history, and history of thought and culture generally.”58 They were too bound to “the presumption of an ultimate harmonious union of theology and philosophy.”59

While Israel concedes that “One newly rediscovered strand of Greek thought which the humanists did investigate with more resolve was ancient skepticism, especially Pyrrhonism,” he goes on to say: “However, skepticism … was made much of by the humanists precisely because it appeared useful as a device for defending theology’s hegemony against the encroachments of less welcome strands of ancient thought …

56 Enlightenment Contested, op. cit. 416.
57 Ibid. 414-415.
58 Ibid. 416.
59 Ibid. 417.
Primarily as a way of discrediting the ancient philosophy schools and neutralizing their naturalistic and ‘atheistic’ views.”

Renaissance humanist treatment of Greek thought failed in other ways, as well. Take their reading of Graeco-Roman Stoicism for example. The Renaissance humanists tended to ignore all that which might create tension with Christian thinking, “screening out everything contradicting Christian theology.” They tended to view Stoicism then “as essentially a preparation and paving the way for Christianity.” By following this “method”, they inevitably missed a great deal of truth in their subject. Israel calls this textual approach “humanism’s anachronistic Christianization of pre-Christian thought.” Thus they viewed Stoicism like they viewed Platonism, as “profoundly akin to, and essentially a preparation for, the thought-world of the early Church Fathers.”

Israel further criticizes Renaissance scholarship in that: “humanist scholarship had proven remarkably slow to challenge and supplant all manner of fanciful suppositions, fabrications, and received traditions passed down through texts, including notions which, to the Early Enlightenment mind, were full of gullibility, uncritical acceptance of authority, and not infrequently sheer fantasy ... there being a prevailing unwillingness rigorously to follow up such doubts.”

A large part of the reason for the humanists’ shortcomings had to do with the fear of persecution. They were not “so much blind to the deeper intellectual challenges inherent in a close study of classical texts as compelled by the practical impossibility of compromising or questioning the fundamental beliefs of their age ... in this way avoiding risk of scandal, outrage, controversy, and a brutal clash of values.”

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60 Ibid. 420.
61 Ibid. 417.
62 Ibid.
63 Ibid.
64 Ibid. 418.
authors such as Erasmus tended to be watered down; as Israel puts it: “cohabitation designed to paper over major theological and philosophical problems, not systematic investigation and exploration of ideas, remained the predominant strategy.”

The Greeks as precursors to the Radical Enlightenment via Early Enlightenment scholarship

A more exact and fuller interpretation of the Greeks had to wait until early Enlightenment scholars took up the challenge. Israel argues that the Early Enlightenment’s “ars critica”, the new text criticism, or “new scholarship” overthrew Renaissance humanist criticism. This new text criticism, according to Israel, became one of the three major factors that led to the struggle for the fate of God in the modern world. These three forces, as was mentioned in the chapter defining the Enlightenment, were the New Philosophy, the Scientific Revolution, and, last but by no means least, the new scholarship.

Israel is right to argue that the new scholarship of the Early Enlightenment period “has generally received the least emphasis from later historians.” By contrast to the revolutions caused by the New Philosophy (such as Cartesianism) and the Scientific Revolution (of Copernicus, Galileo, Gilbert, Harvey, Newton, etc.), the revolution in scholarship “has received much less recognition despite being integrally linked to both the other revolutions.” Yet it is “arguably, of comparable importance.” Despite this fact, “there continues to be an insufficient awareness among historians of the late seventeenth century’s claims to a scholarly breakthrough, repudiation of humanism, and disclosing of the limitations, both real and imputed, of all earlier hermeneutics and text scholarship.”

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65 Ibid. 420.
66 Ibid. 409.
67 Ibid.
68 Ibid. 410.
The new great critical scholars of this period were Simon, Vico, Bentley and Le Clerc. They all had many criticisms of their earlier humanist predecessors. Of this new scholarship, Israel says:

The new perspectives and approaches ... radically transformed whole fields of knowledge, including such vital areas as Bible hermeneutics, comparative history of religions, history of philosophy, study of the Church Fathers, ancient Greece and Rome, Jewish history, Islam, and Chinese civilization. But this was by no means all; for, as we shall see, the revolution in text criticism and erudition had a major impact also on the practice of philosophy itself and on the developing struggle between the two enlightenments.69

Think, for instance, of how some of the major philosophers of early modernity did philosophy. They did philosophy not by separating philosophy from theology or the Bible, but by taking on theology and the Bible as they philosophized. One thinks right off hand of Hobbes and Spinoza, for example. Hobbes’s *Leviathan* appears to be the work of a theologian or Bible commentator. It is shot through and through with references to the Bible to make his case for a radically different theology and philosophy; and he does so following a very different methodological perspective compared with the less daring humanist interpreters.

Spinoza’s audaciousness goes even further. Israel mentions that "Spinoza’s *Tractatus theologico-politicus* has, not without reason, been called ‘the most important seventeenth-century work to advance the study of the Bible and religion generally’... which ‘disarmed the religious interpreters who would enforce conformity’.70 As we will see later, this work was to become one of the principal engines that brought an end to the pre-Enlightenment religious hegemony over biblical scholarship.

The early Enlightenment revolution in text criticism (especially of the Greek classics and biblical studies), insisted "on the need for scholars to approach the subject wholly independently, free of all prejudgments about its meaning and significance, acknowledging

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69 410.
70 Ibid. 410.
allegiance to no chain of tradition and authority whether Jewish, Catholic, Protestant, or Muslim.” They also insisted on honoring the distinction between truths of meaning in interpreting sacred texts in comparison or in contrast to truths of fact. For instance, Spinoza argued that all of the biblical text needs to be put in context, the context of history. But “Placing all writings in ‘historical’ context effectively meant ... systematically excluding every miraculous, magical, revealed factor, explanation, and criterion.” For Spinoza, then, history should be seen “as an exclusively natural process devoid of magical action, spirits, supernatural agency, or miracles.” Spinoza sought to apply the same scientific principles in his study of scripture as he did toward nature. Following this philosophy toward even sacred texts, “for the first time, made hermeneutics a fundamental aspect of philosophy itself.”

While rejecting Spinoza’s metaphysical presuppositions, moderate enlighteners nevertheless recognized the value of some of his ground-breaking scholarly methods in approaching texts and were thus led to reject some of the older, traditional conventions of humanist scholarship. The moderate enlighteners wished to secure a rational basis for learning the truth of scripture. According to their thinking, the orthodox (Catholic, Lutheran, or Calvinist) also need not be afraid, for is not God the God of all truth? Still, they argued that more was needed to combat the radicals than the approach of the Counter-Enlightenment: “For personal conviction that Scripture is divine revelation, or taking it for granted that everyone accepts Christianity is true, and the Pentateuch the authentic Word of God, no longer suffices either adequately to explain Scripture’s meaning or to defend what, for most men, were still undoubted verities against libertines, Spinozists, Deists, and

71 Ibid.
72 Ibid. 411.
73 Ibid. 412.
74 Ibid. 413. For a fuller exposition of Spinoza place in the history of textual interpretation, see J. Samuel Preus’s Spinoza and the Irrelevance of Biblical Authority, especially the opening chapter, “Spinoza versus the interpreters.”
Ironically, it was the interaction between the moderates and radicals over text interpretation that actually advanced the new scholarship; and this then led to further arguments against the veracity of Greek and Christian sacred texts.

Enlightenment thinkers see rationalist Greek philosophy as a source for human enlightenment

Israel argues and documents that the new scholars recognized greater importance in Greek philosophy than did the humanists. Thinkers such as Pierre Bayle recognized a Greek “revolution’ perceived by some as being Man’s first great ‘enlightenment’ – the Presocratics’ discovery of philosophical argument and criticism.”

According to [Bayle], humanity’s first great philosophical revolution served to bring civilization to utter ‘sauvages’, which is what in his eyes, like Fontenelle’s, the archaic Greeks were prior to the rise of philosophy. Philosophy, he believed, taught them above all the vital difference between religion and morality, and how to tailor institutions, laws, and politics to the needs of men. Here was a revolution crucial intellectually, morally, religiously, and politically.

Israel argues that one of the most influential Greek philosophers for many Enlightenment thinkers was the Presocratic philosopher Xenophanes of Colophon (BCE 560-470): “the Enlightenment turned [Xenophanes] into one of the most important precursors of the esprit philosophique of the eighteenth century ... From both the moderate and radical perspectives, Xenophanes became a key exemplum.”

As opposed to most Christian Medieval and Renaissance scholars and philosophers, Xenophanes dared to know more. He bravely critiqued the ideas of the masses and Homer

75 Ibid. 413-414.
76 Ibid. 436, my emphasis.
77 Ibid. 437.
78 Ibid. 436.
and Hesiod about the gods, divination, omens, and the like. He is thought to have been the first to affirm a strong this-worldly view of things: “for all things are from the earth and to the earth all things end.” He is also thought to have been “the first to employ doubt as an instrument of philosophy” (which becomes enormously important in the history of modern philosophy). Timon of Phlius, “the official founder of skepticism as a philosophical school… stressed Xenophanes’ alleged invention of skepticism as a philosophical technique, as well as his notoriety as a critic of Homer’s treatment of the gods.”

Many in the Enlightenment saw “Spinozism” in Xenophanes: “With his new skeptical reasoning about the divine, Xenophanes inferred from the fact that different peoples conceive the gods differently – and after their own likeness – that they imagine (if not fashion) their gods after their own image, unthinkingly imputing anthropomorphic qualities to them.” Needless to say, this is radical talk. His philosophy turns religion on its head. Instead of man being made in the image and likeness of God, for Xenophanes, the gods are made in the image and likeness of man! As Jonathan Israel puts it: Xenophanes is in fact the very first thinker known to have argued that because men conceive the gods in their own likeness they also credit them with their own desires and aspirations and, consequently, their own limitations and failings … For men to think of the gods in their own likeness, he held … is neither logical nor fitting. He censures Homer’s gods on moral grounds in particular … As Sextus Empiricus reports Xenophanes’ words: ‘Homer and Hesiod ascribe all the things to the gods

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79 Ibid. 437. It might be that Israel’s take on Xenophanes implies that he was a systematic thinker. However, as Jonathan Barnes mentions in his Early Greek Philosophy, “Many modern scholars have doubted whether he was a systematic thinker, and some have denied that he ever wrote a properly philosophical poem.” Nevertheless, Barnes still thinks that “there are enough surviving fragments to warrant our calling him a philosopher.” Early Greek Philosophy, translated and edited with Introduction by Jonathan Barnes (New York: Penguin Books, 1987), 14. Xenophanes’ “radical enlightenment” status might also need to made more modest because, according to Hippolytus, “He also says that god is eternal and unique and homogenous in every way and limited and spherical and capable of perception in all his parts” (Ibid. 99).

80 See Richard H. Popkin’s influential study The History of Scepticism: from Erasmus to Spinoza for the role that doubt and skepticism played in the development of modernity. We will take up this subject in some detail in later sections of this dissertation, especially on Descartes.

81 Ibid. 437.

82 Ibid. 440.
which are considered disreputable among men: stealing, fornicating and cheating others.\(^83\)

One can tell from such audacious arguments that Xenophanes may be thought of as a Greek radical enlightener and a precursor to the European Radical Enlightenment. How could he not be deemed a radical enlightener, especially of his time, since he “overthrew the gods of mythology and, much as he demythologized divine power, sought to demythologize natural phenomena”? Israel mentions that even the “Clouds he explains as vapour lifted from the sea by the sun.”\(^84\) Beyond this, the surviving fragments of his work seem to show that he also naturalized rainbows. Israel states that “If rain, the movements of clouds, and rainbows are purely natural phenomena, mechanically caused, there is neither reason nor requirement to attribute such occurrences to supernatural interference or action.” Not only did Xenophanes rule out the gods involvement in nature, he even “more or less ruled out the secret communication of gods with men.”\(^85\) This additional radical claim in effect denies to human beings any personal comfort from the divine from prayer or worship.

Xenophanes was not the only Greek precursor to the Radical Enlightenment or to Spinoza. The Greek Enlightenment produced many others. Strato of Lampsacus, though not well known today, also had a powerful impact on Spinoza and other thinkers during the Enlightenment. Israel’s research shows that: “Still more often tied to Spinoza during the Early Enlightenment than Xenophanes was the third-century BC philosopher Strato of Lampsacus ... [He] played a not inconsiderable role in the evolution of eighteenth-century materialism... contemporaries were greatly struck by the affinities between his supposed system and that of Spinoza.”\(^86\) And again: “No other classical writer was cited as often or insistently as Strato in the role of chief ancient precursor of Spinoza, though all sorts of

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\(^83\) Ibid. 440-441.  
\(^84\) *Enlightenment Contested*, 442.  
\(^85\) Ibid. 443.  
\(^86\) Ibid. 445.
other ancient writers besides Xenophanes, Strato, and Epicurus were adduced in this capacity.” 87 Israel supports this claim by citing some great 17th century thinkers who believed there was such a relation. Bayle, for instance, “held that Strato was a direct precursor of Spinoza and the principal Greek exponent of the idea that a blind and unintelligent nature created and creates everything in the universe, animate and inanimate.” 88 But while Strato appears to have been a precursor to Spinoza in the sense of having held some radical ideas as Spinoza, so far as I have been able to discover from the works of Spinoza scholars, I have not found any evidence to claim that Spinoza himself acknowledged Strato as an influence over his thinking.

Israel cites one further major school of Greek thought that needs to be mentioned. The Stoics were also hugely influential in the European Enlightenment; so much so that Spinoza was charged “with subversively reintroducing Stoic teaching without declaring his sources or real purpose.” 89 Israel remarks that Enlightenment scholarship was not alone in this historical judgment: “In modern times, the case for regarding Spinoza as a ‘new Stoic’ has been reiterated by Dilthey” and others. 90 Yet, as always, there were also some thinkers of the Counter-Enlightenment who sought to counteract Stoic and Spinozist influence by teaching that both were refuted long ago: “For by labeling Spinoza a ‘Stoic’, Early

87 Ibid. 457.
88 Ibid. 456.
89 Though Israel agrees that in some striking cases Stoicism and Spinoza seem agreed, he makes it a point to show major ways in which the two are very different. While “In Stoicism, there cannot be disembodied spirits or supernatural forces any more than in Spinoza and “Both philosophies scorn ‘superstition’ and credulity”, “the Stoics defined ‘superstition’ differently from Spinoza.” For instance, “They did not reject divination or astrology or even the ancient oracles” (Enl. Cont. 461). More, “even prayer, as well as the cult practices accompanying these, are appropriate in a way inconceivable to the Radical Enlightenment” (Enl. Cont. 465). “Spinoza, on the other hand, as Nietzsche was later delighted to discover, spurns all teleology, Stoic, Aristotelian, or any other in depicting nature” (Enl. Cont. 466). Israel cites many other divergences between the two which conclusively demonstrate the fallaciousness of conflating the two (Enl. Cont. 457-470).
90 Ibid. 459.
Enlightenment critics questioned both his originality and integrity, reminding readers that Christianity had long since disposed of the arguments of the Stoics, back in late antiquity.91

The foregoing account briefly summarizes Jonathan Israel's study of the Greeks as precursors to the Radical Enlightenment. We need now to give further context to the history of the Greek Enlightenment (and what it was reacting against) and its influence on the European Enlightenment.

The Greek Enlightenment in further context: from mythology to rationalism92.

As we mentioned earlier, Israel does not give an exhaustive or comprehensive account of the influence of the Greeks on the European Enlightenment. This is because his focus was to give an account of the Radical Enlightenment from 1650 to 1750. But since the purpose of this dissertation is to give a general account of the precursors to the Radical Enlightenment, and since the enlightened Greeks are the foundation and inspiration for a great deal of future radical thinking, we need to add to Israel's account of the Greeks. In order to accomplish this, we should also some description of the background or context of these precursors.93 In

91 Ibid. 460.
92 Just as the term “Enlightenment” is fraught with many deep and profound philosophical interpretations, so also with the terms “mythology” and “rationalism.” Some of these issues are addressed in the appendix on postmodernism, but a great deal more than can be done in this study has been proffered by other disciplines besides philosophy. Cultural Anthropology, History of Religion, Comparative Religion, and even some works in Psychology of Religion have made insightful and important contributions on this subject.
93 In his short, but excellent introductory summary of Greek philosophy in his Early Greek Philosophy, Jonathan Barnes (following conventional dating schemes) divides the history of Greek philosophy into three periods. The first period from 585 to 400 BC is traditionally known as the “Presocratic” period (though this term is not exactly accurate because much of Socrates’ (470-399 BC) career was during this period and because some of the “Presocratics” were contemporaries of Socrates). This period “established the scope and determined the problems of philosophy” (9). The second period is usually known as the period of the Schools (of Plato and Aristotle, and of the Epicureans, Stoics, and Sceptics) and typically dates from 400 to 100 BC. The third period from 100 BC to 539 AD “was marked in the main by scholarship and syncretism: the later thinkers studied their predecessors’
a word, we have to give added explanation of the religion of their culture, that is, their Counter-Enlightenment. Let us then retrace our steps for a moment; only this time by supplementing Israel’s account of the Greeks.

When most people think of ancient Greek philosophy, they think of philosophers such as Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle. These moderate enlightenment philosophers were great because instead of just believing everything they were taught at home, in the Temple, and by tradition, they did what the eighteenth-century Enlightenment philosopher Kant urged all adults to do: and that was to have the audacity to use and rely on their own understanding and reason even, at times, in variance with their culture’s most precious and important beliefs. But, as we have seen from Israel’s account, Socrates and Plato were not the only self-reliant, courageous thinkers in the history of Greek rationalism. In fact, as we shall show in the last sections of this chapter, Socrates and Plato are problematic with respect to the radical enlightenment both in Greece and Europe’s Radical Enlightenment. Because of this, some scholars attribute the true sources of the radical enlightenment to the Presocratics and other radical thinkers after Socrates and Plato.

Xenophanes, Strato, the Stoics and other revolutionary thinkers led to what can be called the Greek Radical Enlightenment. They came before (and after) Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle, and should be understood as purer forerunners of the European Radical Enlightenment to come. About the ancient Greek Enlightenment, E. R. Dodds states:

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94 The reason why the west has been mostly familiar with Plato and Aristotle and not the other great Greek philosophers, scholars say, is because Christianity (which became the religion of the west) adopted their philosophies as opposed to the others. And they did so because their writings seemed to be more in accord with Christian thought. After the Renaissance however, more and more thinkers started embracing other Greek thinkers, including ones that were verboten to the Church.

95 In practice, however, “moderate enlightenment” philosophers such as Socrates appeared to be more conservative – at least in the sense of keeping up with some of the ritual practices of his culture. But even here, I suspect that if we were to talk to Socrates-Plato about this, Socrates would (or had) subject these practices to his keen analytic mind. We know, for instance, that even on his death, he subjected the belief in the immortality of the soul to a searching and skeptical discussion.
The ancient Greek Enlightenment has ... its roots are in sixth-century Ionia; it is at work in Hecataeus, Xenophanes, and Heraclitus, and in a later generation is carried further by speculative scientists like Anaxagoras and Deomocritus. Hecataeus is the first Greek who admitted that he found Greek mythology 'funny,' and set to work to make it less funny by inventing rationalist explanations, while his contemporary Xenophanes attacked the Homeric and Hesiodic myths from a moral angle.96

Dodds goes on to describe Xenophanes as one who even “denied the validity of divination.” If this is true, it would mean “that, almost alone among Greek thinkers, he swept aside not only the pseudo-science of reading omens but the whole deep-seated complex of ideas about inspiration.”97 Not to be outdone, Heraclitus “made fun of ritual catharsis, comparing those who purge blood with blood to a man who should try to wash off dirt by bathing in mud”!98 To an Athenian, these charges were not only radical; they were also blasphemous.99 Such thinkers were the precursors of their radical enlightenment. They were, if you will, the Hobbes's and Spinoza's of their day. We begin to see them more and more as exemplars, influences, helps, or precursors that influenced future generations of “enlighteners” or “rationalists” up unto the European Radical Enlightenment.100

Dodds refers to others besides Xenophanes and Heraclitus as precursors to the Greek philosophical Enlightenment such that “By Euripides’ day [480-406 BCE] the Enlightenment had been carried much further.”101 Euripides had the audacity to rely on his own common sense reason to such a degree that he was able to overcome the pressure to conform to the religious sirens of his culture. He actually called the sun, which was

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97 Ibid. 181.
98 Ibid.
99 Ibid. 182.
100 Indeed, much of Dodd’s account of the Greek moderate and radical enlightenments in his *Greeks and the Irrational* read just like Jonathan Israel’s *Radical Enlightenment* in that he lists the major figures in the history of Greek culture who questioned, doubted, and denied the reigning popular religious beliefs (of inspiration, the validity of dreams from the gods, of ritual catharsis, shamanism, etc.
101 Dodds, op. cited, 181.
traditionally considered a chief god for the Greeks, “a golden clod.”102 Anyone with only the slimmest of education about the religion of the Greeks should know with what religious awe the sun was viewed in the ancient world.

In his *The Sacred and Profane*, historian of religion Mircea Eliade documents that even as late as the Roman Macrobius (395-423AD) it was understood that the ancients saw “in the sun all the gods of the Graeco-oriental world, from Apollo and Jupiter to Osiris, Horus, and Adonis.”103 For modern readers, it has to be understood that, “For religious man, nature is never only ‘natural’; it is always fraught with religious value. This is easy to understand, for the cosmos is a divine creation; coming from the hands of the gods, the world is impregnated with sacredness.”104

There is no way readers can appreciate the revolutionary paradigm shift of this advancement in human knowledge unless one has taken the time and trouble to enter their literature and mind-set to appreciate just how “enchanted” and god-filled their world was. In the same way that contemporary readers are precluded from fully understanding and appreciating early Enlightenment philosophers such as Descartes or Leibniz without knowing the scholastics, so also readers of the ancient Greeks are precluded from fully understanding and appreciating the philosophy of the Greek rationalists without really learning the counter-enlightenment religion of their day.

In order to do accurate history then, one has to do the requisite labor to get a glimpse (as best we can) of world-views radically different from our own. And the ancient Greek religious world-view of, say Hesiod and Homer, is even more radically different than the scholastic world-view. It gets more and more challenging the further we go back in time

102 Ibid. 182.
such that historians of religion tell us that even the theology of Hesiod and Homer show signs of “desacralization.” On “the hastening of the process of rationalization”, Eliade notes that this can be seen very early on, even in their religious thought:

In the Graeco-Roman world the sun, having become the ‘fire of intelligence’, ended by becoming a ‘cosmic principle’; from a *hierophany* [manifestation of the god] it turned into an *idea* by a process similar to that undergone by various of the sky gods (Iho, Braham, etc.). Even Heraclitus says that “the sun is new each day’. To Plato it was the image of the good as expressed in visible things; to the Orphics it was the intellect of the world. Rationalization and syncretism advanced together.... These last honours paid to the sun in the twilight of antiquity are not entirely devoid of significance; they are like palimpsests in which traces of the old writing can still be seen under the new – they still reveal traces of the true, primitive hierophanies: the dependence of the sun on God which recalls the very early myth of the solarized demiurge, its connections with fecundity and plant life and so on. But generally speaking, we find there only the palest shadow of what the sun hierophanies once meant, and constant rationalization makes it paler still. The philosophers ... thus at last completed the secularization of what was one of the mightiest of all the cosmic hierophanies.105

We have now given some of the religious background of some of the Greek rationalist thinkers and can better see the radical differences between its theological explanations compared to the more Greek “Enlightenment” naturalistic explanations. It is primarily with respect to this difference that the historians we have referred to have cited the Presocratics as precursors to the Greek “radical Enlightenment.” Of course, there were other powerful influences besides the Presocratic philosophers, as well, such as the playwrights Euripides and Aristophanes, the historians Herodotus and Thucydides, and of Sophists such as Protagoras, Gorgias, and Hippias. “Nonetheless, as Aristotle saw, the Presocratics are the most important and influential representatives of the early period: it was they who began philosophy, they who prepared the way for Plato and for the great

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105 Eliade, *Patterns in Comparative Religion*, op. cited, 151. And again: “This desacralization of solar hierophanies is only one among many similar processes through whose operation the entire cosmos is finally emptied of its religious content” (Eliade, *Sacred and Profane*, 158. Like Eliade, Israel, Dodds, Havelock, and Barnes also argue that the “desacralization” or secularizing or demythologizing of these radical Greek philosophers secularized a great deal of the Greek mythical tradition. Max Weber coined the famous phrase “the disenchantment of the world” mostly in reference to the sciences and the 17th century, but it has application to the secularization process initiated by the Greek Enlightenment.
philosophical schools of the following generations.”¹⁰⁶ Let us then to Plato and his teacher, the great Socrates

The Greek Enlightenment of Socrates and Plato in comparison to orthodox Greek religious dogma (and with some comparisons to the Bible, as well)

Greek religious orthodoxy and Socrates’-Plato’s philosophical enlightenment

For the purposes of this dissertation, at this point, I wish to focus on Socrates and Plato and their famous rejection of some of their culture’s depiction of the gods as an example of what happens (even if only to a moderate degree) when a person has the courage to use his own understanding to test, by reason, even the most precious and the most important theological and philosophical claims of one’s culture – beliefs that are foundational for faith, morals, law, and government. I focus primarily on Plato here because of the centrality of his influence on that which is to come in the Hellenistic period, the New Testament, and the Church Fathers – and, indeed, even up to the Renaissance and the early modern period in several places.

I make it a point to compare Plato’s writings with the New Testament for two reasons: in order to make dramatically clear the differences between the two, and to use this section as a bridge to lead us from Greek philosophy to Christianity. Plato is only a “moderate enlightener”, but his work is still a far cry from the religion of Hesiod, Homer, and the counter-enlightenment orthodoxy which executed Socrates for “impiety.” As we mentioned earlier, not much will be said here about Aristotle because his major

philosophical influence in European culture comes much later on in the latter Middle Ages to the Enlightenment.

A good way for the reader to better appreciate and feel the far-reaching difference between the orthodox theological teachings of ancient Greek religion with the more rational, secular, or enlightened views of even moderate enlightenment philosophers such as Plato is by personally acquainting oneself with both by studious reading. It would be useful at this point for readers to refresh their memory of Greek mythology by perusing some of Hesiod’s *Theogony* and Homer’s *Odyssey* or *Iliad.* In this way they will grasp in more vivid detail just how very different mythological thinking is from the growing non-mythological thinking of the Greek enlightenment philosophers.

Read Hesiod’s creation account and his explanations on how all things have become as they are. Read about the war in Olympus, of Zeus and of his father, of Promethius, and of the ways of the gods with humankind. And then read Homer and note how visions, dreams, oracles, voices, impulses, and experiences from the gods fill his world. Note how events are explained. Note to what degree the whole world is filled with the glories and horrors of their gods. And then realize that these stories were not meant to be “literature” for the ancient Greeks (as they are for us). They were sung from generation to generation as revelations from the gods about the ultimate causes behind the world.

Now then, imagine if you will that you are an ancient Greek and that your whole education has been restricted to learning, memorizing, and singing only Hesiod and Homer. Imagine, moreover, that your whole culture teaches that Hesiod and Homer are inspired by the very gods, and that these songs are in reality the truth. Your whole being is filled with this sacred history and explanation of things. You reach adulthood and then, one fine day, you happen to come upon a few people in a shady grove in animated discussion. You learn that one of them is said to be the famous philosopher of Athens called Socrates and the
other principal talker, a bright young man named Theatetus.

As you listen to this dialogue your mental world is slowly but gradually brought into contact with a very different mind-set. Instead of referring to the oracles of Hesiod and Homer at every turn as you are accustomed to hearing the priests explain such things, you note that this philosopher is struggling to understand the truth about things in a different way. He doesn’t continually advert to poets, priests, or prophets for his explanations or for confirmation or justification of his explanations. Instead, he tries to understand things using what he calls reason and philosophy. The longer you listen to his arguments, the more you realize that this philosopher is not at all like the priests and prophets of your fair city. You feel frightened by this new way of talking and investigating things; but at the same time you feel exhilarated, as if this something new under the sun that you are learning is fraught with great power and possibility.

Some of what he says contradicts your knowledge of the nature of the gods and therefore seems wickedly heretical; yet you can’t help but to listen further and to think more about what is being said to get a better judgment on this new teaching. You become completely taken up with it. You’re astounded by Socrates’ way of explaining things rationally, and by how his arguments expand your mind, and by how admirably human and this-worldly his philosophical passions and illustrations usually are. You want to become a disciple of this philosophy and to submit your beliefs and judgments to reason, as well. But, even as you decide to make these internal changes, you feel that the old way, the way of the gods of the poets, priests, and prophets now somehow seem foolish and even immoral, and you sense that there hath been a glory that hath departed. You feel a sense of alienation

107 Actually, this is not entirely true. Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle often did refer to poets and prophets. But what is different in their treatment of them is that they used the opinions of the poets and prophets of their culture for further analysis, testing, and thought. They did not refer to them in the usual orthodox fashion of “God said it; I believe it; that settles it.”
from the culture at large and from family and friends. Sometimes you feel nostalgia for the old way. You have been enlightened and the old enchanted world has died.

In part this is what Socrates’ and Plato’s love of reason and philosophy accomplished. Now you know what it might have been like for Theatetus and other young men who listened and learned from Socrates. They were part of something new in the world, a philosophical movement that not only loved and pursued wisdom and knowledge, but did so primarily or largely based on their own human rational resources.108

Plato versus some of the Greek religious world view

Hesiod: “Hail, daughters of Zeus! ... Tell how the gods and earth arose at first/And rivers and the boundless swollen sea/And shining stars, and the broad heaven above ... 109

Hesiod: Great Heaven [Ouranos] came, and with him brought the night./Longing for love, he lay around Earth,/Spreading out fully. But the hidden boy [Cronos]/Stretched forth his left hand; in his right he took/The great long jagged sickle; eagerly/He harvested his father’s genitals/And threw them off behind” 110

108 I am reminded of an insightful passage in Josef Pieper’s Scholasticism: Personalities and Problems of Medieval Philosophy. Pieper describes the life-changing impact that the newly translated corpus of Aristotle’s works had on many 13th century minds such as Siger of Brabant. Imagine if you will, that you are a 13th century theologian and that your education stemmed mostly from the Bible, the Church Fathers, and from Platonic and Augustinian sources. After nearly a thousand years of Platonic-Augustinian interior rationality, Aristotle seemed to have rent the curtain that prevented this type of mind-set from beholding the world. Pieper describes Siger of Brabant (whom he takes to be a sincere believer) as “a man so enthusiastically dedicated to the process of thinking – with the truly amazing potentialities of human reason to acquire knowledge and insight.” But, for the 13th century, these truly amazing potentialities of human reason to acquire knowledge and insight were infinitely supplemented by something new under the European sun: the world. “Those potentialities had suddenly been revealed to Siger and his contemporaries by Aristotle, and seemed in the first rush of enthusiasm utterly without limit. Aristotle had newly brought within the range of their vision the wealth of the natural world, the infinite possibilities of exploring it. ‘Even more than reason, it seems to have been nature that Aristotle opened up to these minds; ‘there came to light a real world, a knowable world.’” Pieper goes on: “And what of theology? Of course it was not expressly denied; such denial was simply beyond the bounds of possibility for the thought of that age. But in the face of this new plethora of knowledge about the natural world, theology simply became uninteresting.” And that, says Pieper “was something new, something ‘un-medieval’” (Josef Pieper. Scholasticism: Personalities and Problems of Medieval Philosophy (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1964), 123-124.

109 Odyssey. Trans. Richmond Lattimore. The Odyssey of Homer, p. 27 or lines 1 and 9-10.

Homer: “Tell me, Muse .... From some point goddess, daughter of Zeus, speak, and begin our story”.

Plato: “First, I said, the greatest lie about the most important matters was that of the man who told bad fiction when he said that Ouranos did what Hesiod tells us he did, and how Cronos punished him for it... Nor indeed, said I, any tales of gods warring and plotting and fighting each other - these things are not true... We must not admit into our city stories about Hera being chained by her son, or of Hephaestus being hurled from heaven by his father when he intended to help his mother who was being beaten, nor the battle of the gods in Homer, whether these stories are told allegorically or without allegory” – Plato's Republic

The first two passages above come from Hesiod's Theogony. Note Hesiod’s epistemological stance: He is relying on the gods (and not empirical experience or hypothesis testing or reason) to reveal to him the answer to such natural philosophical questions as how the shining stars, broad heavens, and swollen sea came to be. We see this same stance in the passage from Homer’s Odyssey (“Tell me, Muse .... From some point goddess, daughter of Zeus, speak, and begin our story”) because from this point onwards the goddess is presumed to inspire the poet with insights into the councils of the gods, the degree of the gods’ involvement in the affairs of mortals, of what is right and wrong, the story of god-like Odysseus, and many other culture-informing teachings. Hesiod and Homer was the Bible of the Greeks.

Notice how the passage from Plato directly contradicts the teachings of Hesiod about the gods Ouranos and Cronos. This is a very serious thing to do (even though, it is true, Plato’s criticism comes centuries after Hesiod and the climate is more liberal thanks to the Presocratics (and other historical and cultural factors). But despite this liberal development, we need to remember that Socrates was tried and executed by the state for impiety against the gods of Athens).

\textsuperscript{111} Plato. Trans. G.M.A. Grube. Plato's Republic. New York: Hackett Publishing Company, 1974, pp. 47-9. Plato is referring here to the story of the castration of Ouranos told by Hesiod in the Theogony, 154-210. We will see in succeeding chapters of this study how thinkers who relied more on reason than on faith leveled similar criticisms of their religion. We’ll see this from those influenced by Greek philosophy (such as in Athens (Acts 17) when they rejected belief in the resurrection of the body and from some in the Church at Corinth (1 Cor. 1-4), and then, later, in the Renaissance, (1582) from Noel Journet, and then, of course, from Spinoza and others.
Socrates calls the reigning Greek theology “the greatest lie” and “bad fiction.” And he declares this “whether these stories are told allegorically or without allegory.” He firmly announces that Cronos did not do to Ouranos what has been told for generations that he did do. And he is adamant that such stories not be publically taught, especially to the Greek youth. Like Solomon, Plato knew very well the truth of the proverb: “Train up a child in the way he should go, and he shall not depart from it” (Prov. 22:6). He states this clearly in the Republic (#378e): “The young cannot distinguish what is allegorical from what is not, and the beliefs they acquire at that age are hard to expunge and usually remain unchanged. That may be the reason why it is most important that the first stories they hear should be well told.”

To get a better feel for the magnitude of Socrates’ and Plato’s stance against Hesiod, imagine someone in the Jewish and Christian tradition who publically sought not only to persuade people not to believe various teachings from the Bible, but also sought to persuade people that God was immoral! If you have read only Deuteronomy 28:15-68 you would know how serious this is. Imagine someone in Jewish and Christian history teaching against even morally worrisome portions of scripture. Envision someone who teaches in public that God did not tell Abraham to sacrifice his son Isaac, or that the covenant with God and His people was not confirmed by genital circumcision, or that God’s marching orders for the Israelites to take the Promised Land by slaying every man, woman, child and infant in it was a great lie or bad fiction. (In fact, of course, there were some men and women who

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112 There is a great deal of extremely interesting and important literature on the question of Plato and allegory and myth versus truth or science. For instance, in his Plato the Myth Maker, Luc Brisson attributes to Plato the distinction between myth and reason. He says: “Until Plato the vocabulary (muthos/logos) hardly distinguishes between a ‘true’ account and a ‘legendary’ account” (vii). And again: “There is thus little evidence, if any, evidence prior to Plato which could lead one to conclude that there was a clear opposition between muthos and logos” (ix). Brisson’s final conclusion on this matter then is this: “In the final analysis, however, the famous muthos/logos dichotomy is not clearly attested prior to Plato, although the germs may be discerned in some authors” (x).
did oppose various biblical teachings and they paid for it by being stoned to death in biblical times or having their tongues torn out of their mouths and burned at the stake even up to the Early Enlightenment. Descartes’ contemporary and philosopher Marin Mersenne still felt it was justified that Noel Fournet had his tongue gouged out and then body burnt to a stake for arguing that the God of the Bible who predetermined the masses to an eternal torment was more immoral than the gods of the Greeks and Romans.113

Plato utterly and systematically dismisses any and all accounts of the gods when they plot, fight with each other, or behave as humans. But because this is part and parcel of the inspired narratives of Hesiod and Homer, Plato’s philosophical pronouncement against these is tantamount to a total rejection of orthodox or traditional Greek religion.114 Such a

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113 An anecdote reported by Mersenne: “saying [of a certain Noel, executed at Metz] that he would rather have preferred to adore a Saturn who eats his children, an adulterous Jupiter, a drunkard Bacchus, a deceiving Mercury, or believe that there is no God at all, than to believe Him to be the author of the ruin of humankind, and of the perdition of reprobates, who surmount the number of the elect by so very much” (Jean-Luc Marion. On the Ego and on God: Further Cartesian Questions. Trans. Christina M. Gschwandtner (New York: Fordham University Press, 2007), 110 and endnote #31 on p. 231.

114 In the history of the reception of Greek works such as Hesiod’s and Homer’s, most commentators in the Christian west up unto the Enlightenment regarded all such heathen accounts as “myths”, the Christian term for pagan cosmological narratives. From the Christian’s perspective the account of the gods in these stories appeared as clear evidence that they were not only obviously morally inferior to the Hebrew-Christian religious tradition, but also obviously foolish and fictional. The first important lesson I learned in my first major in the History of Religion from the chair of the religion department was the recurrent phenomenon that everyone brought up in a certain religious tradition thinks that all other religious traditions are not only strange and foreign, but also foolish and obviously false. The bias of one’s upbringing is the scholar of religion’s greatest challenge. A more neutral or fairer or scholarly comparison between Greek religion and the Christian religion would be to point out the strong similarities between the two traditions. We can’t take the space to adequately demonstrate this here, but maybe a couple comparisons will serve as an exemplar of so many other commonalities. One might for instance point out accounts similar to Hesiod’s and Homer’s in the Bible. See how similar Hesiod’s account that the “earth arose at first... And shining stars, and the broad heaven above” with the Genesis account of “In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth...” Or if Hesiod’s claim of “Hephaestus being hurled from heaven” seems out of a comic book, then read passages such as the Book of Revelation’s: “And there was war in heaven. Michael and his angels fought against the dragon, and the dragon and his angels fought back. But he was not strong enough, and they lost their place in heaven. The great dragon was hurled down – that ancient serpent called the devil or Satan, who leads the whole world astray. He was hurled down to the earth, and his angels with him” (Rev. 12:7-9). Many other similarities or correspondences might be cited as well. One further note here: Right after Socrates wisely excoriates Hesiod and Homer for their brutish views about the gods and their morality (e.g. immorality), he then goes on to say that he won’t allow such beliefs to be uttered in his city. The practice of censorship is, of course, what the Church did through most of its history as well. This was part of the reason why Nietzsche’s
sweeping indictment by a philosopher sounds like the principal protagonist of the European Radical Enlightenment Baruch Spinoza.

How Enlightened were Socrates and Plato?

But how “enlightened” was Plato? How radical was he? In what sense should we affirm or deny him as a precursor to the Radical Enlightenment? Remember (according to Jonathan Israel’s definition that we’re using), the Radical Enlightenment is the “rejection of all supernatural agency, magic, disembodied spirits, and divine providence.” Though Plato’s rationalist bent was clearly radically different from the credulous believers in the old time Greek religion, a careful and closer look at Plato’s writings reveal that he was not very radical with respect to Israel’s definition of radical. The question as to his philosophical influence on succeeding generations in the Christian western world will be taken up briefly in the next and last section of this chapter.

Now it is clear that though Socrates believed in “following the argument wherever it led”, he also took dreams and oracles very seriously. In fact, he even ‘heard voices’. He called this his ‘daemon’. Dodds states that “If we can believe Xenophon, [Socrates] called it, quite simply, ‘the voice of God’.”115 So, despite his pioneering rationalism, we mustn’t leap to the unwarranted conclusion that he was as radical as a Spinoza, or Hobbes, or modern day atheists such as Bertrand Russell, Sidney Hook, Richard Dawkins, Daniel Dennett, and so on. With Plato, however, things might have been different; for “it is not always so easy to

115 Dodds, The Greeks and the Irrational, op. cited, 185.
decide where Plato is expressing a personal faith and where he is merely using a traditional language."\footnote{116}{Ibid. 207-208.}

What about the metaphysical-theological Platonism of Plato? True, his philosophy-theology seems to have developed primarily via rationalistic means; but, still, one can argue that it wasn’t derived only from rationalistic means. This is where Dodds argues that due to “events which might well induce any rationalist to reconsider his faith” and the influence of the Pythagoreans’ new transcendental psychology, “Plato in effect cross-fertilized the tradition of Greek rationalism with magico-religious ideas whose remoter origins belong to the northern shamanistic culture.”\footnote{117}{Ibid. 209.} Dodds goes on to explain that Plato was also influenced around this time by philosophers who “took over the old mythical fancies about the fate of the soul and read into them new allegorical meanings … Such men prepared the way for Plato.”\footnote{118}{Ibid. 209.} Nevertheless, an important difference in this transference must be pointed out, for Plato “transposed these ideas definitively from the plane of revelation to the plane of rational argument.”\footnote{119}{Ibid.}

Dodds discusses the theory that Plato’s religiousness dates only or mostly towards the end of his life. Dodds then asks a question about Plato’s later growing theological bent (which many today are asking about the well-known English philosopher Antony Flew’s conversion from atheism to deism). Dodds asks, “Ought we to discount all this [Plato’s later ‘Platonic’ views] as a senile aberration, the sour pessimism of a tired and irritable old man?”, for it seems to contrast with his earlier views.\footnote{120}{Ibid. 215.} Dodds answers, in essence, that though it was more pronounced later in his life (and with it many heinous teachings [primarily authoritarian] which Karl Popper highlights in his \textit{The Open Society and its}}
*Enemies* (vol. 1, especially chapters 3 and 10)), it was nevertheless alive and well even in his best days as a philosopher.

As we will find at the end of our study of Descartes as a precursor to the Radical Enlightenment, so we find here: there are two forces at work, the one a reliance and love of human reason, and the other a continued and at least partial acceptance of some of the culture’s theological views. So, just as Descartes argued that his writings were better able to stave off Radical Enlightenment ideas (e.g. to confute the atheists and infidels) than any other philosophical systems, so also did some works of Plato, such as his *Laws*, argue for measures just as heinous as that committed against Socrates.

We can end this section on Plato by noting that despite Plato’s more virulent anti-enlightenment edicts, according to Dodds, he remained faithful all his life to Socratic rationalism.

Knowledge, as distinct from true opinion, remained for him the affair of the intellect, which can justify its beliefs by rational argument. To the intuitions both of the seer and of the poet he consistently refused the title of knowledge, not because he thought them necessarily groundless, but because their grounds could not be produced... [and] the products of poetic intuition must be subject to the rational and moral censorship of the trained legislator.

Even Karl Popper (whose analysis of Plato and Platonism is harsh in the extreme) admits that even though there is much that is repulsively authoritarian in Plato’s philosophy, he nevertheless “pays tribute, by his manner of writing, to our inter-personal theory or reason; for most of his earlier dialogues describe arguments conducted in a very reasonable spirit.” Popper distinguishes between true rationalism and pseudo-rationalism.

What I call the ‘true rationalism’ is the rationalism of Socrates. It is the awareness of one’s limitations, the intellectual modesty of those who know how often they err,

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121 Ibid. 215-216.
122 Ibid. 217.
and how much they depend on others even for this knowledge. It is the realization that we must not expect too much from reason; that argument rarely settles a question, although it is the only means for learning – not to see clearly, but to see more clearly than before.\textsuperscript{124}

The very fact that many of Plato’s dialogues do not end with either The Answer or any claimed certain answers is powerful testimony to Socrates’ and Plato’s commitment to reason and truth.

Transition to Hellenism and the regression of Greek thought

We have briefly gone over various scholars’ accounts, such as E. R. Dodds’, of the Greek moderate and radical enlightenments of the ancient Greeks. But he is careful to also point out that the story of Greek civilization doesn’t end with the Greek Enlightenment. On the contrary. There was a regression. He does not take this cultural regression as a reaction against the Enlightenment, in the sense that some historians view the Romantic period in European history, for example. Instead, he sees it as a “failure of nerve.” In his influential essay, “The New Failure of Nerve” Sidney Hook says the following about the period from the Greeks to the Christians:

In the famous third chapter of his \textit{Four Stages of Greek Religion} Gilbert Murray characterizes the period from 300 B.C. through the first century of the Christian era as marked by ‘a failure of nerve.’ This failure of nerve exhibited itself in ‘a rise in asceticism, of mysticism, in a sense, of pessimism; a loss of self-confidence, of hope in this life and of faith in normal human efforts; a despair of patient inquiry, a cry for infallible revelation; an indifference to the welfare of the state, a conversion of the soul to God.’\textsuperscript{125}

As a result of this Greek cultural regression, Dodds tells us, there were several

\textsuperscript{124} Ibid.
successful prosecutions of intellectuals on religious grounds [which] took place at Athens ... disbelief in the supernatural and the teaching of astronomy were made indictable offences ... a series of heresy trials ... The victims included most of the leaders of progressive thought at Athens – Anaxagoras, Diagoras, Socrates, almost certainly Protagoras also, and possibly Euripides... All these were famous people. How many obscurer persons may have suffered for their opinions we do not know. But the evidence we have is more than enough to prove that the Great Age of Greek Enlightenment was also, like our own time [1951 of McCarthyism and Russian and Chinese totalitarian communism], during an Age of Persecution – banishment of scholars, blinkering of thought, and even ... burning of books.127

Some have sought to explain the ancient Greek prosecutions as motivated primarily by political and not religious reasons. Dodds argues against this view except in so far as the political persecution was driven by the “religious bigotry” among the masses which politicians used for their own purposes.128 Nilsson argues that persecution against the rationalist philosophers “was whipped up by the professional diviners, who saw in the advance of rationalism a threat to their prestige, and even to their livelihood.”129

There is one further argument that Dodds makes that I think is un-fathomed and therefore under-appreciated by many contemporary thinkers. He reminds us that in antiquity, “To offend the gods by doubting their existence, or by calling the sun a stone ... was practically treason – it amounted to helping the enemy. For religion was a collective responsibility. The gods were not content to strike down the individual offender: did not Hesiod say that whole cities often suffered for one bad man?”130

126 Israel and Dodds do not say much about Anaxagoras beyond listing him as a revolutionary thinker who was persecuted by religious authorities. In his Early Greek Philosophy, Jonathan Barnes goes into greater detail about Anaxagoras than Israel or Dodds by first citing serious problems in how to accurately interpret the truth about Anaxagoras (26-31), and then by citing some of his less than radical enlightenment views regarding Mind. Some believe that “he held that the original cosmogonical force was mind” (45). Still, if what we are told from some ancients is true, he “appears to have offered a complete account of the natural world on the old Milesian model” (226).

127 Dodds, The Greeks and the Irrational, op. cited, 189.

128 Ibid. 190.

129 Ibid. 190. One can see this same religious bigotry plus economic fear at work against St. Paul. See for instance, Acts 19:23-40 for an excellent of example of this.

130 Ibid. 191. This notion was by no means restricted to the ancient Greeks. They were even more so notoriously practiced among the ancient Israelites. As we will see in my section on The Condemnations of Cartesians from the Church's perspective, Christianity practiced these same divinely ordained edicts throughout much of its history. What many fail to appreciate, however, is
Dodds mentions that within a generation or two of the high Greek Enlightenment, especially perhaps owing to the effects of the Great Plague of 430, even while Plato was writing his great works, there was an increasing acceptance and embrace of magical and miraculous healings, pilgrimages to temples (as in Lourdes in our generation), foreign cults ("mostly of a highly emotional, 'orgiastic' kind"), the worship of the Phrygian 'Mountain Mother,' Bendis, Cybele, Asiatic 'dying gods’ Attis and Adonis, black magic, and many more irrational beliefs and behaviors that Dodds cites.131 “All the symptoms I have mentioned ... can be viewed as regressive; they were in a sense a return to the past. But they were also, in another aspect, portents of things to come.”132

The decline of Greek Enlightenment thought after Aristotle

Introduction

Earlier, I noted historian Will Durant’s question asking how the European Enlightenment came about and then asked this of the Greek Enlightenment. In this final section I want to turn this question upside down: How did the Greeks go from the radical enlightenment of Presocratics such as Xenophanes, to the moderate enlightenment of Socrates and Plato, to the almost purely practical or ethical philosophies of Epicureanism and Stoicism, to the "failure of nerve" in the growing acceptance of Hellenistic and eastern mystery religions?133

the fact that these condemnations, persecutions, censorship, and executions were biblical! Too many commentators, who are not natives of Judaism, Christianity or Islam, simply do not know the depth of devotion, love, and obedience to the scriptures these religions of the book have.

131 Ibid. 194.
132 Ibid. 195.
133 Merriam-Webster’s Collegiate Dictionary (Eleventh Edition) defines "Hellenistic" as: a person living in Hellenistic times who was Greek in language, outlook, and way of life but was not Greek in
As we mentioned in the preceding section, some Greek scholars have advanced the theory that after the period of Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle, an “Age of Anxiety” or “Failure of Nerve” set in. Because of its importance as a historical thesis, it bears repeating: this decline of enlightenment philosophy “characterizes the period from 300 BC through the first century of the Christian era as marked by ‘a failure of nerve’. This failure of nerve exhibited itself in ‘a rise of asceticism, of mysticism, in a sense, of pessimism; a loss of self-confidence, of hope in this life and of faith in normal human efforts; a despair of patient inquiry, a cry for infallible revelation; an indifference to the welfare of the state, a conversion of the soul to God.”134

W. W. Tarn’s Hellenistic Civilization (especially the last chapter on philosophy and religion) lays out many historical, social, political, philosophical and religious developments from the Hellenistic (approx. 300 to 30 BCE) to the Christian era (pp. 325-360) that seem to support Murray’s and Dodds’ interpretation. For Tarn, the Hellenistic period is “not one phase of civilization, but two: the earlier phase creative in science, philosophy, literature political state-forms, and much else, with an independent Graeco-Macedonian world extending its civilization to Asia; the later phase distinguished by the exhaustion of the creative impulse and the reaction, both spiritual and material, of the East against the West.”135

The following account of the Hellenistic period into the Christian era is selective and brief. I first focus on the two new schools of philosophy after Plato and Aristotle, that of ancestry; esp: a Hellenized Jew. Hellenism is a body of humanistic and classical ideals associated with ancient Greece and including reason, the pursuit of knowledge and the arts, moderation, civic responsibility, and bodily development. W.W.Tarn follows convention for this period and dates it “from the death of Alexander in 323 to the establishment of the Roman empire by Augustus in 30 B. C” (Tarn 1).

135 W. W. Tarn. Hellenistic Civilization, 3rd edition (New York: A Meridian Book, 1975), 129. It should be noted here, however, that Tarn has some reservations about the view that the Hellenistic period is one of decline or decay.)
Epicurus and Zeno. And then go on to say a few words about the developing incursions of religious ideas which will segue into the next chapter on the warfare of religious “enlightenment” or counter-enlightenment beliefs versus Greek Enlightenment philosophy. In keeping with the focus of this study, I say virtually nothing about the equally-important political, military, economic, and social processes that contributed to the philosophy of “Hellenism” and “the failure of nerve” in this period.

The two new schools of philosophy

Epicureanism

The four great schools in the history of Greek philosophy were Plato’s Academy, Aristotle’s school (the Peripatetics), Epicurus in his garden, and Zeno in the Painted Porch or Stoa. The Cynics had no established school, in keeping with their profession of poverty. Their appeal was primarily to the poor and downtrodden, though Zeno’s teacher was a Cynic (Crates, the ‘physician of souls’).136

The two new philosophies of the Hellenistic period were that of Epicurus and Zeno. Tarn states that “The two philosophies both aimed not at the discovery of truth, but at the satisfaction of practical needs... The aim of philosophy was the happiness of the individual; what mattered was conduct... neither cared for science of learning.”137 But beyond these points of agreement, Epicurus and Zeno reacted to the new world which Alexander the Great had made in two very different ways.

Epicurus taught an ethics or philosophy that he thought could relieve the feelings of religious oppression and anxiety that many felt at the time. “The world they dreaded,

136 Ibid. 325-326.
137 Ibid. 328.
[according to Epicurus], was only a machine. No gods, good or evil, affected it; it was not made or guided by design; it came into being through certain mechanical principle."\textsuperscript{138} As Tarn explains, by “constructing a world on scientific principles”, Epicurus sought to “free men from fear of the gods and the evils of superstition.” After all, man need not fear the afterlife because “man’s soul at death dissolved again into the atoms which made it.”\textsuperscript{139} I assume that Tarn is using the term “scientific” here in a loose sense).

All this sounds very much like radical enlightenment philosophy. It is, for one thing, a revival of Democritus’s atomic theory.\textsuperscript{140} Yet Tarn is not so willing to treat Epicurean thought in this way for a few reasons. For one thing, as we have already mentioned, his philosophy did not aim to increase theoretic knowledge of the world, but, instead to find individual happiness. For the Epicureans, in order to attain happiness one needed to avoid passions and emotions. And, if one is to avoid passions and emotions, one should not get too involved in the real world. According to Tarn, “This constituted a doctrine of renunciation.” And because of this position, “They never influenced the great world”; they had no wish to.”\textsuperscript{141} Tarn criticizes Epicureanism further saying, “The real reproach against his philosophy was that it taught men to shirk living; it was a running away.”\textsuperscript{142} As we will see, Epicurean influence extends into the New Testament world and past the second century A.D.

Despite these arguments, I think we can see Epicurus and his followers as “radical” enlighteners, at least in some regards. Their anti-demonic, anti-god, materialist-like, mechanistic-like, atomistic-like teachings were certainly radical in the context of the times. Though they conceded that gods existed, they taught that they did not do anything. They

\textsuperscript{138} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{139} Ibid. 329.
\textsuperscript{140} Ibid. 328.
\textsuperscript{141} Ibid. 329.
\textsuperscript{142} Ibid. 330.
refused to get involved with divination and astrology, and adopted a form of naturalism to explain the world. And they loved the life of the mind. Still, Tarn is right in that though they may have loved thought and talking, they had no active involvement in the world. The picture that Tarn draws of the Epicureans here reminds me of what the author of the book of Acts said when St. Paul arrived in Athens and talked and preached to Athenians and to Epicureans and Stoic philosophers: "All the Athenians and the foreigners who lived there spent their time doing nothing but talking and listening to the latest ideas" (Acts 17:21). This may be so, but they can nevertheless be considered radical enlighteners in that they thought Paul a "babbler" and "When they heard about the resurrection of the dead, some of them sneered" (Acts 17:18,32).

Stoicism

As we mentioned above, the teachings of Epicurus and Zeno had several things in common, but they also had big differences. For one thing, Epicurean philosophy only won a minority, and it was somewhat limited to Athens. Zeno, however, did not have a center or formal school to teach from. He "talked to those who came in a public colonnade, the Painted Porch, a forecast of the fact that the Stoic teachers were never to be tied to a centre at Athens, but were to spread throughout the world." By far, the greater school between Epicureans and Stoicism was the latter. Tarn emphatically declares that "The philosophy of the Hellenistic world was the Stoa." So much so, that it greatly influenced even Christianity.

Zeno responded to the new world of Hellenism by providing a philosophy that claimed could guide the world and make it happier without escaping it completely and

143 Ibid. 328.
144 Ibid. 330.
145 Ibid. 325.
146 Ibid. 335.
without rejecting the gods’ active role in the world. Unfortunately, there are no surviving writings of Zeno or his immediate successors, and no complete Stoic writings until Seneca, Marcus Aurelius, and Epictetus. But scholars consider the writings of these latter Stoics as probably a fairly accurate picture of the teachings of Zeno and his first followers. For the purposes of this thesis, there is no need to tell the history and teachings of Stoicism. My purpose at this juncture is to show how they helped set the stage for the religious “enlightenment” or counter-enlightenment to come.

Zeno’s successor was Cleanthes of Assos. Tarn claims that he is the “author of the greatest religious hymn in Greek” and that he “brought out the religious side of [Zeno’s] doctrine.” Thus the universe was considered to be “ruled by one Supreme Power whom the Stoics envisaged under may aspects and names – Destiny, Zeus, Providence, the Universal Law, Nature.” From this Power came everything, including man’s soul. This soul was thought to be “akin to the divine.” Stoics also had an eschatology, as well. They believed, for instance, that the universe cyclically ended in the divine Fire and then started again exactly as it had been. This is because the whole universe is controlled by Destiny. Their Destiny, however, differed from the grim Babylonian notion of Fate in that the universe was a product of His design and that “His design was all-wise and all-good.” In fact, He is even a merciful God. Other foreshadowing’s of Christianity could be cited.

The Stoics believed in a World State and that because all men are citizens of this one State or City, all “ought to be equal.” Stoics believed that “everything was determined”, and, as a consequence of this, thought “that all that had to do with the body – strength and weakness, sickness and health, wealth and poverty – was a matter of indifference.” The

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147 Ibid. 330-331.
148 Ibid. 330.
149 Ibid. 331.
150 Ibid.
151 Ibid. 331.
Wise Man should neglect these things in favor of the things of the soul and thus desire only that “which God or Destiny in its wisdom had ordained for him.” Thus, “The ideal man, when he came, would say 'Thy will be done'.” Submitting one’s self to God’s will was the way to happiness (and escape from suffering). Moral virtue was supreme. “On this Zeno was uncompromising; the intention to do evil, he said, was equivalent to doing it.” Moreover, the Supreme Power gave man a conscience to follow, so that “the true Stoic, whatever else he was, was captain of his soul.”

A new religious “enlightenment” arises

Stoic philosophy had other deeply ingrained religious notions, for Stoicism also took up astrology. Tarn calls this another sign of “its detachment from the scientific spirit.” In fact, by the second century “science was beginning to fail.” And because of this decline it lost out to astrology. “Astronomy might have killed it; instead, by the end of the second century, it had killed astronomy, and thenceforth it had a free field till Copernicus.” Notice from just this one example how important Greek enlightenment ideas are in comparison with religious counter-enlightenment ideas for the development of natural philosophy.

Since the Stoics embraced astrology they were confronted with the problem of how to escape the Fate of the stars. Tarn answers how they were able to do this: “there were three main lines on which man sought to escape from his stars, all depending on a belief

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152 Ibid. 332-333.
153 Ibid. 334.
154 Ibid. 335.
155 Ibid. 347.
156 Ibid. 346.
that some god was really more powerful than that Fate which ruled the gods... These three lines were Gnosis, magic, and the eastern mystery-religions.”

Gnosticism is the belief that one can gain a special kind of knowledge, but not the knowledge of the philosopher; some god had once directly revealed the secret key of the universe to some chosen soul, and could a man find that knowledge, hidden from other men, he was immune from Fate; he had short-circuited the stars. They might torment his body, but his soul was beyond their reach.

This kind of “enlightenment” knowledge, as we have discussed earlier, was also foundational to that movement that would soon enter the world – Christianity.

Magic also filled the world once again and influenced many realms of practical life. (We see this in the New Testament in many ways, especially in the belief they had in the name of Jesus.) But more influential than magic, was the new religions bursting on the scene: “But far more important than magic were the Hellenistic mystery-religions.” As Tarn puts it: “Magic might alter your fate, but initiation lifted you above the sphere of Fate altogether... your soul, even in this life, was beyond [the reach of the stars], and after death would rise above their spheres to the sphere of the divine and dwell with the gods; you were in fact ‘saved’.”

Along with the growth of Stoicism came a skepticism and decline of the traditional Greek gods and an increase in foreign religious ideas. A growing lack of living faith in the old Greek gods continued. “Many things conspired to decide the fate of the Olympians,” Tarn argues. “They belonged to, and fell with, the city state; philosophy killed them for the educated, individualism for the common man; he was no longer part of the city... But

157 Ibid. 351.
158 Ibid.
159 Ibid. 353.
160 Ibid. 353.
perhaps what settled the matter was the conquest of Asia and Egypt.”\textsuperscript{161} By the “conquest of Asia and Egypt”, Tarn means their religious ideas and practices.

For the educated, the place of religion was being taken by philosophy and science. But these hardly affected the common man; he must worship something, and, as the Olympians faded, a more real religious feeling began to develop, and the appeal of the intimate and confident oriental worships became irresistible. In this sphere the East led its conqueror captive; and thought the movement did not perhaps culminate till after the Christian era, it was adding strength all through the Hellenistic period.\textsuperscript{162}

Tarn plots this decline. “Twilight was indeed falling on the Olympians, in spite of [some] external show” of loyalty.\textsuperscript{163} Dionysus now became the most important Greek god outside Greece.\textsuperscript{164} There was also a pervasive syncretistic movement which blended gods and sacred accounts.\textsuperscript{165} And new or more experiential forms of religious teaching sprouted: “A dominant factor of the time was the striving after one god.”\textsuperscript{166}

Tarn explains that the basis of the mystery-religions striving after one god was also to seek \textit{soteria} or salvation. And the way to do this was “by personal union with a savior god who had himself died and risen again.”\textsuperscript{167} More than that, one sought to be one with the god himself. As one can no doubt tell from these short descriptions of the changes in philosophical and religious thinking, some of the foundations of Christianity were being laid.

These religions brought to the aspirant a new sense of sin, a new conception of holiness; and the rite of initiation, culminating in the knowledge that you were saved, was undoubtedly an intense emotional experience. From the second century onwards [this] religious sense deepened.\textsuperscript{168}

\textsuperscript{161} Ibid. 337.
\textsuperscript{162} Ibid. 340-341.
\textsuperscript{163} Ibid. 336.
\textsuperscript{164} Ibid. 338-339.
\textsuperscript{165} Ibid. 333.
\textsuperscript{166} Ibid. 339.
\textsuperscript{167} Ibid. 354.
\textsuperscript{168} Ibid.
Many other streams added to the torrent of Greek counter-enlightenment religious beliefs. Orphic ideas, for instance, became very popular because of “its religious ecstasy and its ideas of purity and the antagonism of flesh and spirit.” All these new ideas eventually led to a new religion which would very quickly dominate the whole western world. “The interest in the Hellenistic religions is that they depict the world in which Christianity arose. That world provided more than the medium of the common civilization in which Christianity was to spread; it to some extent paved the way.”

169 Ibid.
170 Ibid. 360.
PART III

THE RELIGIOUS ENLIGHTENMENT VERSUS THE GREEK ENLIGHTENMENT:
IN JUDAISM AND CHRISTIANITY FROM THE HELLENISTIC PERIOD TO SCHOLASTICISM

Chapter Three

The Religious “Enlightenment” versus the Greek Enlightenment in Judaism and Christianity
from Hellenism to 1st century Christianity

Introduction

In our last chapter, we briefly cited some of the changes that occurred in the Mediterranean world since the death of Aristotle. We saw that philosophy’s focus (generally speaking) changed from the Presocratics’ primary interest in theoretical knowledge of nature to ethics with Socrates and Plato. The movement away from empirical scientific thinking continues in the new philosophies (Epicureanism and Stoicism) and then in the new mystery religions of the Hellenistic period (300 to 30 BC) into the Christian era. We also briefly mentioned how some of these new movements and ideas would culminate in Christianity. In this chapter we do three things. First, we add one further major component to this culmination in Christianity, and that is the Religious “Enlightenment” versus the Greek Enlightenment in Judaism (from Hellenism to 1st century Christianity); second, we tell the story of the Christian “Enlightenment” against Judaism in the New Testament; and finally we will relate
more of the story of Christian enlightenment” versus the Greek enlightenment, as this is portrayed in the New Testament.

The Religious “Enlightenment” versus the Greek Enlightenment in Judaism from the Hellenistic period to 1st century Christianity

Just as the purpose of W. W. Tarn’s Hellenistic Civilization was “an attempt to get a general picture of the civilization of the Hellenistic period”, so this section is an attempt to get a general and brief picture of how the Greek “radical” and “moderate” enlightenments were precursors to Jewish radical, moderate, and counter-enlightenments in the Hellenistic period (300-30 BC) to the 1st century Christian era. Though it may be true that “Few Greeks in the Hellenistic period ever managed to learn very much about the Jews” and that “no Jew made his history available to Greeks before Josephus, late in the first century A.D”, the Jews not only knew the writings of the Greeks Enlightenment; many of them were even converted to it. 171

During this period the Jews both in the Diaspora and in Judea were growing accustomed to the Greek language and to many other aspects of Greek culture. Tarn argues that not only were the Jews in the Diaspora adopting the language and some cultural aspects of the Greeks, but they were even adopting some aspects of the Greek Enlightenment and Stoic notions such that they even “had some sympathy with the religions of those around them and a tendency to universalism.”172 This tendency is pronounced in some places such as

171 Tarn, op. citied, 210, 211, 213, 224.
172 Ibid. 223.
Alexandria where there was a huge population of Jews. Tarn says that even as early as the third century “the Hebrew Scriptures were useless to many Alexandrian Jews.”

Around the time in which Ptolemy I acquired Judaea in 301 BCE, Tarn tells us that “Ezra had originated modern Judaism.” Yet, despite the liberties that Ezra took with respect to Jewish tradition and scripture, he is, compared to the more Hellenized Jews of the time, very orthodox. For anyone who knows Judaism and its sacred traditions, it is easy to discern that all was not well in the house of the Lord when, despite Ezra’s conservative influence, “elements of the governing class” and even “the High Priest, were favourable to Hellenism.” Indeed, during this time we see something similar to the tripartite war of enlightenment ideologies we referred to in chapter one: we see an orthodox (or counter-Greek Enlightenment) party of pious Jews; a more liberal or Hellenistic or accommodationist or “moderate enlightenment” party; and we see out and out Hellenist radical Jews who totally repudiated Judaism and its purported revelations from God.

The orthodox or traditional attitude toward what wisdom and understanding is has been the same since the book of Deuteronomy:

See, I have taught you decrees and laws as the Lord my God commanded me, so that you may follow them in the land you are entering to take possession of it. Observe them carefully, for this will show your wisdom and understanding to the nations, who will hear about all these decrees and say, ‘Surely this great nation is a wise and understanding people’ (Deut. 4:5-6, my emphasis).

We see this same attitude later in the Psalms: “Blessed is the man … whose delight is in the law of the Lord, and on his law he meditates day and night” (Ps. 1:1-3). And even more in the longest Psalm and chapter in the Bible, Psalm 119. Anyone who reads this Psalm and then thinks of the Hellenist Jew who is attracted to Greek learning will understand why it is that the orthodox party felt that God’s people should be focused only

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173 Ibid. 224.
174 Ibid. 211.
175 Ibid. 213.
on God’s word. And, as for more profound or philosophical things, the greatest king of
Israel was a model of the orthodox attitude: “Such knowledge is too wonderful for me, too
lofty for me to attain” (Ps. 139:3), and again:

Lord, my heart is not haughty, nor my eyes lofty. Neither do I concern myself with
great matters, nor with things too profound for me. Surely I have calmed and quieted
my soul. Like a weaned child with his mother; like a weaned child is my soul within
me. O Israel, hope in the Lord from this time forth and forever (Ps. 131, my
emphasis).

Those Jews who were being transformed by Greek philosophy and culture were
caus[ing] extreme anger and bitterness among the orthodox (traditionalists or
conservatives). This Greek and Hellenistic influence actually explains Jewish animosity
against unorthodox Jews in books of the Bible such as Ecclesiastes, Proverbs, and Daniel.

These Hellenising Jews provoked bitter enmity among the pious; they are ‘the
ungodly’ so often referred in subsequent Jewish writings, and Jewish Hellenism may
be the ‘strange woman’ of Proverbs, ‘which flattereth with her lips’, but whose
‘house inclineth unto death’. They were accused of neglecting circumcision and of
exhibiting all the moral shortcomings commonly attributed in the Old Testament to
backsliders... [by] 169 two definite charges made against them were that they
favoured Greek exercises (which involved nudity) and wore Greek hats.176

And so we see that even before the start of the Christian era, the warfare between
Greek wisdom versus biblical wisdom had begun. It might be that the passage just quoted
above may not be fully appreciated by those not versed in the Torah, so it needs to be made
clear that these charges are anathema to Judaism. Ever since Moses laid down the laws
about circumcision and against mixing with the heathen, he made it clear that dreaded
curses of the Lord would be unleashed against any and all backsliders “who do not carefully
follow all his commands and decrees” (Deut. 28:15 ff). The fact that those converted to
Greek wisdom, “the ungodly”, are given a place and ferociously denounced even in sacred
scripture makes it patently clear that Jewish wisdom and Greek wisdom cannot be married
or yoked or harmonize or fellowship or be friends or agree or concur or walk together

176 Ibid. 213, my emphasis.
Tarn is right to say that, “Both praised Wisdom; but, to the Greek, wisdom was a thing which grew with the toil of many brains, while to the Jew it was the fear of the Lord, unchangeable for ever.” He no doubt had the following famous maxim from the book of Proverbs in mind: “The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge, but fools despise wisdom and discipline” (Prov. 1:7). “Wisdom” for the Jew is through and through moral and not theoretical. A comparison of the book of Proverbs, for instance, with even a moderate enlightener like Plato on the subject of wisdom will easily disabuse anyone who might think that the use of the word is synonymous in both cultures. For the Jews, wisdom calls for obedience to Yahweh’s moral commands. Even the Greek-influenced book of Ecclesiastes (probably later edited by orthodox believers) emphatically speaks to this question and categorically states:

Of making many books there is no end, and much study wearies the body.  
Now all has been heard;  
here is the conclusion of the matter:  
Fear God and keep his commandments,  
for this is the whole duty of man (Eccl. 12:12-13).

The wisdom that God commands His people to get comes not from depending on one’s human intellectual abilities, but rather on Yahweh: “Trust in the Lord with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding” (Proverbs 3:5). Even the following Greek-sounding passage has in mind only Jewish morality and fear of God: “Get wisdom, get understanding ... Wisdom is supreme; therefore get wisdom” (Prov. 4:5, 7); for “The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge.”

Plato would have had a serious problem with Jewish thinking about wisdom had he known of it. He would have judged it to be too limited and narrow minded:

The lover of wisdom, we shall say, has a passion for wisdom, nor for this kind of wisdom and not that, but for every kind of wisdom? – True.
As for one who is choosy about what he learns ... we shall not call him a lover of learning or a philosopher, just as we shall not say that a man who is difficult about his food is hungry or has an appetite for food. We shall not call him a lover of food but a bad feeder. – And we should be right. But we shall rightly call a philosopher the man who is easily willing to learn every kind of knowledge, gladly turns to learning things, and is insatiable in this respect (Grube translation of Republic, #475 b to c).177

While the Jew will preach “Taste and see that the Lord is good; blessed is the man who takes refuge in him” (Ps. 34:8), the Greek lover (Plato) of wisdom talks about “the pleasure to be gained from the contemplation of reality cannot be tasted by anyone except the philosopher” (Republic 582 c). Similarly (to anticipate our next section), Christians will say things like:

It is impossible for those who have once been enlightened, who have tasted the heavenly gift, who have shared in the Holy Spirit, who have tasted the goodness of the word of God and powers of the coming age, if they fall away, to be brought back to repentance, because to their loss they are crucifying the Son of God all over again and subjecting him to public disgrace (Hebrews 6:4-6, my emphasis: note the key term “enlightenment” in this important passage).

But lovers of Greek wisdom say such things as, the man who “never has a taste of any learning or any investigation; he has no share in any reasoned discussion or any other form of culture” (Republic # 411 d).

Tarns’ interpretation of the “strange woman” of Proverbs may be right. It may refer both to an adulterous woman and to an “adulteress” Jew, that is, a Hellenized or “backsliding” Jew. The Hebrew for the King James English translation of “strange woman” here connotes meanings such as “foreign”, “non-relative”, “adulterous”, “different”, and curiously, “wonderful.”178

177 While the Christian writer of the Acts of the Apostles criticizes Athenian philosophers for doing “nothing but talking about and listening to the latest ideas” (Acts 17:21), Socrates and Plato say things like: “discussion is very much the philosopher’s tool” (Grube, Republic, #582 d).

If this is correct, then one thing is patently clear from all the many passages in *Proverbs* that refers to this woman, and that is that she was attracting Jewish youth “with her words; Which forsaketh the guide of her youth, and forgetteth the covenant of her God” (Prov. 2:16-17). But even if this is not a valid exegesis, we know that Greek Enlightenment wisdom attracted and seduced many Jews (and then later, Christians in the New Testament, and then some Church Fathers, some medieval philosophers, some scholastics, some Renaissance humanists and, finally, some of the religion-destroying philosophers of the Radical Enlightenment). Thus, by the end of the Hellenistic period and into the beginning of the Christian era, we continue to see the affect that the sirens of the Greek Enlightenment had over Judaism. One last example of this will suffice before we turn to the Christian “enlightened” stance toward Judaism.

Let us take Philo of Alexandria, for our example. Philo (20-50 A.D.) was a Jew and a philosopher. That’s all that one needs to know to conclude that “righteous” ones (like Ezra) have lost and “the ungodly” have won out. Philo’s philosophy demonstrates how much of the Hellenistic spirit he imbibed because he labored to harmonize Judaism with Greek philosophy, the very thing that orthodoxy have always warred against.

Before we end our discussion on Jewish wisdom, let us prepare the way for the new Lord and His attitude toward even orthodox Jewish wisdom.

Christian spiritual enlightenment wisdom versus Judaism

As opposed to places in the Diaspora such as in Alexandria, things were different in Judea, and especially in Jerusalem. Here Greek philosophy and the Hellenistic spirit are not very prominent. The Jews in Judea after all are maintaining the Temple worship, rituals, and
synagogue teaching of Torah throughout the land. Yet, according to the new Christian spiritual enlightenment movement of the time, they were missing out on the light. The “true light ... was in the world, and though the world was made through him, the world did not recognize him. He came to that which was his own [the Jews], but his own did not receive him” (Jn. 1:5-11).

Jesus treated the Pharisees (which were the strictest and most orthodox believers of Judaism of the time) as un-enlightened. He sees them as learned, but superficial; wise, but only in an intellectual-scholarly sense and not in the true sense of wisdom to him. The Pharisees and scribes are not only literate (as opposed to the majority of the population) but also the scholars and “wise” or most “enlightened” in their society. Yet the gospels and the New Testament judge them to be spiritually blind. Jesus’ “enlightenment” is of a wholly different order: “I praise you Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and the learned and revealed them to little children” (Lk. 10:21, my emphases). And this is where things get even more “mysterious”; for the New Testament also teaches that God Himself actually makes it impossible for many, including the Jews, to believe, even if they witnessed the most astounding miracles!

He has blinded their eyes
and deadened their hearts,
so they can neither see with their eyes,
nor understand with their hearts,
nor turn – and I would heal them (Jn. 12:40).

St. Paul puts it in this way:

God gave them a spirit of stupor,
eyes so that they could not see
and ears to that they could not hear,
to this very day (Rom. 11:8).

And again:

Jews demand miraculous signs and Greeks look for wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified: a stumbling block to the Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, but to those
whom God has called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. For the foolishness of God is wiser than man’s wisdom (1 Cor. 1:21-23).

According to the New Testament, even the most devout and zealous Jews are unenlightened and therefore will not be saved from damnation. St. Paul, for instance, states: "Brothers, my heart’s desire and prayer to God for the Israelites is that they may be saved. For I can testify about them that they are zealous to God, but their zeal is not based on knowledge" (Rom. 10:1-2). Paul is talking about a new kind of “knowledge.” This new kind of knowledge is in keeping with the new kind of Jew that he says is the only true Jew. Though he acknowledges that the Jews “have been entrusted with the very words of God” and that there is some advantage in being a Jew and in circumcision, he nevertheless says:

A man is not a Jew if he is only one outwardly, nor is circumcision merely outward and physical. No, a man is a Jew if he is one inwardly; and circumcision is circumcision of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the written code (Rom. 2:28-3:2).

For Jesus and Christianity, true enlightenment is not a matter of “worldly” learning or wisdom, but of spiritual learning and wisdom. And this wisdom and learning can only be received by child-like faith and love, and not by any sort of scholarly or scientific learning. In fact, Jesus was also speaking quite literally and not just metaphorically about the wisdom of children: “But Jesus called the children to him and said, ‘Let the little children come to me,

179 Paul knew a thing or two about zeal for Judaism: “For you have heard of my previous way of life in Judaism ... I was advancing in Judaism beyond many Jews of my own age and was extremely zealous for the traditions of my ancestors. But when God, who set me apart from birth and called me by his grace, was pleased to reveal his Son in me” (Gal. 1:13-16). Of some Judaeizers who were preaching that it was necessary to be circumcised, he says: "Watch out for those dogs, those mutilators of the flesh. For it is we who are the circumcision, we who worship by the Spirit of God, who glory in Christ Jesus, and who put no confidence in the flesh – though I myself have reasons for such confidence. If anyone thinks he has reasons to put confidence in the flesh, I have more: circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; in regard to the law, a Pharisee, as for zeal, persecuting the church; as for legalistic righteousness, faultless. But whatever was to my profit I now consider loss for the sake of Christ. What is more, I consider everything a loss compared to the surpassing greatness of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things. I consider them rubbish, that I may gain Christ ...” (Phil. 3:2-11). In the first passage, note how he came to learn about the Son. In the last passage, note his attitude toward knowledge.
and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of God belongs to these. I tell you the truth, anyone who will not receive the kingdom of God like a little child will never enter it” (Lk. 18:16-17). This is exactly what the Pharisees and certainly the Greeks would definitely not do. Indeed, to those influenced by Greek wisdom, such claims as Jesus’ seem the opposite of the truth. They are indeed the very things that the rationalist Enlighteners from the Greeks to the European Enlightenment of Spinoza and Kant fought against. As we cited in the first chapter, according to Kant, “Enlightenment is man’s emergence from his self-imposed immaturity. Immaturity is the inability to use one’s understanding without the guidance from another.” But this is exactly the method and state that children are in! For Spinoza and Kant, one needs not only to think for oneself, but one needs to test every claim to truth. This also is the very opposite of the kind of Enlightenment that Jesus and Christianity teaches. Their kind of enlightenment forbids testing.

The Christian “Enlightenment” versus the Greek Enlightenment according to the New Testament

Now that we have made some inroads about how the Christian “Enlightenment” judges even its parent, Judaism (or at least some forms of it in 1st century Judea), let us look a little further into the New Testament view of Greek Enlightenment thought. We have already made a start on this subject in Chapter One, Section 4, and we’ve also touched on it here and there in the last chapter, and of course in the section preceding this one. But let us look more closely now at the attitude of the New Testament toward reason and philosophy to fill out some things that have not been explained yet. We stress this analysis because of its importance to arguments that will be made in later chapters.
From the very beginnings of Christianity, in certain times and places, there was tension and conflict. Not all early Christians were happy with the way their church was developing. In Judea and in the more Jewish sections of the Roman world, the tension and conflict was over to what degree beliefs and practices of Judaism should be considered mandatory for the Christian. But in other parts of the world in which the Greek spirit was dominant (throughout Greece, parts of Asia Minor, and part of Italy, including Rome), we see a tension and conflict between what we might call the Christian “Enlightenment” (that is, of those who tend to think that the believer should look for knowledge and life primarily from God’s Holy Spirit) and the “moderate Enlightenment” of Christians who wished also to include Greek Enlightenment or rationalist thinking.

There were Christians in the primitive churches that were enamored not only with their newly found religion, but also with philosophy. Most of these believers were influenced by the Greek spirit in the culture around them and not formally educated. (In fact, Paul indicates that most of the early believers were not educated. See 1 Corinthians 1:26-29). The Greek influence was such a prevalent problem that the apostle Paul had to repeatedly warn and chasten believers who were attracted to philosophy. Over and over again, he says things such as: “See to it that no one takes you captive through hollow and deceptive philosophy, which depends on human tradition and the basic principles of this world rather than on Christ” (Colossians 2:8).

From the perspective of the apostles like Paul, the problem with philosophy is that, at bottom, it depends on human, all-too-human sources and authority, and, as such must be “hollow and deceptive.” Since man is sinful, and since even his very mind is corrupt, he is in no position to really know the truth about God’s world and spiritual things. The only way one can know such truth is from God Himself. One therefore must not depend on “human tradition and the basic principles of the world”, but, instead, “on Christ.”
How does one know what the past was like? How can one find out where the
universe came from? How does one learn what is right and wrong? All the apostles knew
the answers to these questions. The devout believer finds the truth on all such matters not
from disinterested research into the history of various peoples; nor from intellectual
curiosity to observe nature carefully in order to know it better; nor from independent
critical reasoning on various literature on the subject to test and learn from it. All the
apostles knew the answers to these questions. One finds the truth on all such matters from
the Holy Scriptures, from the "Word of God", from revelation, and from spiritual
illumination. The apostle Peter says, “His divine power has given us everything we need for
life and godliness through our knowledge of him who called us by his own glory and
goodness” (2 Pet. 1:3). In 2 Timothy, Paul says that “the holy Scriptures ... are able to make
you wise” and that “All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking,
correcting and training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be thoroughly
equipped for every good work” (2 Tim. 3:15-16).

Those Christians who had been influenced by philosophy and Greek learning
naturally could not help admiring the intellectual achievements and eloquence of non-
believers in the culture at large. These believers (and even many scribes and Pharisees)
could not help thinking that Jesus and his disciples should also have more such formal
education, common sense, and scholarly knowledge and wisdom. But both disappointed.
Jesus praised God for hiding truth from the learned and the wise (Luke 10:21), and Paul
explicitly goes out of his way not to rely on such wisdom. Paul primarily believes in
spiritual wisdom, which he calls a “secret wisdom”, and a wisdom only for “the mature, but
not the wisdom of this age or of the rulers of this age” (1 Cor. 2:6-7). Paul makes it crystal clear that he will not play the pagan, Greek rationalist philosophy game:

When I came to you brothers, I did not come with eloquence or superior wisdom as I proclaimed to you the testimony of God ... For my message and my preaching were not with wise and persuasive words, but with a demonstration of the Spirit's power, so that your faith might not rest on men’s wisdom, but on God’s power.... this is what we speak, not in words taught us by human wisdom but in words taught by the Spirit, expressing spiritual truths in spiritual words. The man without the Spirit does not accept the things that come from the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him, and he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually discerned. The spiritual man make judgments about all things, but he himself is not subject to any man’s judgment: ‘For who has known the mind of the Lord that he may instruct him?’ But we have the mind of Christ (1 Cor. 2, my emphases).

This passage in a nutshell says it all. Here the Christian “Enlightenment” position is clearly laid out. Here the spiritual bifurcation of the human race and who knows what and who can know truth is made abundantly clear. Paul purposely eschews “superior wisdom”, philosophy, logic, or “wise and persuasive words.” There’s no natural theology going on here; nor any kind of rationalist, evidentialist philosophy of religion. He makes it clear that for his preaching and for his life, he depends on only one thing: Christ. Beyond this kind of knowledge, generally speaking, he thinks all else is but dung or rubbish (Phil. 3:8). For, ultimately, all such “knowledge puffeth up”; for “the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life” (2 Cor. 3:6). If St. Paul is to be proud, if he would boast, it will only be, he says, about “visions and revelations from the Lord” (2 Cor. 12:1) and not on the traditions of men or hollow or deceptive human wisdom.

Christians are exhorted to have faith. Unbelief and doubting are often severely rebuked. They are not taught to rely on reason. They are not taught to critique all claims and beliefs and presuppositions. There are no major didactic teachings that explicitly praise reliance on reason in the Torah or in the New Testament, as there are in the works of the great Greek philosophers; for believers are taught to “pray without ceasing” (1

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180 For more on this from contemporary scholarship, see, for instance, Elaine Pagels’s *The Gnostic Paul: Gnostic Exegesis of the Pauline Letters.*
Thessalonians 5:17), to fast, to worship, to love, hope, and to be filled with faith. Over and over again, throughout the whole New Testament, there are stories and teachings that rationalism and doubting are foolish and sinful, and that only childlike (and literally children’s) faith is what is praised and rewarded. For example, Jesus does not praise the knowledge of the scholars and sages of the Pharisees of Sadducees. Instead he says things like: “I praise you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and learned, and revealed them to little children” (Luke 10:21). God hides the spiritual things from the scholarly, but will only reveal them to child-like faith.

In John, we are told that the greatest scholar of the time could make neither head nor tail out of what Jesus was teaching. Jesus tells him,

I tell you the truth, unless a man is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God”, but Nicodemus doesn’t have a clue as to what is meant: “How can a man be born when he is old?” Nicodemus asked. “Surely he cannot enter a second time into his mother’s womb to be born!” Jesus answered, “I tell you the truth, unless a man is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God. Flesh gives birth to flesh, but the Spirit gives birth to spirit”... “How can this be?” Nicodemus asked. “You are Israel’s teacher,” said Jesus, “and do you not understand these things? (John 3:3-11).

The original church saw themselves as “strangers and pilgrims” in the world, and that “the time is short” and that “the fashion of the world is passing away”; they are thus exhorted to look only to the “city which hath foundations, whose builder and maker is God” (Hebrews 11:9-10, 1 Peter 1:1; 2:11; 1 Corinthians 7:29-32). In fact, some churches, such as the church in Thessalonica, were so filled with faith in the teachings from Jesus and the

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181 As the context of the next New Testament passage shows, Jesus railed against the scholarship of the Pharisees since through it they rejected him. From the Enlightenment’s point of view, of course, scholarship is, on the whole, a good thing. But, as Nietzsche points out, the primitive church condemned the wisdom of the world: [you need to introduce and explain the following] “Whomever a ‘first Christian’ attacks is not besmirched by it. ... Conversely: it is an honour to have ‘first Christians’ against one. It is impossible to read the New Testament without feeling a partiality for that which is ill-treated in it – to say nothing of the ‘wisdom of the world’ which an impudent humbug tried in vain to confound... But even the Scribes and Pharisees gain advantage from having such an opponent: they must have been worth something to be hated in such an indecent fashion” (The Anti-Christ, 161-162).
apostles of the Lord’s soon return, that many of them even left their jobs! The apostle Paul actually had to tell them to keep working - "until the Lord returns."

The first Christians were exhorted to “Therefore come out from them and be separate” (2 Corinthians 6:17), for “Your citizenship is in heaven” (Philippians 3:20). This is also why they are told to “not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but to be transformed by the renewing of your mind” and to “not love the world or anything in the world” (Romans 12:2; 1 John 1:15). Indeed, Jesus’ brother, James, rebukes the early believers in the harshest of terms for being cozy with “the world”: “You adulterous people, don’t you know that friendship with the world is hatred toward God? Anyone who chooses to be a friend of the world becomes an enemy of God” (James 4:4). In all these passages, and so many more, there is not a hint of teaching or encouragement to philosophize or to reason. And yet later Christian philosophers would do just this.

Let me refer to a couple more texts before showing how this same problem cropped up in the generation of the Church Fathers. To the church in the Greek city of Corinth, Paul the apostle explains that “the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God” (1 Cor. 1:18). To “prove” his point (in the Christian “Enlightenment” way), he quotes from the Word of God (a passage from Isaiah 29:14) and then expounds what it means. “For it is written:

‘I will destroy the wisdom of the wise;
the intelligence of the intelligent I will frustrate.’

Where is the wise man? Where is the scholar? Where is the philosopher of this age?
Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world?182 For since in the wisdom of

182 Nietzsche: “A religion like Christianity, which is at no point in contact with actuality, which crumbles away as soon as actuality comes into its own at any point whatever, must naturally be a mortal enemy of the ‘wisdom of the world’; that is to say of science – it will approve of all expedients by which disciplining of the intellect, clarity and severity in matters of intellectual conscience, noble coolness and freedom of intellect, can be poisoned and calumniated and brought into ill repute. ‘Faith’ as an imperative is a veto against science. . . Paul understood the need for the lie, for ‘faith’; the Church subsequently understood Paul.” Nietzsche goes on to assert his theory that Paul invented this
God the world through its wisdom did not know Him, God was pleased through the foolishness of what was preached to save those who believe. Jews demand miraculous signs and Greeks look for wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified: a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, but to those whom God has called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power and wisdom of God. For the foolishness of God is wiser than man’s wisdom.... God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise.... so that your faith might not rest on men’s wisdom, but on God’s power... This is what we speak, not in words taught us by human wisdom but in words taught by the Spirit, expressing spiritual truths in spiritual words. The man without the Spirit does not accept the things that come from the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him, and he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually discerned.... Do not be deceive yourselves. If any one of you thinks he is wise by the standards of this age, he should become a ‘fool’ so that he may become wise. For the wisdom of the world is foolishness in God’s sight. As it is written: ‘He catches the wise in their craftiness’; and again, ‘The Lord knows that the thoughts of the wise are futile’ (1 Corinthians, chapters 1-3, my emphasis).183

You can’t get any clearer than this. If this doesn’t express the Christian Enlightenment’s view of worldly knowledge, of God’s attitude toward the wise man and scholar and the philosopher of this age, I don’t know what can. The Greek Enlightenment is “foolishness to God.” Greek philosophical reasoning cannot come to know God, nor the things of God. It cannot bring salvation, spiritual wisdom, or true enlightenment from communing with the true God through Christ His Son. It cannot then find out what this world is all about. It cannot then learn the truth about the creation of the world in seven days, or about our first parents, Adam and Eve, or of the Garden of evil and the fact that there is a devil who tries to lead men’s minds away from the truth. How can the philosopher of this age find out from hollow and deceptive philosophy which depends human tradition about the all-important all of man and the curse on nature? How can they know why women suffer in child birth or why the earth yields thistles? How can their

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183 There has been a great deal of writing on the anti-philosophy passages of Scripture throughout the history of Christian theology and apologetics. There have also been some differences of opinion on how far to take these passages’ rejection of philosophy. All interpreters however agree that the New Testament’s distinction between philosophy and theology is, at the least, a rejection of any philosophizing or reasoning that would reject or make obstacles to the Christian message. Thus, even if the New Testament’s position is not a wholesale rejection of philosophy as such, it does appear to be of any and all philosophies of religion that reject the gospel.

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reasoning teach them who God has peculiarly selected as His people and who He has appointed to rule the earth?

How can they understand where plagues or famines or wars or blights or blindness or disease comes from? How can they know about the meaning of death and what, if anything, happens after death? How can they know that “the earth is established; it cannot be moved”? How can they know what is right and wrong? No, the wise men, the scholars, the philosophers of this world are “always learning but never able to acknowledge truth” (2 Tim. 3:7).

All their reasoning won’t teach them about the angels, about the laws of God, about the sign of the rainbow as God covenant that he will never destroy mankind again by water. By reasoning they cannot find out what God is like, what the end of the world will be like, how they should live. As a matter of fact, Paul states that most of the early church was not wise when they were converted – “not many of you were wise by human standards” (1 Corinthians 1:26). Yet, despite such clear passages (and there are many many more) against intellectualism and rationalism and philosophy throughout the Torah, Prophets, and New Testament, some Christians to come, who were brought up in pagan learning and philosophy, would nevertheless rely on (to varying degrees) and practice philosophy on their religion. Being educated and trained in Greek thought, they couldn’t help but to analyze, critique, wonder, and philosophize about life, the world, the scriptures, and their faith. But, again, David and the great heroes of the faith did not. Instead, they responded in exactly the opposite way. As we’ve quoted above:

Lord, my heart is not haughty, nor my eyes lofty. Neither do I concern myself with great matters, nor with things too profound for me. Surely I have calmed and quieted my soul. Like a weaned child with his mother; like a weaned child is my soul within me. O Israel, hope in the Lord from this time forth and forever (Psalm 131)!

Despite all these proof texts exhorting believers to attend focus on spiritual wisdom, some early Christians (and then, throughout the history of Christian philosophy - which was
most of western philosophy up until the Radical Enlightenment! could not resist intellectual temptation. They found it too hard not to “concern themselves with great matters.” They could not “wean themselves like a child.” We see this pattern of intellectualism versus spiritualism played out not only in what is called the “primitive” church (meaning the churches and Christians as we know them from the New Testament), but also in the very next generation after the Apostolic Fathers – in the generation of the Church Fathers.
Chapter Four

The Apostolic Fathers and the Church Fathers on the Tension between Theology and Philosophy

The Apostolic Fathers versus Greek or worldly wisdom

Contrary to popular opinion, the first generation after the apostles was not that of the Church Fathers such as Tertullian or St. Augustine. It was that of the Apostolic Fathers such as Clement of Rome, Ignatius, Polycarp, Diognetus, and Barnabas. In the Introduction to his translation of *Early Christian Writings*, Maxwell Staniforth makes clear that the Apostolic Fathers continued the anti-philosophy, anti-Greek-Enlightenment, keep-your-eyes-on-the-heavenly-prize mentality of the apostles. I take this to be a very important and largely ignored fact.

In the eyes of the primitive Church the writings of these men were virtually on the same level as Holy Scripture; in fact, if things had been only just a very little different, some of them would actually have been Holy Scripture – and today, instead of being unknown names, as they are to nine out of ten, they would have been familiar to every Bible reader in the world.\(^{184}\)

Staniforth goes on to provide a working definition for the Apostolic Fathers: “So if you want a definition of the Apostolic Fathers, all we can say is that they are certain writers who faithfully preserved the apostolic teaching and tradition between the time of the

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Apostles themselves and the latter years of the second century.” 185 And what does it mean that they “faithfully preserved the apostolic teaching and tradition between the time of the Apostles and themselves”? Staniforth gives us the answer: In “Nearly all their writings … [they] write in a manner very like that of St. Paul.” 186 This is an accurate assessment.

One fact that is unmistakable in the writings of the Apostolic Fathers and that is that all their writings ape the writings of the New Testament almost exactly in style, words, advice, teachings, et cetera. There’s absolutely no free thinking or original thinking or thinking outside the box in their writings. There is no inkling of the Greek philosophical spirit in these writings whatsoever. We also find the same complete reliance on Scripture and Scripture alone. No other writings are referred to. No other reasoning is presented. Only reasoning stemming directly and constantly from scripture. They say only what the apostles said. How different this is compared with the writings of later Church Fathers such as St. Augustine whose City of God gives a history of the city of man, of pagan philosophy, and of a million other things under the sun. What happened to this complete dependence on scripture alone?

We also find the same un-Enlightened view of authority for one’s beliefs and obedience. The Apostolic Fathers, like the New Testament apostles, demanded faith and obedience to scripture and to the Bishops and deacons of the church. Take Ignatius Theophorus, Bishop of Antioch, the capital of Syria (which was one of the world’s three great cities only surpassed by Rome and Alexandria). He is said to have been a disciple of the Apostles. 187 In his epistle to the Ephesians, he demands that the church unite “in a common act of submission and acknowledging the authority of your bishop and clergy.” Later, he says, “as [Jesus Christ] represents the mind of the Father, so our bishops …

185 Ibid. 10.
186 Ibid. 10.
187 Ibid. 63.
represent the mind of Jesus Christ” and again, “we must regard a bishop as the Lord Himself.”\textsuperscript{188} This is not Kantian-Spinoza Enlightenment talk or even Socrates-Plato Enlightenment talk. This is “Don’t think or believe on your own” talk. Think and believe only in obedience to “your Bishop and clergy,” not “Dare to know! Have the courage to use your own understanding” “without guidance from another.”

The earliest surviving Christian writings, outside of the New Testament, come from Clement, Bishop of Rome at about 96 AD. In his Epistle to “the colony of the Church of God at Corinth”, he praises them for “deferring with correctness to those who were set over you” and for their “Humility, too, and a complete absence of self-assertion.”\textsuperscript{189} For people are “made better” by “self-effacement and humble submissiveness” (33). Clement might have been a Greek or Roman by birth, but he makes no mention of any Greek or Roman literature; only “the Bible.” He reminds them of their “heavenly citizenship”;\textsuperscript{190} “Let us fix our thoughts on the Blood of Christ”;\textsuperscript{191} “Let us bow, then, to that sovereign and glorious will.”\textsuperscript{192}

There were some in the church at Corinth who disagreed with the Bishop of their church. Clement tells them to “make your submission to the clergy. Bend the knees of your hearts and accept correction, so that it may bring you to a better frame of mind. Learn to subordinate yourselves.”\textsuperscript{193} The only study he calls his church to do is “careful study on the maxims of the divine Teaching”; for “it is a moral duty for us to bow the head and take our seat on the stool of submission.”\textsuperscript{194}

\textsuperscript{188} Ibid. 76-77.  
\textsuperscript{189} Ibid. 23.  
\textsuperscript{190} Ibid. 24.  
\textsuperscript{191} Idid. 26.  
\textsuperscript{192} Ibid. 27.  
\textsuperscript{193} Ibid. 53.  
\textsuperscript{194} Ibid. 56.
There’s nothing in these earliest Christian writings which bespeak any radical or Greek enlightenment values. There isn’t the slightest hint of naturalism or rationalism. All is based on the Word of God and obedience to their leaders.

Reading the earliest of Christian writings is really quite revealing. For instance, one finds an eschatology of the kind that one hears in American Evangelical and Fundamentalist churches today. They believed that the Lord’s coming was at hand. The scriptures that teach this are too many to cite here, but some must be quoted in order to help readers to know the mind-set of the New Testament and the New Testament Church. These will also help readers to gain a richer understanding of Christian hostility to worldly pursuits such as philosophy, for it the world is indeed ending and the Lord is indeed coming “with judgment”, then one would indeed be a fool to ignore these things to pursue philosophy.

Jesus: “I tell you the truth, this generation will certainly not pass away until all these things have happened” (Lk. 21:32).
Paul: “What I mean, brothers, is that the time is short. From now on those who have wives should live as if they had none; those who mourn, as if they did not; those who are happy, as if they were not; those who buy something, as if it were not theirs to keep; those who use the things of the world, as if not engrossed in them. For this world in its present form is passing away” (1 Cor. 7: 29).
“The Lord is near” (Phil. 4:5).
1 Jn. 2:18: “Dear children, this is the last hour; and as you have heard that the antichrist is coming, even now many antichrists have come. This is how we know it is the last hour.”
“The revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave him to show his servants what must soon take place ... because the time is near ... Look, he is coming with the clouds, and every eye will see him, even those who pierced him, and all the peoples of the earth will mourn because of him” (Rev. 1:1-3).
Jesus: “Behold, I am coming soon! ... Yes, I am coming soon” (Rev. 22: 7, 20).

The early church and Apostolic Fathers also believed strongly and says a lot about the devil or the “Dark Lord.” They believed that the devil’s man (the anti-Christ and the Beast) would soon deceive the world, and much else of end-times talk. They fully believed St. Paul’s teaching that Satan personally and actively deceives the minds of unbelievers so that they believe lies instead of “the truth” (that is, their myth) because “they refused to love
the truth and so be saved.” In fact, because of unbelievers refusal “to love the truth” (how different from the love of truth that even Plato counseled!) God punishes all such so that they will believe in lies and delusions such as the claims of Greek wisdom. “For this reason God sends them a powerful delusion so that they will believe the lie so that all will be condemned who have not believed the truth but have delighted in wickedness” (2 Thess. 2:11-12).

For the early Christians such as St. Paul, the philosophers do not know God. And, if they don’t know God (that is, the Christian God), then they’re in a heap of trouble, for “God’s judgment is right … God is just … This will happen when the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven in blazing fire with his powerful angels. He will punish those who do not know God and do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus. They will be punished with everlasting destruction” (2 Thess. 1:8).

It is therefore “logical” that the primitive church preached against the pursuit of worldly wisdom, for they fully believed that the end of the world and the return of the Lord of Lords was at hand! In fact, some churches, such as those in Thessalonica actually were quitting their jobs and neglecting even practical affairs for survival!195

One more observation that I think worth pointing out from my study of the Apostolic Fathers: the Epistle of Barnabus and the Didache talk about the Two Ways. They thus continue the New Testament teachings of a bifurcated universe of the enlightened and saved from the unenlightened and unsaved - and this long before Augustine’s theology and history of the Two Cities memorialized in his The City of God. In other words, this “two-ways” business is very Christian and very orthodox.

195 This New Testament teaching, by the way, has been followed throughout the history of Christianity, and not only in that of the New Testament or the Apostolic Fathers. See http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Second_Coming_of_Christ, for a list of some of the many believers who believed and acted on this biblical belief.
Staniforth tells us that these writings from this period are considered “the purest times of Christianity next to the Apostles.”\textsuperscript{196} A reading of their writings reveals a very different mentality compared to the later generations of Church Fathers, who are skilled (with ambivalent love) in Greek philosophical wisdom. Compared to the Church Fathers, “The Apostolic Fathers were not all intellectual giants, they were men of a simple and rather endearing piety, who were devoted heart and soul to a living Saviour and quite untroubled by the theological conundrums that were so soon to perplex their successors.”\textsuperscript{197}

The Church Fathers up to Augustine and their struggle between philosophy and the scriptures

The Church Fathers (along with the Apostolic Fathers) continued the other-worldly tradition of Jesus and the apostles. Clement addressed his letters (as Peter and Paul often did) with expressions such as, to the “Church of God which sojourns at Rome”; Polycarp does the same; Justin writes: “Depart ye, depart ye, depart ye, go ye out from thence and touch no unclean thing”; Cyprian says, "We have renounced the world when we were baptised"; Pontius understands that as a Christian, “he is a stranger even in his own state”; Tertullian asks why some Christians seem to want the age to be prolonged when they should be longing for its consummation and the Kingdom to come; Augustine also knows

\textsuperscript{196} Ibid. 12.  
\textsuperscript{197} Ibid. 11.
this spirit: "We are sojourners, unable to live happily exiled from our fatherland. We seek a 
way to help us to end our sorrows and to return to our native country." 198

Of course, these passages should not be taken out of context. Thought they yearn to 
leave the body to be with the Lord, they also still have to live in the world until the Lord 
returns. Thus there are many passages that urge believers to love their fellow man, to 
preach the gospel, and to do good. Nevertheless, “there was a strong feeling that Christians 
should not take part in public life, and accept public office ... and such an attitude was bound 
to react on his view of the education that the world had to offer.” 199 This is proved by the 
fact that the early Church was proud of and deliberately stressed that they were 
unschooled. Indeed, all of their models (the heroes of the faith) were either unschooled or 
renounced such worldly schooling. 200 Many not only knew but also gloried in the lives of 
Peter and John, who, when the learned priests and Sadducees summoned them, “saw the 
courage of Peter and John and realized that they were unschooled, ordinary men” (Acts 4:13).

From all this one should not be surprised upon hearing that the pagans thought the 
Christians were a pack of buffoons. Celsus criticizes the Christians because they never 
provided reasons or arguments for their beliefs in Christ, but instead demanded only blind 
faith. The Christian slogans were “Do not examine, but believe!” “Your faith will save you!” 
and “Do not investigate.” Celsus then concludes that the Christians “repel every wise man

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Most of my quotes come from his chapter entitled “The Christian Attitude to Pagan Culture.”
199 Ibid. 197.
200 Some commentators aver that believers like Daniel and Solomon prove the lie to this rule. Their 
argument however does not take context into consideration. For instance, we are told by most 
orthodox commentators on “Solomon’s” book of Ecclesiastics that he wrote it during the time of his 
backsliding and idolatry. The book then, according to their point of view, is a lesson of what happens 
to the soul *in a backslidden condition*. Indeed, the issue of the canonicity of Ecclesiastes was only 
accepted because of the [later inserted] orthodox passages that repudiate the “backslidden” thinking 
of the book (See Spinoza’s *TTP* wonderful insights on this; see also Warren Montag’s excellent and 
detailed “Lucretius Hebraizant: Spinoza’s Reading of Ecclesiastes” in an upcoming issue in the 
European Journal of Philosophy). The case with Daniel is also dispatched when we merely consider 
the context of his learning, for he was forced to learn while in captivity. The kinds of learning that he 
imbibed and cultivated then were not of the kind that he would have pursued if not forced into it 
(that is, so long as he remained devout).
from the doctrine of their faith, and invite only the ignorant and the vulgar.” Origin accepts
this charge “and turns it to the glory of God.”

But what of the minority of Christians who had been schooled before they became
Christians, and some of whom were philosophers? How did they regard philosophy and
Greek wisdom? Tertullian says that one of the joys that Christians will have in heaven is
seeing the philosophers burning in Hell:

How vast the spectacle that day, how wide! What sight shall wake my wonder, what
my laughter, my joy, my exultation? as I see ... those sages the philosophers blushing
before their disciples whom they taught that God was concerned with nothing, that
men have no souls at all, or that what souls they have shall never return to their
former bodies

Tatian’s invective is worse. Hippolytus rails against their “artificial sophisms of
error”; Lactantius and Justin Martyr also join in on the condemnations. There’s not space
enough in this section to include the many passages from their books in which they not only
repudiate the wisdom of the world and of philosophy, but in which they also sternly warn
and charge believers to stay away from all such literature so as not to be sucked into its
charms and thus lose one’s salvation. This spirit is well-captured in passages such as the
following:

What likeness is there between the philosopher and the Christian, the disciple of
Greece and the disciple of heaven, the trader in reputation and the trader in
salvation, the doer of words and the worker of deeds, the builder up and the
destroyer of things, the friend and the enemy of error, the corrupter and the
restorer and the exponent of truth, its thief and its guardian?

And again, the famous lines:

What indeed has Athens to do with Jerusalem? What concord is there between
the Academy and the Church? What between heretics and Christians? ... Away with
all the attempts to produce a mottled Christianity of Stoic, Platonic, and dialectic composition! We want no curious disputation after possessing Jesus Christ, no inquisition after enjoying the gospel! With our faith we desire no further belief.206

Why did even those who were brought up and trained in philosophy, upon becoming Christians, take this attitude? Answer: Because this is the consistent teaching of the New Testament. It was not easy for many such learned Christians to take this stance. Barclay tells stories of how such brilliant men as Justin Martyr, Tertullian, Jerome, and Clement struggled to keep the intellect in its rightful, spiritual place. Jerome’s is a colorful one. He wrote an account of this painful struggle in his own personal life. He tells us that when he became a Christian, he had no problem with cutting himself off his love of dainty food, and even from his home, parents, relations. But he found that he could not forego his books.

And so, miserable man that I was, I would fast only that I might afterwards read Cicero. After many nights spent in vigil, after floods of tears called from my inmost heart, after the recollection of my past sins, I would once more take up Plautus. And when at times I returned to my right mind and began to read the prophets, their style seemed rude and repellent.

unbelievers are wicked and members of the kingdom of Satan. Because of this fundamentally ontological (in a spiritual sense) and epistemological difference between believers and unbelievers, the apostle demands a spiritual-cultural separation (except with respect to seeking to convert them and livelihood). He wants them to “purify” themselves from “everything that contaminates body and spirit” that stem from the children of darkness. He commands the Corinthian churches that were mixing their lives with unbelievers, the following information about these Greeks: “Do not be yoked together with unbelievers. For what do righteousness [believers] and wickedness [unbelievers] have in common? For what fellowship can light [believers] have with darkness [unbelievers]? What harmony is there between Christ and Belial [a demon or Satan]? What does a believer have in common with an unbeliever? What agreement is there between the Temple of God and idols” (2 Cor. 6:14-16). This passage is not a piece of literary rhetoric; it is a piece of staunch orthodox theology. And it is in agreement with the apostle’s soteriology and eschatology in all his writings. Passages such as these will be watered down and sanitized over and over again in the history of Christianity by worldly Christians and Christians in the throes of love with unbelievers’ books. A careful, thorough, and unflinchingly honest interpretation of such New Testament passages however, do not harmonize with these later revisionist and presentist textual interpretations.

206 Both passages come from Tertullian (Barclay, op. cit., 205). The quote above is precisely the same criticism leveled against moderate enlightenment Christians who, in their love of worldly learning, relied on the rationalism of the Greek philosophers as they did on theology and “Christian” philosophy. This same orthodox charge is made over and over again throughout the history of Christian theology and philosophy – in the Church Fathers, against some in the medieval period, and more certainly against the Scholastics. One can find these charges in the Paris Condemnation of 1277; but they’re made by Bonaventure, Erasmus, Scotus, Luther, Calvin, Pascal, and even, of all people, Hobbes.
This went on for some time until he has a dream in which he is caught up to the Judgment seat of God and asked who he was. He replied, “I am a Christian.” “But he who presided said: ‘You lie; you are a Ciceronian and not a Christian.’” Jerome awoke from this dream begging God for mercy: “He was told that he would be tortured till he agreed not to read the works of the Gentiles.” Jerome replied that “if ever again I possess worldly books, or if ever again I read such I have denied Thee.” Barclay goes on to tell us that Jerome didn’t keep his word.207

But other Christian intellectuals took a different interpretation on the philosophers. Clement, for instance, practices a kind of revisionist or allegorical history. He says that as the law was given to the Hebrews to lead them to God, so also philosophy was given to the Greeks to lead them to the true God. “Philosophy was a schoolmaster to lead the Hellenic mind to Christ ... The way of truth is one, but it is like a river into which there flow many streams and many tributaries.”208 Here we see a picture of things to come in the history of Christian theology. In later centuries, Dante, Aquinas, Descartes, and Leibniz would all somehow legitimate and harmonize worldly and divine learning for the glory of God.

Origen succeeded Clement at the school at Alexandria. He even praised the philosophers and persuaded Gregory to study the philosophy of the Greeks.209 Here indeed was a new thing under the Christian sun, and one which would have momentous influence for what was to follow in the history of Christian thinking.

Before we get to Augustine, three other great Christian leaders should be mentioned: Basil, Gregory of Nazianzen, and Gregory of Nyssa. Gregory of Nazianzen writes

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207 Ibid. 212-13.
208 Ibid. 215-216.
209 Ibid. 216-219.
in praise of “even that pagan culture which many Christians spit upon, as treacherous and dangerous, and keeping us afar from God.”

How do we account for this radical change in attitude toward Greek philosophy and wisdom? This was not a mystery to many of their Christian contemporaries, though. They interpreted this change to a liberal shift, to worldliness, and lack of devotion to Christ and spiritual things. As such, they condemned their philosophical compatriots. (This pattern is played out over and over again in the history of philosophy: of Bonaventure against Aquinas, Luther against Erasmus, Leibniz against Descartes, and of Burgh against Spinoza.)

Some demanded Christians to “Avoid all books of the heathen.” However, this time the move to the intellect was not squashed out. Hence philosophers and lovers of pagan learning such as Augustine arose, which praised Greek wisdom. Augustine writes that Christians should not shrink from heathen learning, and they should learn all they can about it, especially of that which agrees with Christian doctrine. Like Clement and Origin before him, Augustine found all sorts of wonderful truths in pagan literature, especially in Plato and the Platonists. He tried to legitimize and sanction this practice by calling it “spoiling the Egyptians”: “As the Jews spoiled the Egyptian when they went forth from Egypt so the Christian spoils the pagan writers when he goes out from paganism.” For others, though, this analogy between the ancient Hebrews taking physical possessions from their captives, the Egyptians, with Christians taking worldly wisdom from the world is in many respects dis-analogous and therefore arguably hermeneutically illegitimate. It is certain that this is not a proof text that can be rightfully used to argue that God wishes Christians to study worldly wisdom and knowledge from unregenerate unbelievers.

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210 Ibid. 221.
211 Ibid. 230.
212 Ibid. 230-232.
We get an even deeper analysis of how Christians dealt with Greek learning and philosophy from Christopher Stead’s *Philosophy in Christian Antiquity*. Strangely, Stead does not tell us much about the New Testament and the primitive church’s attitude toward reason and philosophy. His analysis takes up where Barclay leaves off. He begins with the Church Fathers, but is also constrained by a stricter notion of philosophy than Barclay.

Stead makes it clear that “Philosophy was invented and given to the world by the Greeks” and that the term should not be used loosely to also include theology. Stead is anxious to define philosophy as distinct from religion or theology. In his history of philosophy, he begins with thinkers from Miletus: “A philosophy recognizably distinct from mythology began when the sages of Miletus in Asia Minor, attempted to explain things in terms of inanimate things which could be expected to behave in a regular way in accordance with a few simple laws ... instead of attributing them to the caprice of the all-too-human gods.”

It is true, though, that Thales, who has been “traditionally regarded as the founder of Greek philosophy”, declared that “all things are full of gods.” Yes, says Stead, “But their main significance as philosophers lies in their attempt to account for all natural phenomena in terms of a few simple substances of principles.” Thus he is doubtful that Christian thought in the early centuries can be labeled as philosophy. It was sometimes called “the barbarian philosophy”, but Stead says that “It is a nice question whether we should call it a philosophy today.” This is because, according to Stead, early Christianity (2nd to 4th centuries) “kept a sharply defined identity; its commitment to the Bible as a sacred book was far more uncompromising than the philosophers’ respect for Plato; and it valued communal experience and tradition in a way which offended students accustomed to

213 Christopher Stead’s *Philosophy in Christian Antiquity*, 3.
214 Ibid. 4.
215 Ibid. 4.
216 Ibid. 79.
accepting the guidance of expert scholars.”

As a result, Stead does not agree with other scholars in their acceptance of a Christian philosophy in this period. He says that a more accurate definition of philosophy can be understood “in the sense accepted today”:

“The proper question is whether the use of which Christian teachers made of philosophical doctrines and methods, in the sense accepted today, entitles them to be called philosophers. I myself would prefer to reserve the term for those who treat such doctrines and methods as an autonomous discipline to which they are committed. In this sense, only a few of the early Christian Fathers can properly claim to rank as philosophers; for the majority, the commitment to philosophical method was too uncertain and their achievement, as philosophers, too slight.”

While Barclay could countenance Gregory of Nyssa (for example) as a philosopher, Stead says: “To Gregory, the Bible and Christian tradition were the source of all truth; he would have considered it frivolous to give comparable attention to Platonic scholarship or Aristotelian logic.” Justin may be considered a philosopher, but he was so insignificant in philosophy that his importance is only as a Christian teacher. Thus: “Our point is rather that their allegiance to biblical and Church tradition left too little room, in most cases, for the dispassionate critical study that philosophy requires.” For Stead then, “Christian philosophy” is really Christian theology.

Claiming that most of the Church Fathers were not philosophers, however, does not deny the fact that they were influenced by philosophy. He gives many examples of this fact; we can only mention a few here. He shows how a philosophical ‘syncretistic’ movement of the 1st century came to influence Christian thought. We know also that Stoic ethics even “influenced the New Testament writers.” Philo of Alexandria had a powerful influence on many Christian theologians and monasticism. Platonism also had an immense affect on

217 Ibid.
218 Ibid. 80.
219 Ibid. 81.
220 Ibid. 80.
221 Ibid. 52.
222 Ibid. 56-57.
the imagination and thinking of the early Church\textsuperscript{223} (as in how the body and human sexuality should be treated).\textsuperscript{224} The Middle Platonists influenced Church Fathers such as Justin, Clement, Origin and Eusebius.\textsuperscript{225} And both Plato and Plotinus were part and parcel of Augustine’s education and Christianity.\textsuperscript{226}

Augustine and philosophy

Augustine, however, is somewhat of a different case. Stead argues that though Augustine confesses that “I had to leave the philosophers for love of thee” (\textit{Confessions} 3.6.10), Stead persuasively demonstrates that that he really didn’t. Contrary to the impression Augustine gives of abandoning “worldly ambitions and a commitment to the spiritual life ... a different impression is conveyed ... [which] show him discussing problems in Platonic philosophy. Some scholars have suggested, accordingly, that it was to philosophy that he was really converted.”\textsuperscript{227} In view of the fact that most of his writings are shot through and through with scriptural references and professed devotion to God, plus his constant refrain that God’s Word is far greater and therefore far more reliable than man’s (including all philosophers) word, I find this claim difficult to countenance. But perhaps by “philosophy” these scholars mean “philosophy-mixed-with-biblical-theology.” However this may be,
while acknowledging Augustine as "by far the ablest philosopher of late antiquity", Stead still singles out "the basic assumptions of his metaphysics."\textsuperscript{228}

In my opinion, there's no way around it: Augustine is one of the supreme intellects in the history of theology and philosophy. Our brief and tidy Enlightenment-versus-Counter-Enlightenment treatment of him cannot do him justice. On the contrary, this focused treatment in some respects is irritatingly too reductive, too simplistic, and too misleading (especially for those who don't know Augustine well). We therefore acknowledge to readers that this treatment is inadequate if one wants to also know the greatness of Augustine. To this we refer our readers to Augustine's writings themselves. With this very important caveat said, what can we say about Augustine in short compass that may speak to the Enlightenment versus Counter-Enlightenment theme of this study - except that Augustine, despite all his vast learning, eloquence, and humanity, is one of history's greatest promoters of the City of God, and therefore, from the perspective of the 17\textsuperscript{th} century Radical Enlightenment, is one of the world's greatest arch counter-enlighteners.\textsuperscript{229}

\textsuperscript{228} Ibid. 219.

\textsuperscript{229} There are many other things that can be said to support this view, of course: his rampant superstitiousness, his credulity about all sorts of stories (q.v. his belief in the composition of the Septuagint), his views on heresy (and the infamous "compel them to come in"), his views on human depravity and sexuality, his views on demonology, miracles, prophecy, omens, dreams, hearing voices, and so much more. He may have used something of a neo-Platonic hermeneutic on the first chapter of Genesis in something of a rationalist manner; but this rationalism certainly did not extend very far. So, though he had some great, insightful ideas on the first two chapters of Genesis, he shows the usual orthodox adherence of most of the rest of the book. All these positions show him to be far from the great "radical enlightenment" pre-Socratics, or even, in my opinion, of the "moderate enlightenment" Socrates or Plato. Socrates had his daemon and heard his voices, but he subjected just about everything to the most honest and courageous searching criticism in his search for truth. He even treated the gods and his own daemon with an ever-open, watchful, and critical mind. Plato moreover had the courage to condemn the outrageous immoralities of the gods of his culture; Augustine could not. Augustine was too devout, too obedient, too fundamentalist, too enthusiastic, too needy, too subservient, too self-sacrificing, even to the point of sacrificing human judgment for "God's." Some might feel that my judgment is too harsh and a-historical, but I don't think it is. He had the books and the time and the life to search out the truth of Lucretius, of Epicurus, of Democritus, Herodotus, Thucydides, and so on; and to compare them with the claims, the arguments, and the histories of the religious. Many another man judged better, even if without the genius he had.
Stead is not the only scholar with this view on the Church Fathers, Augustine, and their legacy on the history of Western-Christian theology and philosophy. David Knowles’ classic *Evolution of Medieval Thought* delineates a similar history. Outside the Bible, for Knowles, Augustine “has had greater influence upon the history of dogma” than any other thinker.\(^{230}\) Therefore some things should be pointed out about Augustine as philosopher and theologian.

For one thing, the divisions between nature, rational wisdom, supernatural wisdom, reason, Christian revelation and philosophy and theology “have no place in Augustine.”\(^{231}\) Knowles argues that “Augustine has at no time any interest in analyzing or describing either the universe or the microcosm of man in [purely] philosophical terms.”\(^{232}\) Because of Augustine’s little training in philosophy, Knowles sees him more as a theologian than a philosopher.\(^{233}\) And indeed most of his works reflect this judgment. Let us take his great *City of God* for our model of Augustine’s theology-philosophy. *The City of God* is Augustine’s history of the world: As he puts it:

I must deal with the course of the history of the two cities [the City of God and the city of man] from the time when children were born to the first couple until the day when men shall beget no more. By the course of their history, as distinguished from their original cause and final consummation, I mean the whole time of world history in which men are born and take the place of those who die and depart.\(^{234}\)


\(^{231}\) Ibid. 34. See rest of 34 as well.

\(^{232}\) Ibid. 33.

\(^{233}\) Ibid. 37-39. For a fascinating example of how Augustine privileges revelation over philosophic thought, see his discussion in Chapter 9, Book XVI, on the antipodes. Here he shows first his knowledge of at least some of the “scientific” literature available to him. He offers some rational reasons why he argues against this view, but, in the final analysis, the test of truth is, as always, the scriptures: “First of all, our Scriptures never deceive us, since we can test the truth of what they have told us by the fulfillment of predictions” (that is, since the prophecies of Scripture has been proven true, we can and therefore should rely on Scripture to tell us the truth on all sorts of its other claims, 367).

Of these two cities, Etienne Gilson's Forward to Augustine's *City of God* says: "Both cities are in fact immortal" – only one city is the city of the Devil and ends up spending eternity in torment with the devil, and the other spends eternity in Bliss with God.\(^{235}\)

Early examples of Augustine’s history include the usual literal understanding of Scripture: “Now, the first man born of the two parents of the human race was Cain. He belonged to the city of man. The next born was Abel, and he was of the City of God ... Now, it is recorded of Cain that he built a city [Gen. 4:17], while Abel, as though he were merely a pilgrim on earth, built none.”\(^{236}\)

The picture rendered here is not one like that of the Stoics. “Contrary to the Stoics, however, St. Augustine did not conceive of the universe as a city. Never did he speak of the *cosmos* as the City of God in the same sense as a Stoic could speak of it as the City of Zeus.”\(^{237}\)

In Augustine’s tale of two cities, both cities are contained in one universe - one whose end is hell, and the other whose end is heaven. Augustine’s history then gives the same theological

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\(^{235}\) Ibid. 29.

\(^{236}\) Ibid. 324-325. Since thinkers first began to critique the scriptures (and the history it offers) with an independent mind (ex. Spinoza), we have continually learned that the history of the two cities as portrayed by the Bible and Augustine (et. al.) has been false. The Bible provides a clear history from the creation of the universe, to Adam and Eve, to the world-wide Noahic Flood, to all the chronologies, to Jesus, to the Apocalypse, the end of the world, and the new heaven and the new earth. What is at issue here is nothing less than the question of truth of the Bible’s and Christians’ claims for the past millennia. Just as the stories and histories of Achilles, Dionysus, Hinduism, etc. are understood to be false, so also are the writings of the Bible and Christians on their origins, development, and history. There are hundreds of millions of people today who don’t know that Ezra, St. Paul, Augustine, Boethius, Aquinas, Pascal, Leibniz, Descartes, George Fox, Thomas a Kempis, Martin Luther, John Calvin, John Wesley, Pat Robertson, Pope John Paul, and so on – all work with a false history – *all got it wrong* just as the ancient Greek myths got their history wrong. See Popper’s *The Open Society and Its Enemies* on oracular history for a superb philosophical treatment of the epistemology of historiography. The question of historical truth or that of getting one’s claims about what did and did not happen in times past is not merely an academic ivory tower interest. It is of vital importance in all sorts of domains. We’re told by the best biblical scholars and Jewish and Christian historians in the finest schools in the world today (in Cambridge, Oxford, Harvard, Princeton, etc.) that the true history of the biblical writings and the accepted teachings and traditions handed down from these are all largely false. For thousands of years, Jews, Muslims, and Christians (the people of the Book) have been taught a false history. It has taken this many centuries for enough freedom, wealth, sciences, and scholarship to combine to finally bring to light these findings. Meanwhile, most of the earth’s inhabitants are still bamboozled by what Spinoza called “the relics of man’s ancient bondage” (*Spinoza, TTP*, trans. Shirley, 3)

\(^{237}\) Ibid. 30.
and eschatological history that the scriptures claim. And indeed, how could he offer a different schema as a Christian? So, despite all of Augustine’s genius and vast pagan learning, he still nevertheless constrains much of his thinking and beliefs to the scriptures, with which, to him, are the veritable oracles of God. As a result, we get the same white or black, sheep or goat, wheat or tares, good or evil, saint or sinner, found or lost, damned or saved, Christ or Satan bifurcation and absolute dualism of all things – just as the scriptures teach. And this dualistic, cosmic either-or is not directed only against the pagans, but also against the Jews of the “Old Testament” who reject the good news of the “New Testament.” The Jews who reject the “New Testament” are called “vessels of wrath”, while Christians are called “vessels of mercy.”

From this admittedly under-described handling of the Augustine corpus, it should still be plain that Augustine is no radical enlightener. Not by a long stretch.

Summing up the Greek influence on the Church

With the exception of Augustine then, Stead sums up his view that “There is no doubt about the contribution which philosophy made to early Christian thought … But we cannot speak with the same assurance about the contribution which Christian writers made to philosophy.”

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238 Ibid. 326. To the Radical Enlightenment mind, reading The City of God is based on principles which are radically unenlightened, un-humanistic, un-rational, un-empirical, and morally outrageous. In the course of his history, he takes up the question how Christian virgins could have been raped in Rome by the invading hordes, Augustine’s only answer is that they must not have been purely devoted to their true husband Christ like they should have been.

239 Ibid. 80.
The caption on the front page of Christopher Stead’s book aptly states what happened to Christianity from its contacts and interactions with Greek thought:

In the ancient world ‘philosophy’ included all branches of higher learning except mathematics and medicine. It was the keystone of a university education; and it helped to change the Christian Church from an obscure Jewish sect into a worldwide civilizing force. This book gives a brief, lucid and systematic account of its origin among the Greeks and its transforming influence on Christian thought.240

Stead says that

In this process Christians often learnt from their pagan critics ... And this dialogue has left its mark on the classical structure of Christian theology, which passed from Augustine to the Schoolmen, and so to Luther and Calvin, to Schleiermacher and to Karl Barth, and is the common inheritance of Orthodox, Roman Catholic and Anglican churchmen.”241

This completes our brief and selective summary of the Church Fathers and Augustine.

240 Imagine the following: Imagine that a very different world-view and “philosophy” impacted the early Church Fathers instead of the Greco-Roman philosophy. Imagine that Justin Martyr, Origin, and Augustine were born and raised in as Confuctionists or Theravadan Buddhists or Zen Buddhists. What would Christian theology turned into then? What then would have become of discussions about the Trinity, the Eucharist, the role of the Church in the world, persecution, censorship, the church councils, hermeneutics and biblical interpretation, notions of God, the supernatural, nature, expiation for sins, life after death, judgment day, sanctification, and the Fall? We can only imagine.

241 Stead, op. cited, 9-10.
Chapter Five

Outline of the Church Fathers to Scholasticism

During the period of the Church Fathers and Augustine, the decline and fall of the Roman Empire was taking place. This of course had huge implications for European culture. From this cultural transformation, the Church went from Church persecuted to Church persecutor. The period of time extending from the beginnings of Christian apologetics after the Apostolic Fathers to the time of St. Augustine is known as the Patristic era in theology and philosophy. Most of these Christian theologians and philosophers primarily relied on Platonic or neo-Platonic (especially Plotinus) thought (and not in the thought of “radical enlightenment” pre-Socratics or “moderate enlightenment” of Socrates and Plato) and often held more to mystical intuition over rational or dialectical proof. In one paragraph, Knowles encapsulates the influence of the Greek mind over the Christian mind for over a millennium:

Christianity, in its origins and pre-history, had little kinship with Greece, but what we call Christendom, for more than a thousand years from the conversion of the emperor Constantine, was almost exclusively a society of people deriving their intellectual discipline and the habits of reasoning directly or indirectly from the Greco-Roman culture of the ancient world. It would be scarcely an exaggeration to say that the philosophy in those centuries is so deeply impregnated with the methodological ideas of Greek thought, and with the doctrines of non-Christian and more particularly of pre-Christian philosophers, as to be in a very real sense a direct extension or prolongation of ancient philosophy ... Indeed, if we have in mind only the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, it is possible to say that almost all the leading ideas of medieval philosophy, with the partial exception of that branch of it later known as natural theology, were identical with, or were directly derived from, ideas
put into currency at Athens between 450 and 300 B.C. by a handful of Greek thinkers, among whom two, Plato and Aristotle, stand supreme.242

One can understand many of the changes in the Christian theological and philosophical ethos simply because of the new status Christians had in the world. Thanks to Constantine (and other forces) in placing Christians in places of power throughout the Empire, Christians were now confronted with entirely different challenges. They were now faced with worldly challenges – political, economic, social, legal, and military. Law, technology, government, money, war, survival, medicine, and so on were needed if one is to govern in the real world. And the Bible didn't seem to meet all these needs. So it was natural to look for help and knowledge elsewhere – even if, at bottom, it was from the benighted heathen.

From early on in the Church Fathers and in the first medievals, Plato and other pagan writers were refurbished. Though the Jews of the dispersion and the early Christians had “an aversion from philosophy ... When Christian theologians and apologists made use of philosophy, it was to Plato and to later Platonists that they turned to find ... the lofty idealism and other worldliness that seemed a divinely ordained preparation for the gospel.”243 In truth, though, these apologists esteemed Plato as the “greatest” of philosophers only because his writings were considered most in accord with the Bible. Plato and the later Platonists are seen as being proto-Christians. God must have given them a glimpse of the Truth, for Plato is so Christian

with his moral earnestness and lofty idealism with his unshakeable faith in the beautiful and the good, with his vision of the godlike soul and its immortal destiny, with his soaring flight from what is temporal and visible to what is unseen and eternal ... Plato ... the source and exemplar for all those who would find ultimate reality ... Plato is the idealist moulding this life and its institutions, upon the model of a city not made with hands 'yonder in the heavens', to another life... a mystical approach to the problem of knowledge and action.244

242 Knowles, op. cited, 3-4.
243 Knowles 19.
244 Ibid. 4-5.
After all, Plato was convinced of design, a transcendent God, and even the soul’s immortality: “he approaches at times very nearly to the outlook on life and on human destiny and endeavor of the Hebrew psalmist and the Christian ascetic.” Plato’s arguments for the soul’s immortality became classics for Christian apologists. He was considered “avant le not.”

The all-powerful influence of Plato and Plotinus, however, would not last. Scholasticism was being born. We can only give the barest mention of its development over many centuries here. In essence, I will brutally summarize Knowles’ account of the middle ages to tell this story.

Knowles tells us that “Scholasticism” is often used to refer to the period from the end of the Patristics to the mid-fifteenth century and beyond to the eighteenth century. Somewhere early in the sixth century, the head of Christian schools of the time was called “scholasticus.” European schools were evolving and progressing. “Scholastic” theology developed into a method and a system. It eventually became clearly distinguished from Patristic theology and “philosophy.” The curriculum of these schools taught dialectic among the seven liberal arts – which, at that time, was the only branch of philosophy studied in a systemic way. The head of the school usually taught dialectic. From his teaching of dialectic, the way philosophy was done and the extent of what philosophy covered continued throughout the Middle Ages. The term “scholasticism” came to be used to refer to the methodology and system that developed from the school curricula of the schools.

Knowles dates the beginning of the Scholastic era in the 9th century. From the 5th to the 9th centuries, theologians and thinkers such as Claudinus, Mamertus, Boethius, Cassiodoros, the Venerable Bede, St. Isidore of Seville, and others passed down the tradition of the Patristics with its Platonism. 9th century theologians Alcuin, Rabonus, and John

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245 Knowles, op. cited, 11.
Scotus commenced the scholastic movement. They knew very little of Aristotle, and that which they did know, was mostly only some of his logic. Still, a rationalism and a dialectic was growing, and this growth led them further away from Patristic philosophy.

As usual, to many of the devout, this new education did not seem to reflect true New Testament Christianity, especially in its spirituality. This new scholastic way was thought to be worldly, Greek-like, or pagan-like, for it all depended not on the Holy Spirit, but to a degree never before seen in Christian thinkers, was overwhelmingly philosophical. By Roscelin in the 11th century, the spirit of rationalism was definitely in the air. Christian mystics raised the first warnings against this development. The advocates of reason (such as Roscelin, Abelard, Peter Lombard) were at odds in important respects with those more akin to the spiritual or the mystical (such as St. Anselm, St. Damien, and St. Bernard). Gradually, the Christian rationalists brought their thinking more in line with orthodox thinking and the mysteries of the faith. Still, the struggle continued. Knowles’ history tells us that rationalism (that is, a “Christian” rationalism) won out in the schools.

Scholasticism philosophized about the use of reason in relation to natural and spiritual truth. They began to think and learn about new things and from new places and people— even from the Christ-killing Jews and infidel Arabs!246 New translations of Aristotle were making themselves known throughout Europe. This caused a restructuring in Christian theology and philosophy. With the continued rise of better and better universities thanks to increased economic expansion (and many other factors), by the 13th century an enormous boost in intellectual activity occurred. This was especially so at the University of Paris.

246 I use these harsh expressions because this was the language of Christians of the time – and for most of the history of Christendom in the west.
The rationalism of the Scholastics, of course, did not reject the claims of revelation. But now they applied the full resources of the rational and logical reasoning they learned from Aristotle to comprehend revelation and spiritual truth in an intellectually superior way than the post-1st century Church has ever understood it. As opposed to the mystics and the more spiritually devout practitioners of the faith (which distrusted reason and placed emphasis on intuition and contemplation), the Scholastics gave themselves up to reason, which they identified as “the candle of the Lord” (we see some of this difference, for instance, between Aquinas and Bonaventure).

The Scholastics did not give themselves up to reason totally, of course. As we said, they did not question the claims of revelation. On the whole, they accepted the premises of revelation without question as truth from God that they can trust and build on. They did not therefore sincerely question these premises, which were part and parcel of the foundations of their systems. I’m reminded of a passage in a wonderful essay by Ralph Waldo Emerson entitled “Self-Reliance” (which in some important respects is like an Enlightenment manifesto). One of the principal criticisms he levels against un-enlightened thinking is its lack of courage, honesty, and independence of thought - not thinking for oneself but instead conforming one's beliefs and thinking to the crowd, to tradition, and to the powers that be.

I hear a preacher announce for his text and topic [to take only one example] the expediency of one of the institutions of his church. Do I not know beforehand that not possibly can he say a new and spontaneous word? Do I not know that with all this ostentation of examining the grounds of the institution he will do no such thing? Do I not know that he is pledged to himself not to look but at one side, the permitted side, not as a man, but as parish minister? He is a retained attorney, and these airs of the bench are the emptiest affectation.247

Do we not know even before we read the works of many of the Scholastics what positions they’re going to take on all sorts of issues, including key philosophical ones if they

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have anything to do with any biblical and Christian teachings? Do we not know beforehand that no matter how many philosophers they may quote, no matter how much display of apparently neutral philosophizing, and no matter how much acute analysis and detail they go into, that, in the end, they will “argue” for only Christian outcomes? Their thinking on the existence and nature of God, angels, the creation, the world, man, the mind, Jesus, the incarnation, other religions, sexuality, and so on all come to the same conclusions – Christian conclusions. And, when we study their analysis on any premises that impinge on Christian theology, the feeling we get is that they are not seriously or honestly or fully examining these premises with the ultimate aim of genuinely testing them.

This summation can be applied to much of the work of Scholasticism (though by no means all!). And indeed, as we will see, this reliance on theology when doing philosophy is one of the major criticisms radical enlighteners will level against medieval, scholastic, and some early modern methodology, philosophy, and science. The dependence on revelation and the Church Fathers in their philosophizing is one of the characteristic traits of Scholasticism that modern philosophy and science has moved away from.

This distinction between Scholasticism and Modern philosophy is by no means trivial. There’s no getting over the great importance of examining and testing all the premises in one’s argument if one is genuinely concerned to come to a true conclusion.

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248 I’m generalizing, of course. In fact, a closer examination of some of the scholastics reveals that “Scholasticism” is by no means a monolithic system in which there are no serious differences in doctrine – especially on philosophical issues that don’t threaten theological orthodoxy. On the contrary! Aquinas, Scotus, and Occam are by no means mindless conformists. There are great differences among them. Still, the claim that we can pretty much predict what positions most of the scholastics will take holds regarding many central and orthodox teachings of the Bible and the Church (that the God of Israel created the world; that He created Adam and Eve; saved Noah, made a covenant with Abraham and his progeny, gave Moses the Law, sent his Son to save the world, the immortality of the soul, the resurrection from the dead, the coming end of the world, etc. – all these, by the way, create a great deal of limitations and constraints on what one can freely do philosophy on).

249 Of course we can feel this way –in hindsight. But, and I want to underscore this, it’s not only us who judge their work in this way. As we will show, many of their own contemporaries did! I trust that this fact takes much of the sting away from the charge of presentism.
Responding to a letter from Foucher, the early modern philosopher and genius, Gottfried Leibniz, sounding like Descartes, writes:

I agree with you that it is important once and for all to examine all of our assumptions in order to establish something solid. For I hold that it is only when we can prove everything that we understand perfectly the thing under consideration. I know that such studies are not popular with the common people, but I also know that the common people do not take the trouble to understand things at their deepest level.  

Unfortunately, Leibniz himself did not practice what he preached. Even though Leibniz says that all assumptions have to be proved, with respect to Christianity and theology Leibniz was more like the Scholastics than he was like radical enlighteners such as Hobbes and Spinoza. Though Leibniz did not rely on or refer to the scriptures and the Church Fathers nearly as much as many of the Scholastics did, his writings on many key Christian concerns show no such true analysis of assumptions. On the other hand, in my opinion, Hobbes and Spinoza really did examine and follow the thread of their meditations on the questions of Christian theological premises.

We will see this same challenge in our next chapter on St. Thomas Aquinas. I take it that Gilson is exactly right when he says the following:

There is an ethical problem at the root of our philosophical difficulties; for men are most anxious to find truth, but very reluctant to accept it [when it conflicts with what we want]. We do not like to be cornered by rational evidence, and even when truth is there, in its impersonal and commanding objectivity, our greatest difficulty still remains; it is for me to bow to it ... The greatest among philosophers are those who do not flinch in the presence of truth, but welcome it with the simple words: yes, Amen.


251 Not all Leibniz scholars would agree with my opinion here. Some would argue that Leibniz did really examine even Christian premises, and that after years of such analyses (even though during one period he almost converted to Spinozism), he came up with metaphysical proofs that seemed to him to defend theism and Christianity. And it was upon these proofs that Leibniz based his faith. Much more, of course, could be said on the subject of Leibniz and his philosophy of religion, not to mention extenuating contextual circumstances such as the nature of his job and his obligations thereof.

But I take it that Gilson is exactly wrong on this point of theological premises when he goes on to say that “St. Thomas Aquinas was one of the latter, clear-sighted enough to know truth when he saw it, humble enough to bow to it in its presence.”

It does not matter how much a genius one is, or how much one has read, if one's premises are fallacious, one's conclusions usually will be fallacious as well. Of course, no one can completely get rid of all presuppositions and prejudices. No philosophy is completely examined and without questionable assumptions. Still, as a philosophical ideal, it should at least be seriously and genuinely attempted. In my opinion, we do not usually find this in medieval and scholastic philosophy on points related to essential Christian theology.

But perhaps we should not only speak in general terms here. Perhaps, before ending this section on medieval and scholastic theology and philosophy (which comprises many centuries!), we should pick at least one example of one Scholastic on at least one subject that might be used to exemplify Scholasticism. And this is in keeping with the plan of our study. Let us then chose the “Prince of the Scholastics”, the great St. Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274). And let us pick an example that is not wholly a Christian subject

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253 Ibid. 61-62. This to me does not give due honor and credit to those philosophers who did actually question and overturn false theological premises.

254 “But to tell this story within the scope of a doctoral dissertation, its range will have to be delimited. This study will therefore limit itself to the following constraints: Firstly, instead of delineating the whole story of what led to the Enlightenment (social, economic, political, legal, technological, etc.), this study will focus on the tension between the philosophical and the theological. Secondly, to accomplish this we can of course only cover some of the texts in the period from the Greeks to Leibniz. Thirdly, we will delimit our scope by giving attention to aspects on this subject that have not been given much attention to in contemporary scholarship in early modern philosophy (especially in the English speaking world). Thus, as was said above, instead of merely referring to “Counter-Enlightenment” or religious beliefs and theologies in general terms, we will point out the specific texts from which these beliefs and theologies stem and show how they militate against naturalistic or rationalistic thinking. Finally, the ultimate aim of this focus is to see how the development of this tension led to what is perhaps the most consequential aspect of the Radical Enlightenment: the repudiation of Christianity and all traditional religion.”
(such as on angels255 or the incarnation). Let us pick an example that most philosophers, both religious and non-religious, know to be of great importance to human beings. We will therefore pick the problem of human happiness and see how Aquinas does his philosophy on this subject. This will take some analysis, but, in the end, I hope the reader will gain from this example a better idea on how scholastics such as St. Thomas deal with the philosophy-theology dynamic.

255 I am reminded of an almost humorous passage in Descartes’ Conversation with Burnam (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1976) in which it is thought that Descartes said: “Thus St. Thomas wanted every angel to be of a different kind from every other, and he described each in as much detail as if he had been right in their midst, which is how he got the honorific title of the ‘Angelic Doctor’. Yet although he spent more time on this question than on almost anything else, nowhere were his labors more pointless” (19). Even if this is not an accurate telling of what Descartes really said, it nevertheless is correct in spirit, for Descartes would not “waste” his time on such scholastic-theological issues. We can see in this difference between the two great philosophers also a difference between “modern” or philosophy and scholastic philosophy.

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Chapter Six

A Scholastic Example: St. Thomas on Happiness

"Man’s happiness is twofold ... One is perfect or complete, the other imperfect. By perfect happiness we understand that which attains the true nature of happiness; imperfect happiness we understand that which does not attain this but participates in some partial likeness of happiness."*256

Introduction

In this chapter we wish to provide one example of how some scholastics treated the relations between philosophy and theology. The scholastics not only did philosophy, but they also did theology at the same time. In a word, scholastics such as St. Thomas mix philosophy (especially Aristotle) with Christian revelation. But while they may mix their philosophy with theology, they make it clear that philosophy must always be subordinate to revelation when the two in any way conflict. While most believers from orthodox Jews to New Testament Christians and the Apostolic Fathers kept philosophy almost completely out

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*256 This quote is taken from Aquinas’s *Summa Theologiae*, Response to Question III, Article Six. It is also found in John A. Oesterle, *St. Thomas Aquinas: Treatise on Happiness* (Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press), 36. It should be pointed out at the outset that this notion of the twofold happiness is not unique to Aquinas or to Christian theology. Aquinas mentions the twofold happiness in philosophers such as Aristotle. Aquinas scholar Denis Bradley points this out: “As is evident in Book X of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, philosophers posit a twofold happiness: one is contemplative, the other active. According to this, they distinguish two parts of philosophy, calling moral philosophy practical and natural, and rational philosophy theoretical.” Denis Bradley, *Aquinas on the Twofold Good: Reason and Human Happiness in Aquinas’s Moral Science* (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of American Press), 45. On the other hand, the theological ramifications of this notion of twofold happiness are not in Aristotle and are unique to Christianity (and religions like it). See next footnote.
of their thinking and lives, the Church Fathers, but then far more, the scholastics, purposely and systematically used philosophy (Aristotle) in their philosophy-theologizing.

This is certainly the case in St. Thomas. As we will see, he not only mixes philosophy with theology, he even distinguishes or separates the two in a way that treats philosophy with dignity – with far more dignity than had hitherto been accorded to it by orthodox Judaism and Christianity, including some of the Church Fathers who had been reared in pagan philosophy. Because of this notable change and because of the importance of scholasticism in the early modern period, we devote a whole chapter to it. We hope to make clear how different scholasticism is from what went before it and what will come after it.

By the early modern period, this movement (to distinguish or separate philosophy from theology and to treat it as an autonomous subject worthy of its own honor), would intensify in Descartes and then reach its radical apex in Spinoza. Let us see more closely then how St. Thomas, as an example of scholasticism, did his work on the problem of human happiness.

What is Aquinas’s view on human happiness and unhappiness? How does he do philosophy on this subject? What method does he use to get at the truth of the question of how man can be happy? A description and critique of some of his arguments for these are what this chapter will investigate.

In sum, as we will see, Aquinas holds to a twofold view of human happiness. He holds that humans can experience a genuine earthly, natural or worldly kind of happiness which he calls imperfect, and he holds that humans can also enjoy what he calls a “true” happiness, that is, a perfect or ultimate happiness. He makes this distinction based on

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257 This black-and-white “twofold” business stems from the Christian “twofold” worldview which divides all things up into a dualism of soul and body, God and the creation, sheep and goats, Christ and Satan, the spiritual and the carnal, etc. We saw this Christian twofold system earlier in St. Paul and then later in Augustine’s City of God.
Christian theology. Aquinas puts it this way: "Happiness is of two kinds; an imperfect one which is had in this life, and a perfect one which consists in the vision of God."\(^{258}\)

The following is a closer look at his arguments for these followed by some concluding remarks.

Aquinas's view of imperfect happiness: its negative and positive aspects

"Aristotle is speaking in the Ethics of imperfect happiness, such as can be had in this life."\(^{259}\)

The quote above indicates that Aquinas's thinking about the subject of happiness was largely influenced by Aristotle's Ethics. Aquinas no doubt used Aristotle's Ethics as a sounding board to develop his own distinctively Christian view. Aquinas' scholar Denis Bradley says that Aquinas then transforms Aristotle's teaching about happiness "by introducing the theological distinction between 'imperfect' and 'perfect' happiness."\(^{260}\)

Not only does Aquinas hold a twofold view of human happiness, in general (that is, between imperfect and perfect happiness), but he also holds a twofold view on imperfect happiness. In some passages, his view of imperfect happiness is negative and critical; in others, it is positive and affirmative.

\(^{258}\) Op. citied, Oesterle 46.
\(^{259}\) Oesterle, 37.
\(^{260}\) Op. cited, Bradley 12. Where Aquinas agrees with Aristotle and where he adds to and diverges from Aristotle is an interesting subject. There is an extensive literature on this. Denis Bradley, for instance, says that "Aquinas is certainly not repeating what Aristotle said about happiness" in all points. As opposed to Aristotelian man, "Thomistic man is more mysterious: he is created by an utterly transcendent God who plants in human nature an innate orientation to Himself" (459). Bradley also offers helpful insight on the differences between Aristotle and Aquinas's views on contemplation. Aquinas distinguishes his concept of the vision of the divine essence from Aristotle's contemplation of the gods. Aristotle's philosophical contemplations is "beatitude imperfecta", which is only an "analogue" for true happiness or the beatific vision of God in Aquinas. This latter concept, says Bradley quoting Aquinas, "falls entirely outside of the ken of Aristotle's philosophy" (398).
Imperfect happiness: its negative aspects

From the very start of the *Treatise on Happiness*, Aquinas makes his position clear about what type of human happiness he thinks is most important and what type of happiness he is critical of. In question one, article five, he states,

> The ultimate end [of man], then, must so entirely satisfy man’s desire that there is nothing left for him to desire. It cannot be his ultimate end if something additional is required for his fulfillment. Hence it is not possible for desire to tend to two things as though each were its perfect good.”

In biblical terms this is tantamount to saying, “You cannot serve two masters.” For Aquinas, those who do not follow their ultimate end then, fall short of their potential. In article seven of question one, he says, "Those who sin turn away from that in which the ultimate end is truly found, but they still intend an ultimate end, which they mistakenly seek in other things.”

In order to determine if true happiness might consist in other elements besides God, Aquinas asks the following eight questions: Does man’s happiness consist in wealth? Does man’s happiness consist in honors? Does man’s happiness consist in fame or glory? Does man’s happiness consist in power? Does man’s happiness consist in some good of the body?

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261 Oesterle 11.
262 Oesterle 13. Aquinas also makes it clear in some passages that not all people are aware of their ultimate end. It is unconscious to them, as Freud would put it, or simply "unrecognized", as Aquinas scholar Eleonore Stump explains. Eleonore Stump. *Aquinas* (New York: Routledge), 24. Stump points out that in Aquinas’s commentary on the book of Job, offers another argument that humans cannot enjoy perfect happiness in this world. And this argument has to do with the problem of evil. For Aquinas, says Stump, the inherent sinful character of human beings is the greatest obstacle to contemplation of God. It is like a cancer in our soul. The only way to be cured of this cancer is through the divine medicine of pain and suffering. Hear Aquinas: “If all the pain a human being suffers is from God then he ought to bear it patiently, both because it is from God and because it is ordered toward good; for pains purge sins, bring evil doers to humility, and stimulate good people to love of God.” Stump 466.
Does man's happiness consist in pleasure? Does man's happiness consist in some good of the soul? And, does man's happiness consist in any created good? He answers all of them in the negative, opting instead for “true” or perfect happiness, which can only be ultimately satisfied in God.

Imperfect happiness: its positive aspects

However, despite these negative references regarding the insufficiency of natural happiness and its goods, Aquinas is not totally dismissive. On the contrary, Aquinas acknowledges “a twofold ultimate perfection ... The first is one which it can attain by its own natural power, and this is in a measure called beatitude or happiness.”263 And again, “Happiness is of two kinds; an imperfect one which is had in this life, and a perfect one which consists in the vision of God.”264 Of the former kind of happiness, a case can be made in defense of the natural goods cited above in the eight questions Aquinas asks. Here Aquinas says that, “in imperfect happiness we need an accumulation of goods sufficient for the most perfect operation of this life.”265 Goods such as these may be called “a participated good and hence a partial good.”266 In another place he says, “External goods are required for the imperfect happiness which can be had in this life ... serving instrumentally for happiness....”267

Thus Aquinas recognizes that there is more to human happiness than contemplation of God. Whilst on earth, a man has other needs, as well. For instance, the human body and intellect are needed: “the body is necessary for happiness in this life” and “the happiness of

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263 Oesterle 11.
264 Ibid. 46.
265 Ibid. 31.
266 Ibid. 25.
267 Ibid. 51.
this life consists in activity of the intellect, whether speculative or practical.”268 Aquinas rejects the view that the soul can’t be happy unless it is rid of the body. For him, “it is natural to the soul to be united to the body, the perfection of the soul cannot exclude the natural perfection of the body.”269 Moreover, “a corporeal good can add a certain embellishment or perfection to happiness.”270 And again, Aquinas makes it clear in such passages that happiness is not only a religious or spiritual function, but also a kind of happiness that “can be acquired by his natural powers.”271 All of this is in keeping with Aquinas’s general principle that “grace does not destroy nature, but brings it to fulfillment.”272

Beyond the goods of the body and intellect, Aquinas also accepts other needed goods for natural happiness: “as the Philosopher says, the happy man needs friends ... For in order to do well, whether in the works of the active life or in the activity of the contemplative life, man needs the help of friends.”273

Before ending this section, it should be noted that some scholars find logical problems with Aquinas’s account of happiness. For example, though John Oesterle acknowledges that Aquinas’s account of natural happiness “remains a realizable end in its own order” and that it can be had in this life, he nevertheless complains that Aquinas’s view on imperfect happiness is “difficult and varying.”274 The conclusion of this chapter will point out both some deficient and positive aspects of Aquinas’s views on imperfect and perfect happiness.

268 Ibid. 46.
269 Ibid. 49.
270 Ibid. 50.
271 Ibid. 60.
273 Oesterle 52.
274 Ibid. 31.
Aquinas on perfect happiness

As has been shown above, Aquinas discusses not only the positive aspects of natural or imperfect happiness, but also some of the negative or insufficient aspects of natural or imperfect happiness. Some of these were listed. But there’s more. In the final analysis, no matter how much natural happiness a human may enjoy in this life, it will never be enough; for this sort of happiness can never be perfect. We can get clearer on Aquinas’s thoughts on this subject by comparing his view of imperfect happiness to his view of perfect happiness.

What is perfect happiness and how does Aquinas connect his view of imperfect happiness with his view of perfect happiness? Denis Bradley states that,

For Aquinas, the desire to attain perfect happiness is a natural desire, even though perfect happiness cannot be naturally attained either in this life or in the life to come. Perfect happiness results from seeing God. The desire to see God is natural not in the sense that all men explicitly know that God is their final end, but natural in the sense that knowing God is the only way to satisfy the necessary desire for happiness.275

This means that, “The desire to see God, then, is implicit in the desire for perfect beatitude.”276 If this is the case, then so long as man is in the world, he cannot enjoy perfect happiness. Hence, perfect or true happiness cannot be found in this world.

Perfect happiness cannot be found in this world.

Many Christians believe that part of Christian salvation, redemption, and sanctification is complete joy or happiness. They take such scriptures as Jesus’ “I am come

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275 Bradley 424.
276 Ibid.
that they may have life, and have it abundantly” to mean that Christians can be perfectly happy in God in this life. But Aquinas takes a different view of this matter. “In probing Aristotle’s characterization of happiness,” Bradley states, “Aquinas reached a remarkable and, to some of his contemporaries in the Faculty of Arts at Paris, a disturbing philosophical conclusion: since perfect human happiness must be uninterrupted and unchanging, it cannot be found in this world.”277 Aquinas says that the only way humans can be completely happy is if their minds could by “united to God in one, continual, everlasting activity.”278 And this, according to Aquinas, is not fully possible even for the great saints and mystics. This is because “The activity of the senses cannot pertain to happiness essentially, for man’s happiness consists essentially in his being united with the uncreated good.” And “man cannot be united to the uncreated good by his senses.”279

The same, of course, applies to non-believers. In their natural state, they are ignorant of the final causes and purposes of the universe and of their own selves. As long as they are ignorant of these causes and purposes, so long as they don’t know what’s going on, so long as they don’t know where they have come from and where they are going, so long as they don’t know their maker, and so long as they are not found in Him, they cannot be fully happy.

As believers or non-believers, no matter how much theoretical knowledge we may attain, no matter how much of The Philosopher we have studied, our desires will not ultimately be fulfilled or brought to rest. Our hearts can only rest in God.280 We can achieve an imperfect happiness, Aquinas argues, agreeing with Aristotle’s Ethics, but this is still an

277 Bradley 424.
278 Oesterle 30.
279 Ibid. 31.
280 Op. cited, Atkins and Williams: “This is clear from the fact that the natural longing of a human being cannot rest in anything else except in God alone. For human beings have an innate longing that moves them from the things that have been brought into being to seeking their cause. Therefore this longing will not rest until it reaches the first cause, which is God” (65).
imperfect happiness because it is engrossed in created things rather than in the Creator.281

According to Aquinas, even if a person knows that God is the creator of all things, he will still be unhappy because if the human intellect knows no more about God than that He exists, the perfection of that intellect has not reached the point of knowing the first cause absolutely, and there still remains in it a natural desire to seek out the cause. Hence it is not yet completely happy. Consequently, for perfect happiness, the intellect must reach the very essence of the first cause. Thus its perfection will be had by its union with God as an object, and only in this does man’s happiness consist, as has been pointed out.”282

One of the primary reasons why personages such as Solomon, Buddha, and Faust were unhappy was because they knew that by their own powers they could never “know what is going on under the sun.” As Aquinas points out, “comprehension is required for happiness.”283

Aquinas quotes the authority of Job to support his argument that man cannot be perfectly happy in this life. He says,

some participation in happiness can be had in this life, but true and perfect happiness cannot be had in this life. This can be shown in two ways. The first way is taken from the common notion of happiness, for happiness, since it is ‘the complete and sufficient good,’ excludes all evil and fulfills all desire. Now in this life all evil cannot be excluded. The present life is subject to many evils which cannot be avoided: the evil of ignorance on the part of the intellect, the evil of inordinate affection on the part of desire, and the evil of much suffering on the part of the body, as Augustine carefully sets forth. Likewise, the desire for good cannot be fully satisfied in this life, for man naturally desires the good he has to be permanent. Now what is good in the present life is transitory; for life itself, which we naturally desire, passes away, and we would like to hold on to it for ever, since man naturally shrinks from death. Hence it is impossible for true happiness to be had in this life.284

281 Bradley states that, “Aquinas fastens on Aristotle’s admission that the mundane happiness of the good man can never completely escape fortune’s whims: to be truly blessed a happy man must be both virtuous and lucky enough to have a modest measure of external and bodily goods. Aristotle acknowledges that life, too often, brings changes for the worse. For that reason, Aquinas unhesitatingly attributes to Aristotle the recognition that this-worldly happiness is imperfect or merely human” (Bradley 401).
282 Oesterle 39.
283 Ibid. 43.
284 Oesterle 57. Eleonore Stump makes a similar point in discussing Aquinas’s commentary on the book of Job. She quotes Aquinas from this book: “If in this life people are rewarded by God for good deeds and punished for bad, as Eliphaz was trying to establish, it apparently follows that the ultimate goal for human beings is in this life. But Job means to rebut this opinion, and he wants to show that
Note the thoroughness of his list of arguments why complete happiness is not possible. Note also that this long list of reasons is based on naturalistic or empirical sources and not Biblical or theological authority. This passage is a splendid example of Aquinas as philosopher _par excellence_. Aquinas is not just a Christian. He is not just a theologian. He is not just an Aristotelian. He is also a philosopher and a man.

The second way in which Aquinas argues that perfect happiness is not possible in this life is theological: true happiness can only be had in the vision of the divine essence. And this no man can attain in this life.285

True happiness can only be enjoyed in God

And so, we are brought back to where Aquinas started. Sounding like the Buddha, Solomon, and Faust, Aquinas declares: “The ultimate end, then, must so entirely satisfy man’s desire that there is nothing left for him to desire. It cannot be his ultimate end if something additional is required for his fulfillment.”286 Aquinas repeats this refrain in varying ways through the _Treatise_ and elsewhere. He holds this view not only on psychological or spiritual grounds, but also on ontological or theological grounds. He believes that, “It is impossible for man’s happiness to consist in a created good.”287 It must be in the Creator or the uncreated Good. To sum up then, for Aquinas perfect happiness can only be enjoyed from God, “because full enjoyment is derived from Him alone.”288

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285 Oesterle 57.
286 Oesterle 11.
287 Oesterle 27.
288 Oesterle 14.
Concluding remarks: Some critical and affirmative remarks on Aquinas’s treatment of happiness

"give honor to that which honor is due" (Rom. 12).

Deficiencies in Aquinas’s treatment of natural happiness

It can be argued that Aquinas’s account of happiness does not give due honor to what can be said about natural or imperfect happiness. In several passages he does give some honor to these natural blessings; yet in far more passages he depreciates them. True, he is comparing natural happiness with supernatural happiness, yet, it can still be argued that he could have done a better job in honoring and praising the usual list of ingredients for human happiness (pleasure, wealth, honors, fame, glory, the body, the intellect). Instead, his account of natural happiness too often seems more like a grudging concession. And his treatment of it is often too negative. This claim may more easily be made out from Aquinas’s treatment of happiness in the Summa Contra Gentiles. There the sections marked out make his attitude even clearer than in the Summa Theologiae.


289 These critical and affirmative remarks, of course, are from an unbeliever’s or the radical enlightener’s point of view.
the Operation of Art.” He ends this part of his treatment on happiness with the section, “That the Ultimate Felicity of Man Consists in the Contemplation of God.”

As one can tell from only this cursory look at the section headings, Aquinas often (but not always) gives short shrift to the natural things that can contribute to natural happiness. In this sense, his account of human happiness is lacking. He also talks of the necessity of friends, but in the texts we have studied, says nothing about the value of romantic, erotic, or marital love\(^{290}\) between human beings – despite Eleonore Stump’s rationalization that, “Among the many chapters in *Summa contra gentiles* saying what happiness does consist in, there is no chapter saying that happiness does not consist in loving relations with other persons.”\(^{291}\)

Beyond this complaint about his treatment of romantic love, a further complaint can be leveled. His account of human instincts is too often cast in theologically negative terms. Much of his treatment of our instincts is categorized as only as of the “flesh,” as “carnal sin,” “lust,” and the like. Today, the Roman Catholic and protestant churches preach a fuller account of human love and human instincts.

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\(^{290}\) It must not be thought that by “love” here only the sexual or erotic is meant. No, much more than that is meant. Take for instance Bertrand Russell’s paean to his wife:

*Through the long years*

  I sought peace.

*I found ecstasy, I found anguish,*

  I found loneliness.

*I found the solitary pain*

  That gnaws the heart,

*But peace I did not find.*

*Now, old and near my end,*

  I have known you,

*And, knowing you,*

I have found both ecstasy & peace

  I know rest.

*After so many lonely years,*

*I know what life & love may be.*

*Now, if I sleep,*

*I shall sleep fulfilled.*


\(^{291}\) Stump 465.
Further deficiencies in Aquinas’s account of human happiness

In many respects Aquinas treatment of human happiness is sensitive and humane. But in others, some argue that they are insensitive and inhumane. While Aquinas did not trivialize human pain and suffering, at times he may have glossed over them. Certainly he did from non-believing perspectives. Though Aquinas did not usually treat human suffering in a dismissive fashion, as many religious believers have done, nevertheless there are key aspects in his theology that all is not well with respect to his attitude toward human happiness. Though Alexander Pope uttered the following words, one can find the same argument in Aquinas’ corpus.

All nature is but art unknown to thee:
All chance, direction which thou canst not see;
All discord, harmony not understood;
All partial evil, universal good;
And, spite of pride, in erring reason’s spite,
One truth is clear, Whatever is, is right.²⁹³

It is true that Aquinas did not countenance mystical views such as Heraclitus’ that pronounce that “Good and ill are one,” and “To God all things are fair and good and right, but men hold some things wrong and some right.”²⁹⁴ For Aquinas, evil was not just a mere appearance.

And though he may have agreed with Leibniz, that “this is the best of all possible worlds,” Aquinas did not usually put a Candide-like²⁹⁵ face on his accounts of evil. Aquinas

²⁹² Eleanore Stump argues that Aquinas not only did not gloss over suffering, but to some degree he even embraced it. He interpreted a lot of it as due to the correcting, sanctifying purpose of God: “we attain to that happiness [e.g. true or perfect happiness] only through suffering.” Op. cit., Stump, 469.
²⁹⁵ The expression “Candide-like” is of course taken from Voltaire’s classic argument against the Pope-Leibniz attitude toward evil in Voltaire’s Candide.
made it clear that, "The present life is subject to many evils which cannot be avoided: the evil of ignorance on the part of the intellect, the evil of inordinate affection on the part of desire, and the evil of much suffering on the part of the body...the desire for good cannot be fully satisfied in this life.... Hence it is impossible for true happiness to be had in this life."\textsuperscript{296}

It is also true that Aquinas rejected the view that evil is only "an illusion produced by the divisions and oppositions of the analytic intellect."\textsuperscript{297} On the contrary, he argued that the \textit{truths} that the analytic intellect discovered in the universe were evidence for the reality of evil and a true cause of human unhappiness. Aquinas, like Aristotle, attributed high honor and pride of place to human reason, both in its practical and theoretical employments.

Yet, as was said above, all is not well with Aquinas's account of happiness in other respects. For one thing, his treatment of the lives of our non-human neighbors on this planet is less than honorable. For Aquinas, God made the animal kingdoms to be subordinated to our interests and power. Their suffering is not thought about, and no provision is made for their good. In this respect, according to contemporary animal rights' ethics, Aquinas’s attitude and narrow view of happiness for only humans\textsuperscript{298} is considered inhumane.

For Aquinas, suffering and evil are ultimately justified because they are sent from God - even if “God permits only those evils he can turn into goods.”\textsuperscript{299} This is even the case when God “connives” (Stump’s word) against Job.\textsuperscript{300} For if we would be ultimately happy, then we need to be purified. Only the pure shall see God. Therefore suffering and evil are needed and sent by God for our good to excise the cancer of impurities out of us.

\textsuperscript{296} Oesterle 57.
\textsuperscript{297} Op. cited, Russell, 17.
\textsuperscript{298} Stump 462.
\textsuperscript{299} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{300} Ibid. 463.
Tribulations are sent to “extinguish the force of concupiscent desires ...[for] "Pain and suffering of all sorts are God's medicine."301 “Suffering is the chemotherapy for spiritual cancer,” Stump says.302

This doctrine is so true and important to Aquinas that he supports St. Paul’s counsel that we are to glory in our sufferings.303 Job’s friends erroneously thought that happiness and unhappiness were functions of God’s justice. They didn’t know, says Stump, that God actually causes more suffering on his saints! Job suffered more because he was a better person.304

Needless to say, these views are considered heartless to many. On at least the surface of things, this attitude appears to be “a disgusting willingness to accept evil.”305 In the history of religion, this attitude has more than once led to a relaxing of efforts to alleviate suffering and evil in the personal, social, political and economic domains.306

Stump argues, however, that Aquinas’s account is not indifferent to suffering and evil; it only see them as part of God’s plan to makes us, in the end, happier.307 None of this justifies injustice or cruelty or lack of care. Evil and suffering are not considered good in themselves, but only as a means.308

Stump makes two very interesting remarks with which we will end this section of the chapter. She says, “If [Aquinas] is right, everything we typically think about what counts as evil in the world is the exact opposite of what we ought to think.”309 And: “if we do not share the worldview that holds that there is an afterlife, that true happiness consists in

301 Stump 466.
302 Ibid. 469.
303 Ibid. 468.
304 Ibid. 469.
305 Ibid. 470.
307 Ibid. 473.
308 Ibid. 470.
309 Ibid. 468.
union with God in the afterlife, and that suffering helps us attain that happiness, we will naturally find Aquinas's valuing suffering even as a conditional good appalling or crazy.”310

Aquinas's account of imperfect happiness shows depth

Despite these deficiencies in Aquinas's account of human happiness and unhappiness, his view is still, in some important respects, correct even from a secular or rationalist point of view. The following statement on the ultimate status of natural happiness is correct: “The definition which some give of happiness – Happy is he who has all he wills,’ or ‘whose every wish is fulfilled’ – is a good and sufficient definition....”311

One may find agreement in this formulation from many of the greatest thinkers in human history. We mentioned Solomon, Buddha, and Faust earlier. But we could add to this list many of our near-contemporaries, who have come centuries after Aquinas – geniuses such as Schopenhauer, Camus, Russell, and Freud for instance. All these thinkers added light on the problem of happiness – and unhappiness – in humankind. And yet, we find that Aquinas cited most of these arguments long ago.

Aquinas was right to distinguish between perfect and imperfect happiness. Philosophizing based on this distinction, for Aquinas, may have been analogous to what Daniel Dennett called an “intuition pump.” Applying this intuition pump to the subject of human happiness opened up for Aquinas many aspects of natural happiness that on the surface seems all well and fine, but, only after deeper study, proves that all is not well and fine.

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310 Stump 473.
311 Oersterle 66.
No matter how many goods one may have, no matter how good one’s employment may be, no matter how wonderful one’s wife, family, honor, fame, money, and the love of many may be, human nature always wants more. As Aquinas knew from his study of the book of Ecclesiastes: “The eye never has enough of seeing, or the ear its fill of hearing.”

Aquinas’s *Treatise on Happiness* lays out the many reasons why human beings cannot enjoy complete satisfaction. He shows how that no matter what the conditions of one’s life, at bottom, all mortals sense that they are undone, unsettled, insecure, and afraid. No matter how good one may have it, one cannot avoid dying, sickness, worry, anxiety, the death of one’s loved ones, fear, and so on: “to desire happiness is simply to desire that one’s will be wholly satisfied, and this everyone desires.” But “[nature] does not give him a principle whereby he can attain happiness.”

While radical enlighteners reject Aquinas’s scholastic theology and Christian faith, elements in Thomas’s philosophy such as his psychological and philosophical insights into what is called “the human condition” should be honored. Aquinas keenly understood the problems and sufferings of life. And he recognized the limits and weaknesses of philosophy. He understood as a philosopher and as a man what all human beings ultimately don’t want and what we ultimately do want: we don’t want to get sick; we don’t want to die; we don’t want our loved ones to die; we want to live forever; we want to be safe; we want to be secure; in a word, we want to be Happy.

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312 Ecclesiastes 1:8.
313 Oesterle 65.
314 Ibid. 61.
As the foregoing example of scholasticism in Aquinas shows, he is extremely thorough. He breaks down arguments into their component parts and parses the major concepts offering fine distinctions that clarify and deepen our knowledge of the subject. He shows what in Aristotle’s ethics he agrees with and what he believes needs the addition of Christian grace. All in all, it is a splendid piece of scholastic philosophic work. And yet, as we can now also tell from focusing on its Christian elements, this philosophical account is saturated with the deliverances and myths of Christian special revelation. Though he tips his hat to Aristotle and to nature, ultimately, Aquinas’ philosophy of happiness is a thoroughly Christian one.

Notwithstanding this fact, his account also shows how much natural reason and philosophy can contribute to the subject. Yet, if we want to get a clear - and albeit somewhat simplified - picture of Aquinas’s final, positive and theological view on the subject, we can bracket out all the natural-philosophical discussions on it. In this sense, and this sense only, we have to remember that no matter how much philosophical depth Aquinas goes into this subject, no matter how many philosophical arguments he considers, and no matter how much his words “grace does not destroy nature, but brings it to fulfillment” may placate us, in the final analysis, he holds a theological position. And this means that all the attendant doctrines that go along with happiness in contemplation of God in heaven are part and parcel of the deal. Hence, walking on water, raisings from the dead, demons being cast out, predestination, original sin, the Fall, the need for salvation, holy water, prayer to the saints, the pope as vicar of Christ, the Mass, transubstantiation, the power of Satan over the weather, witches, and a place called hell for the damned - all are theologically entailed in Thomas’s account of happiness. And this is not a happy outcome.
Now that we have delineated Aquinas’s scholastic Christian view on happiness, we will be in a much better position to appreciate how radically different Spinoza’s account will be when we reach that penultimate chapter. The foregoing thoughts on Aquinas’s treatment regarding the subject of happiness, I hope, presents a fair statement of how he approached issues (particularly, of course, of issues that have some relation to Christian theology). As one can see, the conclusions of his arguments, though utilizing Aristotelian philosophy, all align themselves with Christian theology. Any perusal of Thomas’ writings on happiness clearly reveals what constitutes the supreme authority for him. He does not only refer to Aristotle, but, over and over again he refers to the authority of Scripture and the Church Fathers. Far from being a precursor to the Radical Enlightenment in this respect, one historian sums up Thomas’ legacy (with reference especially to philosophy and science) in this way:

But the theological spirit of the thirteenth century gained its greatest victory in the work of St. Thomas Aquinas. In him was the theological spirit of his age incarnate. Although he yielded somewhat at one period to love of natural science, it was he who finally made that great treaty or compromise which for ages subjected science entirely to theology. He it was who reared the most enduring barrier against those who in that age and in succeeding ages labored to open for science the path by its own methods toward its own ends ... he [made a truce] which was to give theology permanent supremacy over science.315

Some scholars might object to such a characterization complaining that it is unfairly unhistorical or presentist.316 I think there is some truth to this charge. Still, it is not as though Aquinas did not have access to books or to people who showed a more enlightened (according to Enlightenment lights) philosophy. In fact, he was on the front lines of most of the cutting edge intellectual ideas of his time, including dealing with heretical and “atheistical” works (such as by some Avveroists) that criticized revelation.

315 Andrew White, A History of the Warfare of Science with Theology in Christendom, op. citied, 379.
In his Introduction to *Aquinas: Disputed Questions on the Virtues*, Thomas Williams tells us that around 1260 (14 years before Aquinas would die), the faculty of arts at the University of Paris began to clamor for greater independence in philosophy from theology and the theology faculty. They viewed philosophy as a critical discipline deserving of its own dignity and independence. Strongly influenced by Aristotle’s philosophy, they recognized in it “a comprehensive view of the world that did not rely on any purported revelation. Some of the arts masters therefore made very strong claims about the preeminence of philosophy.” So much so that, according to Williams, “some of the propositions [were] later condemned by the Bishop of Paris in 1277 [such as]: That there is no more excellent way of life than the philosophical way. That the highest good of which the human being is capable consists in the intellectual virtues. That the philosophers alone are the wise men of this world.”317 This sounds just like Spinoza!

The arts masters’ call for independence from theology and autonomy for philosophy ("and indeed the whole natural order, which philosophy purports to explain") has come to be called “integral Aristotelianism.” We can also translate this as meaning to a large degree a “Radical Enlightenment” with respect to theology. Needless to say, the theologians were none too happy with this development and therefore opposed it. Their sentiment was well expressed by St. Bonaventure. Williams summarizes their opposition to the integral Aristotelians in the following words: “In short, those who do not rigorously subordinate Aristotelian philosophy to scriptural theology are deserters from Christ’s army, reversers of his miracles, and indeed closet idolaters.”318

We see then, that Aquinas is privy to a lot of “Radical Enlightenment” thought. Some of this thought is not only radical in terms of philosophy, but even, in some respects, in

318 Ibid. xxiii.
biblical criticism. Yet, Aquinas would have none of that. Even though he avoided the orthodoxy of his fellow theologians, or, as Williams puts it, “what we might call the ‘rejectionism’ of the conservative theologians”, he nevertheless rejected “the extreme naturalism of the integral Aristotelians.” Even though Aquinas was “thoroughly Aristotelian”, he “did not agree with the integral Aristotelians that philosophy by itself offers a comprehensive, autonomous account of everything there is.”

From the orthodox or “rejectionists” point of view, Aquinas was probably seen as a “lukewarm” or “worldly” Christian. Even though he was not in the camp of the integral Aristotelians, he may nevertheless have been interpreted as being immoderately wedded to Aristotle and philosophy. Many future conservative or orthodox theologians certainly thought so. Still, despite having feet in both worlds in some respects, when all is said and done, Thomas firmly aligned himself with orthodoxy and Christ. Thus, once again, even though he had access to various “Radical Enlightenment” literature if you will, he rejected it. Aquinas was a rejectionist of Radical Enlightenment thought. Thomas was even privy to some early scientific experimental work. Andrew White gives us further intellectual context in Aquinas’s life regarding science or the experimental method:

The experimental method had already been practically initiated: Albert of Bollstadt and Roger Bacon had begun their work in accordance with its methods; but St. Thomas gave all his thought to bringing science again under the sway of theological methods and ecclesiastical control. In his commentary on Aristotle’s treatise upon Heaven and Earth he gave to the world a striking example of what his method could produce, illustrating all the evils which arise in combining theological reasoning and literal interpretation of Scripture with scientific facts; and this work remains to this day a monument to scientific genius perverted by theology.

Still, Aquinas did make some moves to distinguish philosophy from theology. And he praised reason to high heaven. Literally. So much so, in fact, that some during his time

319 Ibid. xxiii-xxiv.
320 White, op. cit., 380. White deals with Roman Catholic historians of science (such as Rohrbacher and Pouchet) who argue that Aquinas made “an alliance between religious and scientific thought, and laying the foundation of a ‘sanctified science’; but the unprejudiced historian can not indulge in this enthusiastic view; the results both for the Church and for science have been most unfortunate.”
and afterwards, charged that his work was too pagan, too worldly, too philosophical, and
too Aristotelian. Even his great Franciscan colleague St. Bonaventure was critical in some
respects. In later centuries, Luther lambasted him and much of his work as “Aristotelian”
and not Christian. Nevertheless, regarding philosophical matters on which no overriding
Christian theological teaching was at issue, Thomas’s thinking exhibited some brilliant
original philosophical work along with some of the most acute intellectual output the world
has known.
PART IV
PRECURSORS TO THE RADICAL ENLIGHTENMENT: RENAISSANCE TO ENLIGHTENMENT

Chapter Seven
The Renaissance and the Scientific Revolution as Precursors to the Radical Enlightenment

Renaissance humanism as precursor

We have already treated the important contribution that Renaissance textual criticism played in the development of biblical criticism, but we have not said much more about the Renaissance as a precursor to secular or Radical Enlightenment thought. We should do so now. As in the plan of our previous chapters, the purpose of this chapter on the Renaissance and the Scientific Revolution is to provide a general picture of some of the changes these two movements caused which ultimately led to the Radical Enlightenment.321

321 Broad selective histories, like large panoramic pictures are just as helpful and just as legitimate as microscopically focused treatments. As a result of this plan then, no attempt will be made to provide a comprehensive study of all the many complex, interweaving, confusing, controversial issues involved in the historiography of the Renaissance or the Scientific Revolution. The usual endless controversies over defining, dating, types of humanism (Christian and pagan), different types of humanist movements in different countries, and so on will not be our concern in this section.
To begin our selective macroscopic study then, many historians argue that the Renaissance (e.g. the rebirth of classical philosophy, science, literature and art) was that pivotal movement in European history that set the ball in motion that helped usher in secular and anti-ecclesiastical Radical Enlightenment movements. They argue that without the Renaissance there could not have been a Scientific Revolution or Enlightenment. According to this view, the middle ages are seen as primarily a long period of time in which European civilization was feeble and scrawny with respect to economics, education, philosophy, and science. However, with the rise of a commercial class and of wealth, along with the infusion of translations from the classical world (thanks to the Crusades, Arabs, and Irish) Europe was inundated with a world of new ideas.322

One of the chief characteristics of the Renaissance, say historians, is the turn away from a theo-centric to a humanistic attitude. This humanism is usually understood to have started as

a system of education and mode of inquiry that developed in northern Italy during the 14th century and later spread through Europe and England ... this program was so broadly and profoundly influential that it is one of the chief reasons why the Renaissance is viewed as a distinct historical period.323

This humanistic program sought to develop human virtue. No longer was the whole concentration on Christian ethics or the supernaturally infused virtues. Now one could seek honor even for oneself. Jesus's ethic of "He who would be first, shall be last; and he who would be last shall be first" is no longer as deep or as prevalent in Renaissance Europe.

"In short," says the author of "Humanism" in the Encyclopedia Britannica, Renaissance humanism called for the comprehensive reform of culture, the transformation of what humanists termed the passive and ignorant society of the 'dark' ages into a new order that would reflect and encourage the grandest human potentialities.324

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322 Of course, this does not tell the whole story. As in most major historical periods multiple and various forces are at work.
324 Ibid.
Note that it was the Renaissance humanists themselves (and not only later pro-
Enlightenment historians) that judged the medieval past as “the dark ages.” This movement
then possesses all the marks of a cultural revolution. And, because this revolution is critical
and somewhat dismissive of its Judeo-Christian heritage, and because of its this-worldly,
human-centered interests and labors, it is not hard to identify this movement as a
foreshadowing of greater Christianity-challenging things to come. Renaissance Europeans
fell in love with everything about the classical world: its literature, its art, its genius, its
creativity, its poetry, its science, its mythologies, and many of its philosophies.

Compared with the typical productions of medieval Christianity, these pagan works
had a fresh, radical, almost avant-garde tonality. Indeed, recovering the classics was
to [Renaissance] humanism tantamount to recovering reality. Classical philosophy,
rhetoric, and history were seen as models of proper method - efforts to come to
terms, systematically and without preconceptions of any kind, with perceived
experience.\textsuperscript{325}

Renaissance humanists focused on earthly activities and even the pursuit of fame
and wealth and encouraged more independent thinking in philosophy and science. This
greater “Critical scrutiny and concern with detail … of perceived phenomena, that took hold
across the arts and the literary and historical disciplines … would have profound effects on
the rise of modern science.” And not only of physical sciences, but the social sciences as
well: “To humanism is owed the rise of modern social science.”\textsuperscript{326}

The dignity of man is trumpeted from many quarters. Unabashed male nudity is
glorified in some of the greatest outpourings of artistic genius the world has ever known.
Michelangelo’s “Last Judgment” depicts the saints of old in the nude. Not only in the nude,
but with Gentile and not Hebrew features, including uncircumcised genitals! Unheard of!
All in all, “The religious themes that dominated Renaissance art (partly because of generous
church patronage) were frequently developed into images of such human richness that …

\textsuperscript{325} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{326} Ibid. 724.
the Christian message was submerged. The human-centeredness of Renaissance art, moreover, was not just a generalized endorsement of earthly experience, but it “stressed the autonomy and dignity of the individual.”

One can tell from what has been said just how important, once again, the Greeks and classical culture have been to European civilization and to our attempts to explain the history of the precursors to Radical Enlightenment ideals. One outspoken historian, Friedrich Nietzsche, argued that the world had all it needed for a Radical Enlightenment (or, in Nietzsche’s language, to kill God) as early as the classical ancient world. But, as he makes clear, medieval “Christianity robbed European civilization of the harvest of the culture of the ancient world.”

He elaborates on this (with some hyperbole) in a very significant passage in his history of philosophy:

The whole labour of the ancient world in vain ... Every prerequisite for an erudite culture, all the scientific methods were already there ... the prerequisite for a cultural tradition, for a uniform science; natural science, in concert with mathematics and mechanics, was on the best possible road – the sense for facts, the last-developed and most valuable of all the senses, had its schools and its tradition already centuries old! Is this understood? Everything essential for setting to work had been devised – methods, one must repeat ten times, are the essential, as well as being the most difficult, as well as being that which has habit and laziness against it the longest. What we have won back for ourselves today with an unspeakable amount of self-constraint – for we all still have bad instincts, the Christian instincts, somewhere within us – the free view of reality, the cautious hand, patience and seriousness in the smallest things, the whole integrity of knowledge – was already there! Already more than two millennia ago! ... All in vain! Overnight merely a memory! - Greeks! Romans! ... ruined by cunning, secret, invisible, anaemic vampires! Not conquered – only sucked dry!

But then, after many hundreds of years, a spectacular rebirth of Greek and Roman culture blossomed in Europe. The Renaissance of the genius of the classical world brought some of the best of ancient learning back to life again. This turn to the pagan Greeks and

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327 Ibid. 732.
329 Ibid. Note how many times he refers to “science.” And note how affirmatively he speaks of science here and of its facts, its method, and of the whole integrity of its knowledge. It is upon facts such at these that Nietzsche implicitly and explicitly argues that “God is dead.”
Romans set the stage for much to come. As Nietzsche understood, without the Greeks, the Renaissance may not have occurred, and without the Renaissance, the Age of Reason or the Enlightenment may never have arisen. For Nietzsche the “Radical Enlightenment”\textsuperscript{330}, if you will, first appears in the Renaissance. In his \textit{Anti-Christ}, Nietzsche says that the Renaissance was antichristian at its core. It was, in essence, a great attack against Christianity and its values.

Is it at last understood, is there a \textit{desire} to understand, \textit{what} the Renaissance was? The \textit{Revaluation of Christian values}, the attempt, undertaken with every expedient, with every instinct, with genius of every kind, to bring about the victory of the opposing values, the \textit{noble} values ... Up till now \textit{this} has been the only great war, there has been no more decisive interrogation than that conducted by the Renaissance – the question it asks is the question \textit{I} ask - neither has there been a form of \textit{attack} more fundamental, more direct, and more strenuously delivered on the entire front and at the enemy's centre! To attack at the decisive point, in the very seat of Christianity.\textsuperscript{331}

He goes on to say that had this attack against Christianity succeeded at that time, “Christianity would thereby have been \textit{abolished}!”\textsuperscript{332} God, or at least the Christian God, would have died long ago. But Martin Luther and other religious revivalists kept God

\textsuperscript{330} Once again, just in case the reader may have forgotten, the phrase “Radical Enlightenment” is the technical term historian of philosophy Jonathan Israel uses in his landmark study \textit{Radical Enlightenment: Philosophy and the Making of Modernity: 1650-1750}. By “radical enlightenment” Israel mostly has in mind all that western civilization came up with that led to disbelief in the Bible and Judeo-Christianity. Israel argues that the Radical Enlightenment comes to fruition with Spinoza. As the quote from above shows, Nietzsche thought that the Enlightenment really commenced in the early Renaissance.

\textsuperscript{331} Friedrich Nietzsche. \textit{Twilight of the Idols and The Anti-Christ}, translated by R. J. Hollingdale (New York, Penguin Books, 1968, 184, section 61. Nietzsche is referring to the fact that some of the most radical productions of the Renaissance humanists and libertines were done \textit{in the very heart of the Vatican} – such as Michelangelo's pagan treatment of the “Last Judgment” in the Sistine chapel.

\textsuperscript{332} Ibid., 185. But of course Nietzsche understood that it would take more than the challenges of Copernicus and Galileo to bring down the Church, or to “kill God.” Speaking about his own day, Nietzsche says, “We see the religious community of Christianity shaken to its lowest foundations; the faith in God has collapsed; the faith in the Christian ascetic ideal is still fighting its final battle. An edifice like Christianity ... naturally could not be destroyed all at once. All kinds of earthquakes had to shake it, all kinds of spirits that bore, dig, gnaw, and moisten have had to help” (\textit{Gay Science}, 310, section 358).
alive\textsuperscript{333}, though now many new questions and doubts were in the air. Something new was under the sun.

Distilling hundreds of Nietzsche’s aphorisms on this subject, one can summarize his overall argument as follows: the Renaissance at bottom was a reaction against over a thousand years of narrow-minded devotion to scripture and heavenly things. Because of this burden, a reaction set in which ushered in a humanistic revolution. Man now looked to himself, and not only to God. He began to read other books, and not just God’s book. A love for learning began to inspire him. He became fascinated with this world. He began to ask questions - even forbidden questions (this last step of courage is what Nietzsche believes is one of the most important aspects of modernity). Further, Renaissance man looked to mathematics and reason and his own experience to understand the world better. The fight against the old time religion had begun (even though at the time most people were not aware of it).

The Copernican and Scientific Revolutions as precursors

One of the first and most serious rounds in this struggle was brought to a head by a grave challenge to the Holy Scriptures by Copernicus and Galileo, which “unchained this earth

\textsuperscript{333} And yet, as Nietzsche argues in several places, Luther and the German reformation “who exerted themselves the most to preserve and conserve Christianity have become precisely its most efficient destroyers” (\textit{Gay Science} section 358), for statements by Luther and his theological colleagues ridiculing Copernicus in the name of the “higher” and “more certain” truth of “the word of God” forced many to choose and then side with science over God. This section, by the way, is also important because it is one of the only passages in which Nietzsche gives Luther and the Reformation some credit for the progress of science and conscience with respect to truth.
from its sun.”\textsuperscript{334} It is not absolutely certain that Nietzsche had the Copernican Revolution in mind when he wrote “What did we do when we unchained this earth?”\textsuperscript{335} It would seem so however because it used to be believed that the sun revolved around the earth. The earth, as the Center of the universe and the apple of God’s eye, was as it were, chained. “The earth is established; it cannot be moved” (Psalm 104:5). All things were in their rightful place in the Great Chain of Being. But then the Greco-Christian\textsuperscript{336} will to truth unchained

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\textsuperscript{334} If I might be forgiven an aside here, it must be noted that Nietzsche’s pronouncements about science were not always laudatory. On the contrary: since his Birth of Tragedy, there is a consistent thread of anti-science statements made. Despite this fact however, many of Nietzsche’s arguments against religion and Christianity have been based not just on psychological etiologies, but upon the findings of science as well. How to harmonize the two is a question that I’m still working on. So, along with Nietzsche’s praise of science and the scientific method, there are nevertheless also many cautions, criticisms, and even out-and-out denunciations. “No! Don’t come to me with science when I ask for the natural antagonist of the ascetic ideal ...” (Genealogy of Morals, section 25). And though he acknowledges that later science (evolutionary theory) has shown that man is "an animal, literally and without reservation or qualification, he who was, according to his old faith, almost God (‘child of God,’ ‘God-man’), he is critical of what he takes to be its excess belittlement of man. It’s one thing to be disabused of doctrines of the connection of man to God that the old faith taught, but it’s not good to interpret the findings of science to disabuse man from his dignity and self-respect. In this sense (if I read him right here), Nietzsche seems to criticize the effects of the Copernican revolution: “Has the self-belittlement of man, his will to self-belittlement, not progressed irresistibly since Copernicus? Alas, the faith in the dignity and uniqueness of man ... is a thing of the past” (Ibid.). In this sense, science makes man into a nothing just as Christianity did. And this Nietzsche combats. On this interpretation then, it’s not only the loss of God and religious faith that the madman is bemoaning; he is also bemoaning the lostness that science seems to have conferred on man and the challenge of nihilism that this brings with it: “Since Copernicus, man...is slipping faster and faster away from the center into – what? Into nothingness?” (Ibid.) Daniel Conway accepts this interpretation, too. And he quotes an apt Nietzsche text for support: “All science ... has at present the object of dissuading man from his former respect for himself, as if this had been nothing but a piece of bizarre conceit.” Daniel W. Conway’s “The Slave Revolt in Epistemology” from Feminist Interpretations of Friedrich Nietzsche. Edited by Kelly Oliver and Marilyn Pearsall (Penn: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1998), 253. The quote is from Nietzsche’s Genealogy, III, 25.

\textsuperscript{335} I checked other English translations of this passage and the German on this passage: "Was thaten wir, als wir diese Erde von ihrer Sonne Loskettetten?” Friedrich Nietzsche. Nietzsche Werke: Kritische Gesamtausgabe. Die frohliche Wissenschaft. Herausgegeben von Giorgio und Mazzino Montinari (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1973), 159. They all closely agree. There were no variants in meaning to shed any further light on this question.

\textsuperscript{336} In Nietzsche’s extraordinarily deep analysis of Christianity, he argued that though Christianity is obscurantist to its very heart, yet, at the same time, underneath all its slimy mendacity, there is also some genuine moral impulse. Its resolve to be honest and to not commit the sin of lying has caused many a thinking Christian to seek for God’s truth in nature (natural theology). After all, Copernicus and Galileo and scores of other great early modern scientists were Christians. On the other hand, the “Christian will to truth” has also caused a great deal of anguish when the Christian has to confront truths which contradict their commitment of faith. Often this has resulted in a “moderate Enlightenment” or synthesis of religion and science. Often it has also caused believers to chose or to
this earth from its sun, so that the earth was shown to be no longer fixed, no longer stable, no longer secure, no longer the Center of the Universe, but instead is in rapid, vertiginous motion ("E pur si muove" - "And yet it moves" - is what some say Galileo muttered under his breath after recanting his defense of the Copernican heliocentric theory before the Church).

The earth is now “unchained.” It moves. It is now shown to be a great sphere that rotates in (almost) circular motion at a mind-boggling velocity while, at the same time, it also revolves about the sun at equally mind-boggling speeds. Nietzsche asks, like many in the Renaissance and the Enlightenment, What did we do when we unchained this earth? Is there any up or down now? Who are we? Where are we going? If God is in question, then how do we now answer these questions? Such was the spiritual vertigo many experienced during this period.

It might be that the “earth” as Nietzsche uses it here represents both the physical earth itself and we humans who have learned that God is dead and therefore should no longer be chained to this sun (God) as the center of our lives about which we revolve. The heliocentric theory of Copernicus and Galileo taught that the earth moves around the sun, and not the other way around. This astronomical explanation directly contradicts God’s claim (that is, the Bible’s claim) that, “The earth is established; it cannot be moved” (Psalm 104:5). Alluding to this watershed event in the history of secularism (and ones to follow such as the theory of evolution), Nietzsche states: “Man has been reared by his errors: first he never saw himself other than imperfectly, second he attributed to himself imaginary qualities, third he felt himself in a false order of rank with the animal and nature, forth he reject one of them. The modern history of Christianity shows a mix of responses to these confrontations.
continually invented new tables of values and for a time took each of them to eternal and unconditional.”

An immense ruckus ensued that challenged the thinking of all scientists, philosophers, and theologians of the time. The “noise of the gravediggers who were burying God” was beginning to be heard throughout the whole educated world. According to this rendering of the Copernican Revolution, thinkers everywhere began to question the accuracy and truthfulness of Scripture. But this was only the beginning. It also set in motion the questioning of all sorts of things that previously man did not have the courage to inquire into. And it did more than that, for Copernicus and Galileo seemed to prove that the universe could be understood rationally through mathematics and experimental science.

Thus the stage was set so that man could learn about the truth of the universe outside the confines of the church, the Bible, and even God. According to many in the 16th and 17th centuries, and according to many historians since (especially Enlightenment historians), the most fatal attacks in this regard came from the sciences because the sciences seemed to demonstrate that the universe and all its manifestations could be explained and predicted by means of human reason and empirical-experimentalism and not by means of purported supernatural revelation or prophecy. It also powerfully encouraged the scientific method to be utilized in all sorts of subjects as far as possible – even on subjects such as the historicity of the biblical accounts (e.g. biblical criticism was born).

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337 Friedrich Nietzsche, trans. Walter Kaufmann. The Gay Science, 174, section 115. How can Nietzsche affirm this, unless he is affirming the truth of science over that of Christianity? His theory of truth is not completely perspectivist (that is, in a completely relativistic sense) here. He not only seems to favor the apparently scientific explanations of the earth and man’s place in the cosmos alluded to here; it appears from the way he expresses himself that he believes this explanation to be true. Now, grant it, he may not be holding a theological view of truth here, but still, it seems to be a belief in the truth of the claim nevertheless.

338 Several audacious works in this period cropped up which questioned orthodox and traditional interpretations of the Bible - Hobbes’ Leviathan and Spinoza’s Tractatus Theologico-Politicus being two of the most well-known of such works. In the opinion of Israel, Nadler, and other early modern scholars, the most powerful work of the early modern period to exemplify this destructive biblical criticism stems from Spinoza and his Tractatus Theologico-Politicus. Most of what Nietzsche says
Subsequently, many came to realize that the Bible was no longer needed to understand nature. And if the Bible is not needed, then maybe God is not needed. Of course, not all historians agree with this version of history. They will point out, for instance, that many or most of the sciences were fostered and promoted by Christians. They will also point out that the development of natural theology also greatly contributed to the progress in the sciences. We can tell from this difference of opinion among the experts that more parsing is needed to be done.

There were many other important scientific discoveries besides Galileo’s that showed the natural (e.g. not supernatural) functioning of the world (which, therefore put Holy Writ in question) such as the anatomy of the human body and the discovery of the circulation of the blood. These discoveries led to revolutionary ideas that maybe human beings themselves (formerly understood to be “made in the image and likeness of God”) should also be considered as a natural mechanism or machine like the animal. Perhaps about Spinoza is derogatory, but it is important for Nietzsche scholars to remember that Nietzsche also found in Spinoza a precursor! “I am utterly amazed, utterly enchanted! I have a precursor, and what a precursor! I hardly knew Spinoza: that I should have turned to him just now, was inspired by my ‘instinct’. Not only is his over-all tendency like mine – namely to make knowledge the most powerful affect – but in five main points of doctrine I recognize myself; this most unusual and loneliest thinker is closest to me precisely in these matters: he denies the freedom of the will, teleology, the moral world order, the unegoistic, and evil. Even though the divergences are admittedly tremendous, they are due more to the difference in time, culture, and science” (Walter Kaufmann. Nietzsche: Philosopher, Psychologist, Antichrist, 140. See also pages 246-7).

Nietzsche was well-versed in biblical criticism as his Beyond Good and Evil and Anti-Christ amply demonstrate. He ridiculed orthodox theological defenses of scripture, but he was very critical also of liberal biblical scholarship. To him, they still did not go far enough – they were not brave enough or honest enough in their critiques. Still, he was quite aware of the Christianity-weakening effect that all this criticism was having on the church, particularly in Germany. Nietzsche clarifies what he meant by “God is dead” in the Gay Science aphorism 343: “The greatest recent event – that ‘God is dead,’ that the belief in the Christian god has become unbelievable’ – is already beginning to cast its first shadows over Europe” (my emphasis).

Nietzsche was aware of these discoveries and their impact in the history of western secularism. He even made a point of counteracting “the soul superstition” by often calling his psychology a “physiology.” Nietzsche makes mention of or alludes to the evolutionary-naturalistic view that man is an animal and not a child of God created in the image and likeness of God several times in several of his books. Man “has become an animal, literally and without reservation or qualification” (Genealogy, section
man is not special, or higher, or above nature, as scripture claims. Perhaps, again, the Bible is – false.

If you’ll excuse the following audacious metaphorical language in the spirit of Nietzsche, criminology teaches that stabbing murders are usually the result of multiple knife thrusts. It is the same with the death of God. The Renaissance and Age of Reason started the fight and wounded God with vicious knife thrusts delivered by Copernicus, Galileo, and many others. But other attackers were in the wings. The Enlightenment is about to mount the stage.343 It would take more than one stabbing to bring God Almighty down. Assassins like Halley, Hooke, Guericke, Burnet, Huygens, Boyle, Leeuwenhoek, and then the great Newton rose up and played their part in that most fateful of all assassinations – deicide!344

“Long live physics!” says Nietzsche.345

It is with Newton that the gospel of science makes its deepest inroads into Christendom’s consciousness, and Nietzsche understood this. In his essay “Truth and the Primacy of Life” in A Companion to Nietzsche, Keith Ansell-Pearson states that “According to

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25). I take this to mean that he believed the theory of evolution’s evidence that human beings have not only evolved from animals, but also are animals. This is not just a perspective, but a truth.

343 Roy Porter, The Enlightenment, 65. Porter states that the Enlightenment’s “true radicalism lies in making a break with the Biblical, other-worldly framework for understanding man, society and nature, as revealed in the Scriptures, endorsed by the churches, rationalized in theology, and preached from the pulpit....The Enlightenment thus decisively launched the secularization of European thought” (65-6). Lest the reader only think of Nietzsche only as a child of the Enlightenment, he should think again. For there is also much in Nietzsche’s writings that are anti-Enlightenment or anti-modernist; the most radical departure from modernity (in my view) are his many aphorisms against science, reason, and truth. In this sense, Nietzsche is a postmodernist. Stanley Rosen’s The Mask of Enlightenment: Nietzsche’s Zarathustra (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995) affirms that Nietzsche was “the first and best postmodernist”, but he also argues that Nietzsche’s criticisms of the Enlightenment serve to purify the imperfections of modernity and thus mitigates “The risk that modernity will be rejected tout court”(21, 7). This paper however cannot also take up this subject, but instead will stay focused on what Nietzsche may have meant in the madman passage about the death of God.

344 Nietzsche pays Newton one of the highest of compliments that Nietzsche ever gives. Not only does he credit Newton with being a philosopher, but, more than that, he calls him one of “those few who... alone deserve to be called ‘thinkers’” (Gay Science 344 n, section 381n).

345 Gay Science 263, 266, section 335. Nietzsche implicitly praises the power of observation that physicists evince. Kaufmann offers some commentary on this passage because it’s not definite what Nietzsche had in mind. Kaufmann thinks that he is probably juxtaposing “physics” with metaphysics. Thus “God is dead”, but “Long live physics!”
Nietzsche, the characteristic methodological paradigm of modern science was only fully attained, not in Galileo or Descartes, but in Newton.”

Nietzsche fully appreciated the central place that the scientific method had over “superstitions” such as “the God hypothesis” (Nietzsche’s language) and therefore encouraged every thinking person to learn at least one science to attain the scientific spirit: “for the scientific spirit is based on the insight into methods, and were the methods to be lost, all the results of science could not prevent a renewed triumph of superstition and nonsense. Clever people may learn the results of science as much as they like, one still sees from their conversation ... that they lack the scientific spirit ... Therefore everyone should have come to know at least one science in its essentials; then he knows what method is.”

In fact, Nietzsche wished education to force the learning of science. Decrying the religious mindlessness of the middle ages and of Asia, Nietzsche asserts modern European superiority because of its science. He agreed with Goethe’s Mephistopheles who said, “Reason and science, the supreme strength in man.” And again: “The decline of the faith in the Christian god” was due to “the triumph of scientific atheism.”

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346 Keith Ansell-Pearson. *A Companion to Nietzsche* (New York: Blackwell, 2007), 305. This is not the place to explicate Nietzsche’s profound epistemological doctrines on truth, perspectivism and his philosophy of science. Suffice it to say here that Nietzsche’s attitude toward science and to all truth was not what it was for most enlightenment philosophers. He did not accept the correspondence theory of truth – and this includes scientific truth. He calls scientists like Newton “great” (*Gay Science*, section 37), but he nevertheless knows that in too many respects science has set itself up to be the metaphysical substitute for the truths of religion. And this Nietzsche rejects. Still, he often refers to and alludes to scientific discoveries and to the scientific method in laudatory terms, especially when he is bashing Christianity, religion, the gods, and supernaturalistic metaphysical systems.

347 Friedrich Nietzsche. *Human, All Too Human: A Book for Free Spirits*. Translated by Marion Faber with Stephen Lehmann, (Nebraska: University of Nebraska Press, 1984), 264-5, section 635. But of course this opinion says nothing about the fact that great thinkers and scientists such as Newton nevertheless maintained a strong faith in God.

348 Ibid. 162, section 265. In this book and most of his books, the names of or allusions to various scientists and scientific discoveries are referred to by Nietzsche usually in terms of praise.

349 *Gay Science*, 306, section 357.
Problematic issues in the historiography of the Scientific Revolution

In what respects was the Scientific Revolution a precursor to the Radical Enlightenment? Like all important historical and philosophical questions, this query is in reality a very Big question. To fully answer it (if that were possible), we’d have to tell a lot of stories – of Aristotle, of medieval science, of Copernicus, of the Copernican Revolution, of Galileo’s *Two Systems of the World*, of Harvey, Gilbert, and many other movers and shakers in the scientific and philosophical world from the 13th to the 17th centuries. And not only the movers and shakers in the scientific and philosophical worlds. Much more is needed to give a full and true account. The “true account” means that all the relevant social, economic, technological, political, etc. contextual details be delineated. As Roger Ariew states in a book review critiquing Stephen Gaukroger’s *The Emergence of a Scientific Culture: Science and the Shaping of Modernity 1210-1685*, Gaukroger’s history of science is valuable, but without the social dimensions, some important elements appear to be lacking in the analysis. Is it likely that an adequate description of the Scientific Revolution can be constructed without needing to mention the radical changes in social and political structures from the thirteenth to the seventeenth centuries; without repeated references to the Reformation and the threat it posed to the hegemony of the Catholic Church; without investigating considerable shifts in universities, curricula, and the establishment of numerous colleges by new teaching orders such as the Jesuits; without referring to novel institutions ... to the rise of intellectual and scientific societies and learned journals; without needing to say much about scientific patronage or the growing size and cost of the sciences, of instruments and of experiments? Gaukroger’s story ... is primarily one about the intellectual relations holding among natural philosophy, theology and metaphysics; it concerns also mathematics, mechanics and astronomy.\footnote{Roger Ariew. Essay Review: “The Emergence of a Scientific Culture”, from the *British Journal for the History of Philosophy* 17 (2) 2009: 387-388.}

This is correct. There’s no getting around this fact. And yet, Gaukroger’s account, as in the accounts of many other historians of science, simply leaves much of the relevant social context out. Indeed, Jonathan Israel’s *Radical Enlightenment: Philosophy and the Making of Modernity 1650-1750* was criticized from many quarters also on this perceived
deficit. Thus Israel makes it a point to take up these charges in his next tome on the Enlightenment, *Enlightenment Contested: Philosophy, Modernity, and the Emancipation of Man 1670-1752*. In the early chapters of this work he defends his focus on philosophy and science in his history. And, indeed, he offers several plausible arguments for his case. While not denying the place of the fuller social, contextualist story, Israel nevertheless argues that the philosophical-scientific story is the more significant. It should be said that Israel’s books on the Enlightenment do in fact deal with or mention several social, political, economic, etc. forces that helped lead to the Radical Enlightenment. His argument, however, is that the most important factors were ideological.

Be that as it may, I only bring up some of these issues to show that there are a great number of very important (and interesting) matters involved in offering a “true account” of this historical period, and that it will thus be impossible to enumerate all of these in this study. But before offering my generalized account of the Scientific Revolution as a precursor to the Radical Enlightenment, I think it worthwhile to at least alert the reader to a few other significant differences of opinion on several key issues in the story of the Scientific Revolution. For instance, *how much* of a revolution was the Scientific Revolution? Many historians (especially Enlightenment and 19th century historians) have given a simplified, black and white, good guys-versus-bad guys, enlighteners-versus-Christianity account of the Scientific Revolution. They argue that the sciences in the Scientific Revolution were not only more plenteous and extensive, but also were completely new under the sun (that is, through the use of the “new” “scientific method”), and that, to all extents, there was no “real” or “true” science in “the dark ages” of the medieval centuries. Their account is that there was a radical break, a significant *discontinuity* between medieval
and “modern” science. But many other historians of science and philosophy, such as Pierre Duhem and Thomas Kuhn, strongly dissent from this view.  

There are also great differences of opinion over the place that Christian theology played and over how much it was really “overturned” by, for example, the Copernican-Galilean account. For instance, to take only one example of the many disagreements on this subject, take Ariew’s view that “I do not think it is best to think of the dispute as a broadly theological one, as [Gaukroger] does, as opposed to a local dispute based on a specific interpretation of the Scriptures by some Churchmen at a particular time and place.” Indeed, “The Church’s interpretations of Scriptures were thus understood by some of the relevant actors to be contingent matters that could, at times, be reversed ... after all, one is dealing with a social practice that varies over time and place and is often applicable only to restricted domains.”

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351 Jonathan Israel says some very important things in his *Enlightenment Contested* about the:

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352 Ariew, op. cit., 392-394. According to Professor Ariew, Galileo’s *Two Chief World Systems – Ptolemaic & Copernican* was condemned more because he deceived priests into getting the
Compare this view with Draper’s *History of the Conflict Between Religion and Science*, or, even more, with Andrew White’s *The Warfare of Science with Theology in Christendom*! While 17th century historians such as Ariew assesses all the hoopla over the Copernican-Galilean controversy with respect to Scripture as accidental or incidental and only (or primarily) an issue due to various socially dependent issues; historians such as Draper and White judge all of the hoopla over the Copernican-Galilean controversy as primarily due to its rejection of the Word of God’s teaching (as traditionally interpreted), and therefore not only treated the problem as a socially contingent matter, but more so as a critical challenge facing the universal Church.

Each historian treats his history differently because each has a different focus (or overriding concern) that they want to bring out. Since this is the case, it is inevitable that other areas won’t be included. Research in the literature among the different contestants on the historiography of the science-religion debate can be disheartening. Each side tends to overdo their criticism of the other side. Thus, for example, in contemporary science-historiography, White’s *Warfare* is almost always referred to as a benighted account because of its apparently extreme black-and-white, good-guys-versus-bad-guys account. Yet, though this is true, and though his rendering in parts lacks enough scholarship and historical sophistication, still, much of his documented work provides an incomparable service to some of the key issues on the subject - such as, laying out hundreds of cases conclusively demonstrating contradictions between scripture and what the new sciences were saying. He also presents a huge amount of documentary proof of specific and concrete attacks against many of the sciences and philosophies throughout the history of the west from theologians, philosophers, and believers from every walk of life. No matter what

imprimatur of the Church for his book than because of any theological outrage over the work conflicting with sacred scripture.
general position a historian wishes to take on some of the differences of opinion among historians, these primary documents at least support much of White's contention.

The new historians of science who wax proud of their historical-philosophical sophistication too often make their valuable points at the expense of missing or neglecting the legitimacy of many of the invaluable arguments made by their “older” passé colleagues. It’s as if the most powerful motivation for the new historians of science is to blur the lines of all past important historical treatments. The unfortunate result of this almost cottage industry of historical blurring and relativizing is often confusion and skepticism. One ends up utterly in the dark as to whether there is any justification whatsoever in such standard historical terms as “modernity”, “Enlightenment”, “Christianity”, “science”, and so on.

Instead of just talking in vague terms on this subject, I should cite some specific books and essays exemplifying this sort of new historiography. Take Kenneth Howell’s *God’s Two Books: Copernican Cosmology and Biblical Interpretation in Early Modern Science* or some of the essays in *God and Nature: Historical Essays on the Encounter between Christianity and Science* (ed. by David Lindberg and Ronald Numbers) - or, perhaps more importantly than these, take Richard Popkin (because in many respects he spearheaded and modeled a lot of the new historiography in early modern philosophy and science) and his 1968 essay "Scepticism, Theology and the Scientific Revolution in the Seventeenth Century." 

Portions of each of these works make a lot of hay on some of the weaknesses of their opponents’ history of the science-religion conflict, but they seem absolutely oblivious to the accurate and important contributions that their opponents have made. In some cases, the differences of opinion are not correctly understood. They are talking at

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cross-purposes from one another. What Popkin has in mind by “Christianity”, for instance, is different from what White usually has in mind. The way I read the two on this issue is that Popkin’s overall presentation of “Christianity” has to do largely with what all kinds of Christians have done (ex. Some of them have been great scientists); the “Christianity” that White attacks is primarily orthodox Christians (Catholic and Protestant) who follow the tradition of orthodox interpretations of the “Word of God.” We see a kind of fallacy of equivocation at work here between these two renditions. One concentrates on one aspect of Christianity (and proves his point thereby), and the other focuses on what most concerns him (and proves his point thereby). One calls Venus “the evening star”, the other “the morning star.” Yet both are referring to Venus. Both are right – and wrong.

A general summary of the Scientific Revolution as precursor to the Radical Enlightenment

“And new philosophy calls all in doubt,
The element of fire is quite put out,
The sun is lost, and th’earth, and no man’s wit
Can well direct him where to look for it.
And freely men confess that this world’s spent,
When in the planets and the firmament
They seek so many new; they see that this
Is crumbled out again to his atomies.
‘Tis all in pieces, all coherence gone” – John Donne

The Scientific Revolution versus Aristotle and Scholasticism

Having stated some of the problems in the historiography of the Scientific Revolution for the readers' critical awareness, let us now offer our generalized account of the Scientific Revolution as a precursor to the Radical Enlightenment.

First of all, we should note what much of the "Scientific Revolution" was about. The Scientific Revolution was not only a “revolution” in the sense that it was something new in history. It was also a revolution in that it no longer relied on the past way of doing “science” or natural philosophy, that is, it no longer followed the explanatory conceptual scheme of occult or scholastic natural philosophy. In this sense then, the “Scientific Revolution” was also a revolt against the old way of doing natural philosophy which referred to “prime matter,” “substantial forms”, and multiple Aristotelian causes such as final causes with its built-in teleology and anthropomorphism of nature.

The new scientists on the block (prime examples: Galileo and Descartes) would have no truck with the old explanations of nature (“the rock falls because it seeks the center of the earth”). To them, such explanations were not explanations at all. They were pseudo-explanations. They only appeared to be explaining things, but, in actuality, they were begging the question all along. To explain that objects such as rocks fall to the ground because they “want” or “seek” something is to posit illegitimate mental predicates to inanimate (non-mental) objects. Why not pare this down? Why not simply and solely deal with what we have more evidence to know? Why not not posit entities beyond what is necessary?

More, the new scientists on the block found that their new way of explaining natural phenomena free from the added ontological furniture of Aristotelianism and other ancient excrescences were leading to new and powerful breakthroughs. The Patristic, Medieval, Scholastic, and Renaissance advertence to all things past, to the Golden Age, to Adam, to
Moses, to Plato, to Aristotle, or to the Church Fathers was giving way to a brave new world. Just like Columbus and Magellan, we too can discover new worlds, thought the new philosophers. The “New Philosophy” attitude was different: Since the ancients were ignorant of so many things, and since we’re seeing more and more that they got so many things wrong, we need to found the sciences on new and better foundations. Instead of relying on their books to tell us about nature, let us look and see nature for ourselves without all their over-cumbersome superfluous additions.

As far back as Parmenides’ famous “What is is and what is not is not”, the way of explaining nature (generally speaking) has either been by way of Democritus and Epicurus (atomism) or by way of Aristotle (and the Scholastics) with its qualities, forms, souls, final causes, and so on. Because of the onslaught of attacks against the Roman Catholic Church by all sorts of Protestants in the 16th and 17th centuries, the Church was up in arms to counter this ideological war against its very existence. The center piece of this war was in many respects over the theology and philosophy of the Mass. The Mass is what most distinguished the Catholic Church from the churches of the Reformation. The centerpiece of the Mass was the Eucharist. Catholic thinking on this subject may be paraphrased as follows: “If you come up with a theology and philosophy that does not support transubstantiation, then you have come up with a false, dangerous, and heretical philosophy. Hence all forms of materialism or atomism are rejected. Thus, if you explain the world (which God made) by adverting only to material forces, then you are giving an unspiritual, unbiblical, untraditional, un-Christian view of the world. Therefore it is atheistical and must be rooted out.”

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355 This characterization is of course a simplification. There were other powerful explanatory schemes that influenced the course of western philosophy besides atomism and Aristotelianism – for example, Stoicism and Platonism. Stoicism was more of an ethics than an ontology, but it still possessed a metaphysics and a philosophy of nature that was influential. Plato and his offshoots Platonism, neo-Platonism, and then Augustinianism were also of course other indisputable major influences on future philosophers’ and theologians’ way of explaining nature.
To take only one historical example of this stance, take the condemnation of the Sorbonne in 1624 against certain anti-Aristotelian theses put forward by the student Jean Bitault. The Sorbonne condemned the student’s atomist thesis that primary matter is fictitious because “prime matter” was considered essential to explaining and justifying the Catholic dogma of transubstantiation.356

The worry and condemnation of Bitault’s anti-Aristotelianism and materialistic atomism was also partly what motivated many against Galileo, and then later, Descartes – e.g. because the views of Galileo and Descartes’ seemed to support the evil dreaded materialist atomism. Descartes’ 1632 *Le Monde* explains the phenomena of nature without referring to or alluding to Aristotelian or Scholastic forms, prime matter, final causes (though later in the work God is referred to as creator and occurrent with nature), or qualities: “all the forms of all inanimate bodies can be explained without needing to assume anything in their matter other than the motion, size, shape, and arrangement of its parts.”357

All that is needed to explain the processes of the universe reduce to these three. To the religious establishment of Scholasticism this seemed like the disenchantment of the world - “there hath been a glory that hath departed from the world.” And not only the

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356 See Ariew’s *Descartes and the Last Scholastics* on this (p. 87) and Garber’s 1988 “Descartes, the Aristotelians and the Revolution That Did Not Happen in 1637” in *Monist* 71: 471–86. White’s take on this condemnation focuses on its unscriptural component: “the theological faculty of Paris protested against the scientific doctrine [of Bitaud] as unscriptural” (White’s *A History of the Warfare of Science with Theology in Christendom*, Vol. I, p. 214. Ariew’s account refers also to Mersenne’s support of the Sorbonne’s condemnation because of its defense of Aristotle (Ariew, op. cited, 87). Yet, Mersenne’s reasoning (as briefly summarized on p. 88) boils down not only to a defense of the Aristotelian explanation of things but, at bottom, is a defense of the biblical view of man and the universe. Aristotle’s philosophy is not defended and praised in and of itself outside of Christian theological considerations. Rather, it is considered as extremely important because it is considered the best philosophy to defend Christian orthodox theological teachings. It’s not only Aristotelianism or scholasticism that is against the teaching that “man is of the same species as stones, plants, and animals.” Once again, one should not think of scholasticism as only informed or motivated by Aristotelianism. The Sorbonne’s condemnations of Bitaud’s theses were not only because they were anti-Aristotelian, but also because of its atomist-materialist principles (Bitaud’s XIV Thesis states “that everything is composed of atoms or indivisibles). As a result of both, they are considered – as the Sorbonne wrote - “erroneous in faith.”

disenchantment of the world, but also the repudiation of the central Roman Catholic doctrine of the Eucharist (via transubstantiation) and, ultimately, the philosophical back-door way of kicking God out of the world, too. The Roman Church could not countenance any such anti-Scholastic view of the world, especially since the Council of Trent, because these views seemed to undermine the Catholic dogma of the Eucharist which the reformers and Protestants were clamoring against. Thus, any philosophical teaching that seemed to support the enemy was then treated as an enemy.

The Scientific Revolution (ex. Copernican-Galilean heliocentric view) versus Scripture

In this section, we will look more closely at a couple of the claims we made above. Some repetition will therefore be unavoidable.

Another major respect in which the Scientific Revolution (especially the Copernican-Galilean Revolution) should be seen as a precursor to the Radical Enlightenment was in the assault the Copernican theory had against the truth of Holy Scriptures that clearly asserts that the earth is stationary and that the sun moves. (Of course, the ancient Hebrew authors of the Scriptures were not the only people to think this. This is, after all the common sense view. So, it is of course no wonder that we would find the common sense view of such things intermixed in the inspired literature of pre-modern-astronomy cultures.)

In the last few decades there have been many works that have shown a far more contextualist view of the Copernican-Galileo condemnations. Some of these have watered down the widely accepted view that the key element of the Church’s (both Catholic and Protestant) attacks against Copernicus and Galileo were not thought of as in contradiction to scripture. Some also argue that in point of scientific fact, there are ways of looking at
how to define "motion" and "stationary" in such a way to take the sting out of the so-called contradiction against scripture. In the 17th century, Leibniz, for one, offered such a view.358 Furthermore, some, such as Professor Ariew, have arguments that question the view that the Copernican-Galilean theories definitively refute the geocentric view. However these arguments may pan out, there is no denying that many have judged the Copernican view of the earth's motion and the sun's centrality to be contradictory to Scripture, and therefore, another reason to question and to doubt the "Word of God."

Galileo himself knew that it seemed to contradict Scripture. He knew it so well that he counseled theologians to interpret the relevant passages in a new way, that is, in accordance with the truths that science uncovers. His argument ran as follows: Since the Holy Scriptures is true, it cannot utter a falsehood; and since science tells us that the earth does move and that the sun is basically stationary, and since truth cannot contradict truth, therefore, the theologians simply need to re-interpret the scriptural passages that seem to say differently. Galileo:

To me, the surest and swiftest way to prove that the position of Copernicus is not contrary to Scripture would be to give a host of proofs that it is true and that the contrary cannot be maintained at all; thus, since no two truths can contradict one another, this and the Bible must be perfectly harmonious.359

Galileo goes on to offer his theological hypothesis on why God would inspire the authors of Scripture to write things about the motion of the sun and the centrality and immobility of the earth:

Since it is very obvious that it was necessary to attribute motion to the sun and rest to the earth, in order not to confound the shallow understanding of the common people and make them obstinate and perverse about believing the principle articles of faith, it is no wonder that this was wisely done in the divine Scriptures.

But many or most of the theologians would have none of this. They rejected Galileo’s accommodationist hermeneutic as not only unbiblical but dishonoring to God, as well: God tells the truth; he doesn’t lead men to believe in falsehoods “to accommodate” our ignorance.  

Cardinal Bellarmine, for instance, wrote that if people assert that the new astronomical view is really true (as opposed to only hypothetically true as Copernicus was believed to have written), then

this is a very dangerous thing, not only by irritating all the theologians and scholastic philosophers, but also by injuring our holy faith and making the sacred Scripture false ... Second. I say that, as you know, the Council [of Trent] would prohibit expounding the Bible contrary to the common agreement of the holy Fathers. And if your Reverence would read not only all their works but the commentaries of modern writers on Genesis, Psalms, Ecclesiastes, and Joshua, you would find that all agree in expounding literally that the sun is in the heavens and travels swiftly around the earth, while the earth is far from the heavens and remains motionless in the center of the world. Now consider whether, in all prudence, the Church could support the giving to Scripture of a sense contrary to the holy Fathers and all the Greek and Latin expositors. Nor may it be replied that this is not a matter of faith, since if it is not so with regard to the subject matter, it is with regard to those who have spoken. Thus that man would be just as much a heretic who denied that Abraham had two sons and Jacob twelve, as one who denied the virgin birth of Christ, for both are declared by the Holy Ghost through the mouths of the prophets and apostles.  

Cardinal Bellarmine makes three very important arguments here. First, he argues that the interpretations of the scriptures regarding the earth and the sun from the Holy Fathers until the 16th century have been expounded “literally.” It is extremely important to point this out because there is a pervasive misunderstanding about Roman Catholic hermeneutics. It is repeated over and over again that Roman Catholic hermeneutics used an allegorical method toward Scripture which the Reformers didn’t. As a result, the attack against the alleged veracity of Scripture referring to the motion of the sun and the

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360 In his works, Israel cites many cases of all sorts of theologians, philosophers, etc. who attacked this accommodationist view: “This, protested orthodox Calvinists, was tantamount to claiming ‘God says things to us He knows are not true, in other words lies to us; since, in the story of Joshua and elsewhere [Ecclesiastes 1:4-7; Psalms 19:5-7], Holy Scripture plainly affirms the sun circles the earth, this must be so’” (Rad. Enl. 27).

immobility of the earth were supposedly much less threatening. This is simply false when it comes to the Church’s traditional interpretation of the passages on the sun and earth. Bellarmine was not only a Cardinal; he was also a Doctor of the Church. He knew what he was talking about.

The second very important argument in this passage is that Bellarmine argues that interpretations of the scriptures regarding the earth and the sun from the Holy Fathers until the 16th century have received the same interpretation. Theologians and Bible commentators have been in one accord for all of the Church’s history. The fact that all of God’s holy people have always interpreted God’s Word in the same way on this subject is, for Bellarmine, a proof that this is the way that these scriptures should be interpreted and not in the new, cowardly, unbelieving way of Galileo and others who capitulate the integrity of holy writ at the drop of a hat. As a result of this hasty capitulation, they radically restrict the extent and authority of truth in the Holy Scriptures to only essential matters of faith and practice.

Last but not least, Bellarmine’s final point quoted in this passage is also tremendously significant. It has been overlooked and ignored for centuries. Ballarmine’s quote here demonstrates the theological illegitimacy and the logical impossibility of such a hermeneutical stratagem as Galileo’s. The real issue, Bellarmine argues, is whether the inspired scriptures is true on every assertion of fact, including seemingly unessential matters of faith and practice: “Thus that man would be just as much a heretic who denied that Abraham had two sons and Jacob twelve, as one who denied the virgin birth of Christ, for both have been declared by the Holy Ghost through the mouths of the prophets and apostles.”

Galileo was acutely aware of the challenge that this either-or dilemma confronted Christendom with. We said above that Bellarmine’s argument puts the lie to many of the in-
hindsight-apologetic interpretations of the scriptures. But on the switch side, to not take the liberal interpretation that Galileo advised is then to put the lie to all the scriptures and to the very faith itself. Galileo well-understood this quandary and he warned the theologians about it:

Take note, theologians, that in your desire to make matters of faith out of propositions relating to the fixity of sun and earth you run the risk of eventually having to condemn as heretics those who would declare the earth to stand still and the sun to change position – eventually, I say, at such a time as it might be physically or logically proved that the earth moves and the sun stands still.362

In other words (the last part of this passage seems to imply), Galileo may be understood as saying, “If you reject this full-proof-success-system interpretation363 of these passages and then it comes out that it is proved! that the earth really does move and the sun really does stand still, then great harm will come to the Church and the Faith.

It was not only Catholic theologians such as Cardinal Bellarmine who condemned the new view of the earth and sun; the Reformers Martin Luther and John Calvin did as well. Luther, who hated Aristotle and Scholasticism, is believed to have said the following:

People give ear to an upstart astrologer who strove to show that the earth revolves, not the heaven or the firmament, the sun and the moon. Whoever wishes to appear clever must devise some new system, which of all systems is of course the very best. This fool wishes to reverse the entire science of astronomy; but sacred Scripture tells us that Joshua commanded the sun to stand still, and not the earth.364

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363 The expression “full-proof-success-system interpretation” derives from Mortimer Adler’s and Karl Popper’s criticisms of ideologies such as that of Freudianism, Marxism - and for Popper, but not Adler - and faith claims made from orthodox or fundamentalist religious faiths. The reasoning here goes as follows: No matter what can be said against P, something in the ideology can always respond to explain or justify P within said ideology. So, if it is argued that P in psychoanalytic theory is wrong, the faith adherent to psychoanalytic theory can always respond by saying that the arguer thinks this because he represses x or y or other like pseudo refutations. The point of this criticism against such ideologies was to show that insofar as they cannot be tested, refuted or falsified, they are to that extent “metaphysical” and therefore beyond the ken of science or rationality.

After quoting from the Scripture “The world is established, that it cannot be moved” (Ps. Xciii, 1), Calvin “triumphantly concluded: ‘Who will venture to place the authority of Copernicus above that of the Holy Spirit?’”

Jonathan Israel’s *Radical Enlightenment* argues that though the ‘Crisis of the European Mind’ commenced in the middle of the seventeenth century especially “with the rise of Cartesianism and the subsequent spread of ‘mechanical philosophy’ or the ‘mechanistic world-view’ ... Yet

it was unquestionably the rise of powerful new philosophic systems, *rooted in the scientific advances* of the early seventeenth century *and especially the mechanistic views of Galileo*, which chiefly generated that vast *Kulturekampf* [culture war] between traditional, theologically sanctioned ideas about Man, God, and the universe and secular, mechanistic conceptions which stood independently of any theological sanction.

As we have argued above, Descartes and Cartesianism was one of the most powerful philosophical expositors and proponents in the world of this “New Philosophy.” And to Descartes and Cartesianism we now go.

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365 Ibid. This passage and the passage above have been quoted in scores of books. It should be said here, however, that Owen Gingerich argues that these passages purportedly from Luther and Calvin are a myth. See *The Book Nobody Read: Chasing the Revolutions of Nicolaus Copernicus* (New York: Penguin Books, 2004), 136-138. Gingrich assured me through personal communication that since the publication of his book, no one to his knowledge has written anything that refutes his view. I have some doubts about Gingrich’s argument against these specific passages; but even if he’s right about these specific passages, it is highly unlikely that that Luther and Calvin didn’t hold these views. 366 *Radical Enlightenment*, op. cited, 14, my emphases. I don’t think that Israel’s *Radical Enlightenment* gives due credit to Scientific Revolution (and the Renaissance). He addresses some of this deficit in his next volume, but still not enough in my estimation.
Chapter Eight

The Question of Descartes as Precursor to the Radical Enlightenment

Introduction

Before we commence with our reflections on the question of Descartes as precursor to the Radical Enlightenment, it might be a good idea to remind ourselves of our purpose. As we stated in the Introduction to this dissertation, our intention is to offer a selective history of vignettes on the struggle between rationalism and theology. But instead of citing the usual over-generalized narration of the Counter-Enlightenment or orthodox religious viewpoint, we will show the very specific sources of their beliefs and theologies (that is, from the texts of revelation or the Bible) and show how these militate against naturalistic and rationalistic thinking (and vice versa).

In this chapter, we will look more closely at a few of the things that show Descartes as a major precursor to the Radical Enlightenment, but also those respects in which he was still a “medieval” or “counter-enlightener” or enemy of the Radical Enlightenment. By the use of such terms as “Radical Enlightenment” and “medieval” here, we continue to single out particularly the question of the truth-status of revelation, faith, miracles, prophecy, and theology. The “Radical Enlightenment” is the term being used to represent disbelief in and rejection of these claims; and “medieval” is meant to represent having faith in, and support of, these claims.
Where are we? In part one of our study, we laid out many of the principal characteristics of the Enlightenment, particularly with respect to the struggles among radical, moderate, and counter-enlighteners. We delineated the meaning of the Enlightenment along with how it should be distinguished from that which came before it, the "pre-Enlightenment", if you will. We paid particular attention to the heart of the warfare between these camps, e.g. the problem of interpreting and incorporating biblical revelation and church doctrine with reason, philosophy, rationalism, and science. How to understand and follow the "Word of God" when so many reasons, arguments, and scientific discoveries seem to contradict it? What we have to do with in this period of the 17th century and Descartes is nothing less than “the fate of God in the modern world”\textsuperscript{367} - not an insignificant problem, to say the least.

The question of Descartes as a major precursor to the Radical Enlightenment

The question of Descartes as precursor to the Radical Enlightenment: \textit{in historical context}

Here’s one way Jonathan Israel characterizes the place of Descartes and Cartesianism in the 17th century:

\begin{quote}
The first example of the onset of a principled, general discarding of authority and traditional premises, in Europe, was the advent of the mechanistic world-view asserted by Cartesianism which triumphed widely in the later seventeenth century. This great shift in basic concepts, like the slightly later notion of a ‘Scientific Revolution’ occurring between Galileo and Newton, changed western civilization profoundly and, among innumerable other changes, transformed the meaning of ‘revolution’ itself … Descartes embarked on a general … ‘revolution’ … of knowledge … for, in Descartes, ‘revolution’ means not just linear, fundamental, and irreversible change, and not just auto-emancipation from the intellectual and cultural shackles of the past, but … something that changes
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{367} This expression is used often in many works on the period – for instance, Matthew Stewart’s \textit{The Courtier and the Heretic: Leibniz, Spinoza, and the Fate of God in the Modern World}.  

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everything ... Scorning all existing categories and premises, and all traditional learning, Descartes and Cartesianism transformed men’s way of viewing the world ... and for this reason were regarded as a true founding ‘revolution’. 368

This is correct. But we have to take Descartes’ and the Cartesians’ role in this revolution with respect to the Radical Enlightenment in historical context, for Descartes was not the only force who wrought the vast changes of the Enlightenment. The Protestant Revolution, the Thirty Years War, the Scientific Revolution (especially, at first, Copernicus and Galileo) are other forces that must be underscored. Not only that, but none of these, including Descartes, meant to weaken or destroy Christianity’s survival in Europe.

Admittedly, new philosophical and scientific ideas such as Cartesianism cannot claim all the credit for engineering the resulting revolutionary transformation in European culture. New kinds of theological controversy often contributed to weakening the internal cohesion of the main confessional blocs ... Yet it was unquestionably the rise of powerful new philosophical mechanistic views of Galileo, which chiefly generated the vast Kulturkampf between traditional, theologically sanctioned ideas about Man, God, and the universe and secular, mechanistic conceptions which stood independently of any theological sanction. What came to be called the ‘New Philosophy’, which in most cases meant Cartesianism, diverged fundamentally from the essentially magical, Aristotelian, ‘pre-scientific’ view of the world which had everywhere prevailed hitherto ... albeit most ‘Cartesians’ of the 1650s and 1660s never intended to undermine theology’s hegemony or weaken the sway of the churches. 369

And there were other forces at work for a more Enlightened Europe, as well. One simply cannot ignore the powerful influence that the libertinisme erudit (16th and early 17th century humanist libertines) had in this period. Israel states that

This form of intellectual dissent, termed libertinisme erudit, still an appreciable force in the late seventeenth century ... sought to mask, but simultaneously to disseminate, views opposed to prevailing theological and metaphysical orthodoxies by presenting opinions and quotations culled mostly from classical authors in innovative and seditious ways, paying particular attention to skeptical, irreverent, and atheistical sources such as Lucian, Epicurus, and Sextus Empiricus, and historians of philosophy such as Diogenes Laertius. 370

368 Enlightenment Contested, 5. I take Israel’s use of the word “everything” and “all” in the last three lines of this quote as hyperbolic and not literal.
369 Radical Enlightenment 14.
This form of stealthy writing influenced many of the intelligentsia of the time to question several of the religious beliefs and traditions inserted into European culture since the takeover of Christianity. Israel continues his history of this movement explaining that “various manifestations of clandestine atheistic and deistic traditions reaching back via such authors as Bodin, Bruno, and ... Vanini ... and then through earlier Italian thinkers, notably Machiavelli and Pomponazzi ... albeit in the veiled, camouflaged manner of the sixteenth-century libertines.”  

There’s no getting around this fact then: “This was a potent intellectual undercurrent ... and one which played a notable role in preparing the ground for the rise of the Radical Enlightenment.”

Much more can be said about the powerful influence that this humanist-libertine movement had in Europe, but this will suffice to give us a feel for some of the other movements going on around the same time as the Cartesian revolution. Still, we must remember that despite these movements and the New Philosophy of Descartes and his colleagues, none of these were explicitly Radical Enlightenment stuff. Despite these revolutions taking place, much of Christianity’s power in Europe was still preserved.

From the 1650s ... the opportunity to forge an explicit and systematic philosophical radicalism existed. Nevertheless, all new streams of thought which gained any broad support in Europe between 1650 and 1750, such as the philosophies of Descartes, Malebranche, Le Clerc, Locke, Newton, Thomasius, Leibniz, and Wolff, sought to substantiate and defend the truth of revealed religion and the principle of a divinely created and ordered universe. If the great thinkers of the late seventeenth and early eighteenth century uniformly reviled bigotry and 'superstition' and discarded, if not expressly rejected, belief in magic, divination, alchemy, and demonology, all except Spinoza and Bayle sought to accommodate the new advances in science and mathematics to Christian belief (if not always to that of one or other Church) and the authority of Scripture. They asserted as fundamental features of our cosmos the ceaseless working of divine Providence, the authenticity of Biblical prophecy, the reality of miracles, immortality of the soul, reward and

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372 Ibid. 15.
punishment in the hereafter, and in one way or another ... Christ’s mission as the Redeemer of Man. 373

Despite the Protestant Revolution, the Thirty Years War, the 16th and 17th century Scientific Revolution, the humanist-libertine movement, and despite Descartes, the hegemony of theology in Europe continued. Though Europe was now divided and splintered into different confessional camps, biblical revelation was still considered indispensable.

By 1648 Europe’s rulers had been engulfed for over a century in inter-confessional conflict ... Yet everywhere organized Churches of one theological complexion or other were deemed indispensable pillars of the social order, arbiters of belief, morality, education, and censorship, and the ultimate guardians of authority, by elites and populace alike. So great indeed was the cultural ascendancy of the dominant or State Churches in their respective zones of hegemony that confessional theology long remained the principal and overriding criterion in assessing all intellectual debates and innovation. 374

Though Christianity still held sway over Europe despite the early revolutions in science and philosophy, the New Philosophy was beginning to percolate throughout the consciousness and unconsciousness of the European mind. People were beginning to question their church, their faith, and the “Word of God.” It would only be a matter of time that these explosions of new ideas would have their radical effects in every significant area of culture, including government.

Trust in and acceptance of social hierarchy [the great chain of being] and kings, bishops, and aristocracy was bound to erode and be at risk once revolutionary philosophical, scientific, and political thought systems began to invade the general consciousness, questioning the ascendancy of established authority and tradition, and eroding deference for supposed ancient constitutions and law codes as well as the ancient consensus that all legal and institutional legitimacy derives from precedent, religious sanction, and traditional notions about the true character of the community. From this followed directly the advent of republican and democratic

373 Radical Enlightenment, 15. Francis Bacon must be added to Israel’s lists both as being a powerful Enlightenment force and, at the same time, as being a moderate enlightener in so far as he continued to support the church triumphant and the revelational claims which undergird it). I should say too that Israel’s mention of Bayle in the same line with Spinoza, as if Bayle too was an out-and-out radical enlightener, is open to question.

374 Ibid. 23.
political ideologies expressly rejecting the principles on which political, social-hierarchical, and ecclesiastical legitimacy had previously rested.\footnote{Enlightenment Contested 9-10.}

Many in the 17th century (and afterwards) recognized and blamed Descartes for being one of the major forces that destroyed the sacred age-old world-view. We learn from Descartes’ contemporaries not only that Descartes’ philosophy was new and different, but also how it was to a large degree a precursor to the Radical Enlightenment. We will note only a smattering of samples of these in our next section to make this point, and then show it further in the subsequent section on the condemnations of Cartesianism from the Church. Finally, I take up this issue of the condemnations and criticisms of Descartes and Cartesianism again in our ensuing chapter on Leibniz. We will see that even geniuses and moderate enlightenment voices had fierce words against Cartesianism because of its deleterious influence against Christianity.

Descartes as Enlightenment revolutionary supported by the testimonies of his contemporaries up to the high Enlightenment

The above passages from Jonathan Israel help put Cartesianism with respect to the Radical Enlightenment in its proper historical context. Yet, though all these things are true, Descartes’ accomplishments and role as a precursor to the Enlightenment and indeed to the Radical Enlightenment (though unintended by him) is assured. After noting the pivotal role that Descartes played with respect to the revolution in philosophy, science, and in man’s world view (in our first quote above in section II), Israel goes on to show Descartes’ influence throughout Europe – in its universities and in various preachers, philosophers, and theologians (contemporary to Descartes and in the next century). All of these confirm the assessment of Descartes’ revolutionary effect on Europe and the claim “that modern
thought begins with Descartes.” As was mentioned above, we will only briefly note some of these here.

Israel notes the effect of Cartesianism in the Netherlands starting as early as the late 1640s.

By the late 1640s his influence in the Dutch universities, and Dutch scholarship, medicine, and science, at a time when it was still unnoticed in his native land, was already far-reaching ... all the Dutch universities ... lapsed into a philosophical struggle unprecedented in European history since ancient times for acrimony, duration, and divisiveness. The result was a deep and abiding split between philosophical conservatives, broadly scholastic Aristotelians ... and innovators, primarily Cartesians, intent on revolutionizing not just philosophy but also physics, astronomy, medicine, and in some respects Bible criticism and theology, along the lines of Descartes' mechanistic world-view. 376

Descartes' influence was felt not only in the universities and in the upper echelons of government, but "also began to be debated in taverns, passenger barges, and popular pamphlets in the vernacular." 377 Preachers throughout Europe accused Cartesianism of being the root cause of the growing unbelief and impiety. At the end of the seventeenth-century, many blamed Cartesianism for the 'crisis of conscience'. They "tended to attribute the whole of what they saw as a social catastrophe to Cartesianism itself." To take only one concrete example of such claims: "It was due to Descartes, as the Reformed preacher Jacobus Koelman expressed it in 1692, that Holland was now rife with a 'dreadful mass' of 'atheists, libertines, New Sadducees, Hobbists, mockers and the like'; for all of them were intellectually nurtured on Cartesianism, including the Cartesian Spinoza." 378

But, of course, preachers were not the only ones who recognized the revolutionary changes that Descartes unleashed. Israel gives copious examples of philosophers and philosophes who confirmed the view of Descartes' role in the modern world. “Bayle and most of the philosophes of the eighteenth century, for all their criticism, continued to

376 Rad. Enl. 24-25.
377 Ibid. 25.
378 Enl. Cont. 31.
venerate [Descartes’ works] as marking the true beginning of ‘modernity’ and ‘enlightenment’ in men’s ideas.”379 The *philosophes* were aware “that Descartes was the first to ‘change the general way of thinking, starting an intellectual revolution which culminated in the mid eighteenth-century Enlightenment.”380

Julien Offray de La Mettrie, French physician and philosopher, was another prominent *philosophe* whose writings make it clear just how influential Descartes’ works were. La Mettrie was brought up as a Jansenist, but he turned away from this movement in his teens and then took up the study of medicine for his doctor’s degree. In his *Man a Machine* published anonymously in 1748, he argues that humans, and not only animals, are *- machines! To say that man is a machine is to imply that he is not a special creation by God, that is, that he is not created in the image and likeness of God, that he does not have an immortal soul, that there is no immortality and therefore no eternal judgment. All that is operates by mechanical principles. La Mettrie credits Descartes’ writings as the stimulus which led to materialism.

Justin Leiber’s introduction to La Mettrie’s book confirms La Mettrie’s claim that he derived his materialist or mechanistic belief from Descartes. Leiber shows us how (according to La Mettrie) Descartes “realized that advances in anatomy, biology, and neurophysiology might well be thought to have begun to form a firm scientific basis for materialism.”381 From Descartes’ influence, Leiber says that La Mettrie “has been variously credited as the first truly modern materialist, the first modern defender of animal rights, the first modern sexologist and criminologist.”382

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380 Ibid. 25.
382 Ibid. 3.
Several other scholars have also attributed La Mettrie’s materialist inspiration to Descartes. Many think that *Man a Machine* “is the decisive culmination of Descartes’s beast machine-work” and also that the materialism of the *philosophes* “derives from Descartes’s mechanistic views and his rejection of final causes.”\(^{383}\) Descartes is considered “as the originator of the machine-model to the study of human anatomy, and thus as the father of scientific naturalism.”\(^{384}\) Indeed, La Mettrie thought that Descartes’ dualism was merely a put-up job to keep him from being persecuted.\(^{385}\) He did not think Descartes believed in the soul.

La Mettrie acknowledges that Descartes made many mistakes, but he argues that because Descartes “was the first to demonstrate fully that animals are pure machines ... only a churl would not forgive him his errors!” For La Mettrie, this move to see animals as machines ineluctably leads serious thinkers to infer that man, too, is only a machine - “To be a machine, to feel, think, know good from evil like blue from yellow.”\(^{386}\) From mechanical explanations of animals, to the similarities of them with man, and then to the next courageous leap that La Mettrie took from this, we go from man in the image and likeness of God to the image of man just like the animals, in one generation! This was Descartes’ great stimulus. Thus La Mettrie offers us some conclusive evidence of seeing Descartes as a precursor to the Radical Enlightenment.

As is Israel’s custom, he diagnoses the literature in the major European countries like a doctor in order to get the heartbeat of how each country felt. We’ve cited an example from the Netherlands and from France, but he cites multiple cases from countries throughout Europe. Israel, of course, is not the only historian or scholar who argues the case for Descartes’ world-changing influence. Every historian and scholar of Descartes and

\(^{383}\) Ibid. 14.
\(^{384}\) Ibid.
\(^{385}\) Ibid. 71.
\(^{386}\) Ibid.
the Enlightenment does. Before ending this section, let us cite one further example of the influence of Descartes; this time from England. Let us take Leibniz’s famous nemesis, “Newton’s mouthpiece”, Samuel Clarke, as our example.

One scholar puts it this way:

Samuel Clarke (1675–1729) was the most important British philosopher in the generation between Locke and Berkeley, at least in terms of influence on his contemporaries, and was a leading figure in Newton’s circle. His philosophical interests were mostly in metaphysics, theology, and ethics; epistemology seems to have held little attraction for him. Although his philosophical vocabulary and some of his metaphysical ideas were influenced by Descartes, Clarke’s overall judgment of Descartes was quite critical. He shared the view expressed by More, Pascal, Bayle, and Leibniz that Descartes’ system could be, and had been, used to further irreligion and had naturally developed into Spinozism.387

From these examples above we are given a summary glimpse into the mind of Europe, which with almost one accord, charges Descartes with being one of the leading forces which led to the Radical Enlightenment movement of irreligion, materialism, and the gravest of all perceived evils – Spinozism.

Descartes as Enlightenment revolutionary who destroyed occultist and scholastic thinking

There is another very important argument for the revolutionary significance of Cartesianism that we have not yet said anything about, and that is the role that Descartes played in being one of the chief knights (along with Galileo and Hobbes) who slew the dragon of the philosophy of the occult. In his wonderful essay, “The occultist tradition and its critics” in The Cambridge History of Seventeenth Century Philosophy, Brian Copenhaver pulls back the veil on the seventeenth century and shows the background and influence that

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the occult had in Europe from the Renaissance to the seventeenth century up to Leibniz and Newton.

While Descartes was not a Radical Enlightener with respect to Christianity (at least according to many Descartes’ scholars who believe that Descartes’ expressions of faith were sincere and not due to fear), he was with respect to scholastic forms, magic, alchemy, astrology, and much else. He expelled magic from philosophy. He rejected the Renaissance humanists’ restoration of the occult that the Renaissance revival of Greek and Roman culture (with its revival of pagan ideas, occultism, substantial forms, Neoplatonic beliefs, and magic) conjured back up in Europe. After all, what lay underneath Plato’s astronomy? What underpinned Pythagoras’s astronomy - and even Copernicus’s and Kepler’s? How did they think of the sun and of light? All these natural philosophers thought in un-(or non) naturalistic terms to complete their explanations of natural phenomena.388

Conspicuous among the ruins restored by the humanists were ancient signposts to the truth and significance of magic, astrology, divination, and demonology. In the Renaissance landscape of antiquity, Hermes, Plato, Pliny, and Plotinus were seen telling the tales that Naude doubted. The old sages haunted history’s terrain, but Descartes averted his eyes.389

In his younger years, Descartes had indeed shown interest in the occult and its cousins. He looked into Rosicrucianism. He took dreams as messages from God seriously. He even at one time wrote things that sound as if he were one of them: “The active force in things is one: love, charity, harmony” and “every corporeal form acts through harmony.”390 But Descartes gradually turned from these. In his Discourse, he records how he dealt with “superstition and falsehood, in order to know their true value and guard against being deceived by them.” He wouldn’t go the way of Marlowe’s Faustus. He would not trust in

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388 Yet it is also true that Descartes, at least in his metaphysical passages, also adverts to un-(or non) natural forces to complete his explanations of natural phenomena. Despite this fact, however, the influence of his naturalistic explanations took hold and grew.
389 The Cambridge History of Seventeenth Century Philosophy, op. cited, 475.
390 Ibid, 476.
“the false sciences [knowing] their worth well enough not ... to be deceived by the promises of an alchemist ... the predictions of an astrologer [or] the tricks of a magician.” Descartes called alchemical work “illusions [that] aren’t worth a moment’s thought from a decent person.”

Copenhaver says that Descartes extricated himself from this old thinking very early on in his career.

From the time he composed his posthumously published *Regulae ad directionem ingennii* (1620-8?), Descartes saw the occult sciences as arsenals of bad method ... The eighth rule calls it ‘foolish ... to argue about the secrets [arcane] of nature, the influence of the heavens on these lower regions, the prediction of future events ... without ever inquiring whether human reason is adequate for discovering matters such as these ... Whatever he found esoteric, obscure, or vacuous, Descartes wished to eliminate from his philosophy, whose clear and distinct ideas were to end the reign of the occult.

I suspect that most people who read Descartes today haven’t a clue as to this context and to just how enchanted a place the world was still thought to be by many in the 17th century. The more that we learn about this context, the more we feel admiration for Descartes’ contributions to the Enlightenment.

The world that Descartes lived in was a messier place and a nursery of wonderment, as he learned in the feud with Gijsbertus Voetius [a prominent Dutch Calvinist theologian and rector of the University of Utrecht] that began in 1639. Magic, occult qualities, and substantial forms were some of the many threads in the fabric of this tedious dispute. Voetius linked Cartesianism with atomism and skepticism, denounced it as incompatible with scripture, and condemned it for rejecting the Christian doctrine of the soul, the incarnation, demonic possession and miracles.

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391 According to this definition then, Newton would not be deemed a decent person, for he spent much of his career on such illusions.

392 Ibid. 477.


394 Ibid. 478. Part of Voetius’ argument against Descartes was because he feared that if Cartesianism were to be part of the university curriculum (or to replace Scholasticism), students would no longer have enough time to learn from the riches of Scholastic theology and philosophy (see Ariew’s Introduction to Rene Descartes: Philosophical Essays and Correspondence, xiv). Along with this motivation, however, is also the usual orthodox one: the need to make sure every philosopher’s and theologian’s teachings are compatible with scripture. Thus the teachings that Voetius condemns as
With these brief arguments that show Descartes as a precursor to the Radical Enlightenment, let us look more closely into some of the aspects of Descartes’ work that challenged the traditional theological thinking of his world. We’ve seen that many in the early modern period identified Descartes as the spearhead that led to irreligion and Spinozism, and that many in the Church condemned his philosophy as a result. Let us now look with more specific detail on some of the planks of Descartes’ philosophical platform that were widely condemned. One of the central teachings of Descartes’ works that was widely condemned was his method of doubt – even though Descartes himself meant it to be used toward the sciences and not theology. But what Descartes thought of his method of doubt and what many in the Church thought of are not of the same cloth. As another way of seeing Descartes as a precursor to irreligion and Spinozism (aka the Radical Enlightenment), let us therefore look more closely at this doctrine, at the Church’s condemnation of it, and why the Church condemned it.

the result of Cartesianism is that it is “incompatible with scripture.” This scriptural litmus test is made evident in its “rejecting the Christian doctrine of the soul, the incarnation, demonic possession and miracles.” Ariew’s quote of Voetius’ condemnation ends on the same note. Descartes’ philosophy must be rejected “above all” because it too often conflicts “with orthodox theology” (Ibid. op. cited).
Why the Church Condemned Descartes’ Method of Doubt – from the Church’s Perspective

“he who doubts is like a wave of the sea, blown and tossed by the wind. That man should not think he will receive anything from the Lord; he is a double-minded man, unstable in all he does” – James 1:6

“Don’t you know that a little yeast leavens the whole batch of dough? Get rid of the old yeast”

(1 Cor. 5:6)

Introduction

In the Introduction to his Descartes Embodied: Reading Cartesian Philosophy Through Cartesian Science, early modern philosophy scholar Dan Garber tells us the story of his first readings of Descartes. He couldn’t make much sense of it. “I couldn’t figure out his point of view, why he was giving the kinds of answers he was giving. Something about his larger intellectual context seemed to be missing.”

Indeed, I myself had similar feelings when I read over and over again in the literature on Descartes how the Church condemned his philosophy. Why did many in the

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395. Two points for clarification: First, by “Church” I mean both Roman Catholic and Protestant churches and their affiliated institutions of schooling and government. Second, by ‘method of doubt’ I have in mind Descartes’ specific teachings to practice a thorough and systematic doubt for the purpose of weeding out all prejudices, errors, and any claim that cannot be known clearly, distinctly, and with certainty (but also, in general, many of the rules he lays down to attain truth). He makes such arguments in most of his works – most notably in the Rules for the Direction of the Mind, Discourse on Method for Conducting One’s Reason Well and for Seeking the Truth in the Sciences, Meditations on First Philosophy, and the Principles of Philosophy. Though Descartes states that these strictures ought to be followed in natural philosophy or in the sciences, many of his religious critics interpreted this as too dangerous because of the fear that it would lead some to practice this method on Christianity itself – that is, on the scriptures, the Church Fathers, and the legitimacy of the Church itself. Their fears were both prescient and correct, as we now know in historical hindsight. A caveat is needed here on the question of Descartes’ method. As in most things philosophical and historical, this business of Descartes’ method is actually very complicated. I can’t go into these complications here, except to say that Descartes later changed his method and even forsook it! I will refer the reader to Dan Garber’s Descartes Embodied, especially to the illuminating essay “Descartes and Method in 1637.” It would appear, however, that those who criticized Descartes’ methodology, in defense of the faith, were not as astute or as careful as Garber in their study of Descartes’ works. But these considerations need not enter our discussion at this point.

Church condemn his work? Anyone who reads Descartes will find that he seems almost obsessed with God, with proving his existence, with proving the ontological distinctness of the soul, and so on. Didn’t he write to put to rout the evil atheists and to defend the faith for the glory of God? He did say that he wrote his philosophy “For the urgency of the cause, as well as the glory of God”, didn’t he?397 He was a good son of the Church and one who sought to carry out the orders of the Lateran Council under Leo X, wasn’t he?398 So why did the Church (and so many universities and governments) condemn his teachings?399 That is what this section will reflect upon.

More specifically, I’m going to focus on the biblical grounds for these condemnations rather than the scholastic-philosophical grounds usually presented and highlighted in the secondary literature on Descartes. Garber found help in understanding Descartes from “his larger intellectual perspective,” that is, from the perspective of the context of the history of science (particularly physics). This study finds help in understanding Descartes and the condemnations against him from the context and perspective of the 17th century Church’s biblical and theological beliefs. The focus of this section will therefore be on the Church’s condemnations against what they saw as Descartes’ nefarious influence against faith in Scripture due to the influence of the method of doubt that he preached. In this section we will not deal with those condemnations that had to do with Descartes’ natural philosophy and science, that is, with his perceived arguments against final causes, against teleology, and

397 Letter of Dedication to the Sorbonne in the Meditations on First Philosophy in Which the Existence of God and the Distinction of the Soul from the Body are Demonstrated (Rene Descartes: Philosophical Essays and Correspondence, ed., Roger Ariew, 98.
398 Ibid.
399 My summary account adheres to and adds to the following two works, but I do so highlighting only the biblical and/or theological aspects of these condemnations. See the “Appendix: Condemnations of Cartesianism” in Descartes’ Meditations: Background Source Materials, ed. Roger Ariew, John Cottingham, and Tom Sorrell. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998; and Nicholas Jolley’s essay in “The reception of Descartes’ philosophy” in The Cambridge Companion to Descartes, edited by John Cottingham. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992.
for a purely secular mechanization of nature - though these too of course contributed to the conclusion that Descartes must be up to no good).\footnote{In keeping with the thesis of this dissertation, I purposely concentrate on the biblical versus philosophical (and vice versa) theme (rather than on Descartes’ mechanistic philosophy against final causes and teleology) in hopes of saying something new in the literature. All or most works on Descartes’ relation to the Enlightenment emphasize his rejection of final causes and teleology. I wish to make a contribution that may help some people who may not have been as aware or as knowledgeable about these matters.}

I write on this subject of the Church’s condemnations against Cartesianism because I see it as filling a need. In our time (as opposed to that of the seventeenth-century), many scholars, and certainly many students (both undergraduate and graduate), do not know much about the Bible, theology, or Church history. These subjects are simply not high on the agenda in philosophy departments today (as they were in the 17th century). And so, as a result, 21st century students of Descartes often cannot fathom all that is going on when they read Descartes. They thus don’t fully understand the highly charged and dangerous atmosphere of the time. And they thus miss out on much of the drama that makes Descartes and seventeenth-century philosophy exciting to read.

Books such as Roger Ariew’s *Descartes and His Contemporaries* and *Descartes and the Last Scholastics* help a great deal in pulling back the curtain for us to see and feel the historical, social, and philosophical context in which Descartes wrote. There is no doubt how such information is needed to properly interpret a philosopher. The contemporary reader of Descartes who doesn’t understand Descartes’ world cannot know of the dangers or the courage or the slyness that Descartes and early modern philosophers had to exercise. Once the reader is made privy to the flesh and blood, existential needs and fears of the age, the reader can better appreciate what he is reading. We must remember, once again, that the world of 16th and 17th seventeenth century Europe was rife with theological discord and wars – the Protestant Revolution, St. Bartholomew’s Massacre, the Thirty Years War, the Vicar of Christ versus the Protestants in Germany and England, the Catholic and
Calvinist Inquisitions, Catholic and Protestant religious persecution and censorship, and so on – most of which had to do with biblical, theological, and philosophical matters.

Ariew rightly states:

A philosophical system cannot be studied adequately apart from the intellectual context in which it is situated. Philosophers do not utter propositions in a vacuum, but accept, modify, or reject doctrines whose meaning and significance are given in a particular culture ... Thus, Cartesian philosophy should be regarded, as indeed it was in Descartes’ day, as a reaction against, as well as an indebtedness to, the scholastic philosophy that still dominated the intellectual climate in early seventeenth-century Europe.”

I entirely agree. What I wish to focus on, however, is not so much Descartes’ and the Church’s indebtedness to scholastic philosophy as to the indebtedness to the Christian scriptures and the Christian theology that undergird scholastic philosophy. We must not forget that Aristotle was only one part of the theological-philosophical world-view called “scholasticism.” The other part, which is the foundation for all Christian theology and Christian philosophy, comes from the scriptures themselves. Read any Summa of Thomas Aquinas, for instance, and you will see plenteous references to Aristotle, but along with these, and constraining these, are all the references to the scriptures and the Church Fathers’ understanding of the scriptures. Aquinas makes it patently clear throughout his writings that the scriptures, that is, the Word of God, are to be considered as the supreme authority – even over “The Philosopher.”

Before we begin though, some qualifications are in order here. For instance, it is not the case that all Christians think that all doubt and skepticism are through and through evil. On the contrary, for instance, the scriptures and the Church themselves recommend doubting and skepticism of “the lies of the devil”, of “deceitful philosophy”, and of anything that can hurt one’s faith. Another important point that must be made is that many

Christians, in the history of Christianity, are what have been called “fideists.” In the 16th and 17th centuries, various fideists have used skepticism as a way to disarm the claims either of the New Philosophy or the all-knowing Protestants such as the Calvinists. Luther’s and Calvin’s fideism fits the bill for the former, while Roman Catholic thinkers such as Pierre Charron fit the bill for the latter. The subject of “fideism” is a vast and complicated one. This is not the place to parse all the many important differences in the use of this term. I bring it up here so as to alert the reader that there are important qualifications to be made in reference to our discussion of the Church’s general condemnation of doubting, and more specifically of the Cartesian method of doubt.

Another very important qualification that we must make is that we should note that just as there were different denominations of Christianity, so also there were different responses to Descartes’ works. Not all Christians judged Descartes’ works as of the devil. In fact, there were many Cartesians who were devout. Thinkers such as Arnauld, Malbranche, and the early Pascal thought that many of the central planks in Descartes’ philosophical platform were basically correct. Not only that, but many Cartesians believed with Descartes

402 Richard Popkin defines fideists as “persons who are skeptics with regard to the possibility of our attaining knowledge by rational means, without our possessing some basic truths known by faith (i.e. truths based on no rational evidence whatsoever).” Popkin sees writers such as St. Augustine, Luther, Calvin, Pascal, and Kierkegaard as fideists. Richard Popkin. The History of Scepticism: from Erasmus to Spinoza (California: University of California Press, 1979), xix-xx. The reader should know that this description or definition of fideism has several different important distinctions, which the study of Popkin’s book, and others works on this subject delineate.

403 For an excellent example of Charron’s fideism, see chapter 5, “Pierre Charron, Wisdom” in Descartes’ Meditations: Background Source Material, edited by Roger Ariew, John Cottingham, and Tom Sorrell (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998). It should be noted that though the skeptical fideism of thinkers like Charron were used in order to destroy Protestant dogmatism, the Jesuits and others within the Roman Catholic Church nevertheless still condemned it. To their thinking it evinced too much skepticism and doubt. Besides, it smacked of 16th and 17th century Protestantism (Jansenism and some mysticism) in its strong reliance on the Holy Spirit for religious knowledge. Note for instance Charron’s use of scripture on pages 58 and 62. The editors don’t cite the scripture texts, but they are important. Take the one which Charron quotes on page 58: “a spiritual person judges all things and is judged by none.” This comes from Paul’s first letter to the Corinthians 2:15 (See this passage also in its context). It is a central passage in Pauline theology and has been the linchpin in all sorts of theologies of fideism. We have spoken at length in this dissertation on this aspect of religious enlightenment thinking. At any rate, Charron’s use of it is highly ironic because most of the early Protestant groups (especially the “enthusiastic” among them) used this passage and others like it in the New Testament to justify some of their key doctrines.
that his system would put Christian philosophy and theology on better foundations than
Aristotelian Scholasticism.

Having noted that many Cartesians were devout Christians however, we must
qualify the extent of their Cartesianism, that is, the extent of how much they agreed with
and followed Descartes' teachings. Many believing Cartesians, though supporting Descartes
in some things, did not support him in other things. For instance, many expressed serious
reservations about the method of doubt. We may take Arnauld as a good example of this.

In his *Interpreting Arnauld*, Elmar J. Kremer reminds us of Arnauld's remarks in the
*Fourth Objections* to Descartes' *Meditations*, that "Although philosophy can claim this entire
work [Descartes' *Meditations*] as its own, nevertheless, because the author has respectfully
and willingly submitted himself to the tribunal of the theologians, I shall here act in two
capacities" – that is, he will examine Descartes' work as a philosopher, "and then I shall set
forth what could be offensive to theologians in the entire work."404 Did Arnauld find
anything theologically offensive in Descartes' work? Yes. In his essay "Arnauld's
Interpretation of Descartes as a Christian Philosopher", Kremer sizes up Arnauld's
assessment as follows.

But although Arnauld admired Descartes's philosophy and was prepared to defend
it against the charge that it was heretical, he did not accept some of its most
important principles, and cannot properly be said to be a disciple of Descartes. He
considered himself a professional theologian rather than a philosopher, and his
primary allegiance was to the Catholic theological tradition as he understood it.
Hence, he was prepared to depart from Descartes whenever he thought it necessary
to do so in order to maintain theological orthodoxy. For example, from the *Fourth

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404 "Arnauld emerges ... as a figure who wanted to continue the medieval theological tradition and, at
the same time, to embrace the new philosophy... [He] understands, and fears, in his contemporaries
what Sleigh has characterized as a certain 'boldness of reason which would, in time, spark the
Enlightenment'" (Elmar J. Kremer. *Interpreting Arnauld*, ix). In his essay, "Arnauld and the Modern
Mind" (in Kremer's book), Peter A. Schouls argues that Descartes' philosophy "is the first sounding of
Kant's Enlightenment call for each to be self-emancipated from self-incurred tutelage.... Here is the
typically modern mind" (44). But Arnauld "is not a modern mind. To the contrary, he is so enveloped
in pre-modern Augustinianism that he fails to recognize modernity's character when it faces him"
(44).
Objections on, he rejected the method of doubt, at least in part for theological reasons ... [In an endnote Kremer remarks that] “In response to Arnauld’s misgivings, Descartes added a clause in the Synopsis of the Meditations to make clear that the work dealt only with speculative truths knowable by the natural light, and not with matters of faith or morals ... But [Kremer says] I know of no passage in his later works in which Arnauld speaks favorably of the method of doubt.405

And so we see the need to qualify the extent of those interpreted to be Cartesian and devout. At any rate, our concern is with those believers who fought against and condemned the Cartesian method of doubt. Whatever the case may be here, one thing is clear, and that is, if you are a genuine or devout believer in the seventeenth century, you may (generally speaking) look upon Descartes’ method of doubt with suspicion. In fact, many of Descartes’ contemporaries saw this method as being just as dangerous and open to condemnation as the Copernican-Galileo unbiblical heliocentric doctrine.406 Galileo’s Copernican teachings seemed to undermine scripture, and everybody knows what happened to him because of this. Descartes’ method of doubt also seems to contradict scripture, and we know that this too was condemned by the Church because this method (as they perceived the danger of its use in theological matters) contradicted scripture.

There are several biblical and theological criteria that the devout know and follow to determine whether someone is indeed a genuine Christian (just as there are some philosophical criteria to help one identify a Platonist, Aristotelian, a Spinozist, etc.). There are tell-tale signs of a genuine believer that can be elicited with very little trouble. In fact, litmus tests of orthodoxy have been part of the reason behind many of the Church’s Councils: they list all that is considered theologically acceptable. Everything that diverges seriously enough from the central tenets of the faith is thereby condemned as heresy. Just as there are criteria for determining whether a law is constitutional, so also are there

405 Ibid. 87-88. Kermer goes on to say that Arnauld also “did not hesitate to reject important Cartesian doctrines, including the doctrine on free will and on judgment as an act of will” (76).
406 There were several other factors behind Galileo’s condemnation – political, social, and, not least, his own abrasive personality.
criteria if a philosophical teaching is biblically and theologically sound: Does the author glorify God? Is Christ properly presented in all his teachings? Does he believe in the resurrection of the dead? Does the author's opinion in any way contradict scripture? Are the author's teachings clearly in harmony with the Word of God? Does he confess that Jesus is the Son of God sent by God to atone for the sins of the world? Can the work do anything to harm the faith of the faithful or question the authority of the Church? And so on.

And then there’s the phenomenon in every religion that some are totally devoted, some only partly devoted, and some pretty oblivious to their faith, even though they talk as if they were genuine believers. Moderate or liberal Christians such as Leibniz, Bacon, or Locke, for instance, would not have as serious a problem with Descartes’ epistemological rules as the more orthodox and fervent - though this claim too has its caveats. For instance, regarding Descartes’ criterion of truth, a matter logically and philosophically entailed in Descartes’ method of doubt, Leibniz early on expressed deep concern. Regarding Descartes’s dictum of accepting as true only that which is clear and distinct, one Leibniz scholar states:

The danger, for the mysteries of the faith, of Descartes’ criterion of truth was noted by the young Leibniz, as is shown by some remarks contained in his first long letter addressed to Arnauld. What place can there be for truth superior to human reason (and of which it does not, and cannot, have clear and distinct ideas) in a philosophy whose first principle is that of admitting as true only that which is clear and distinct?407

These and many more worries and criticisms were leveled against Descartes’ method. Most of these were leveled by the more fervent devotees of the faith (though many moderates joined in this chorus). This section will focus on their perspective. Just as Garber’s essay is interested in only Descartes’ scientific thought (“Descartes was a multifaceted character, and there are a number of approaches that one can take to illumine

his thought. All I mean to assert is that this is one of them\textsuperscript{408}, so also this facet of the
religious reception of Descartes’ method of doubt will be what interests us.

My goal, like Garber’s, is to provide (as far as possible) a “disinterested historical
reconstruction” of the Church’s biblical theological perspective in condemning Descartes.
Descartes’ contemporaries and the Church were not only responding to threats against
scholasticism. That is why they so often explicitly and implicitly refer to scripture.
Descartes himself makes many references (explicit and implicit) to the scriptures in his
writings and correspondence. He too makes it clear that “the Holy Scriptures are to be
believed because they have God as their source” and that “one may infer from the Holy
Scriptures that the knowledge of [God] is much easier than the manifold knowledge that we
have of created things.”\textsuperscript{409}

\textit{The Church’s condemnations of Descartes based on biblical-theological grounds}

Why did the Church condemn Descartes’ method of doubt? That’s easy to answer:
\textit{Because God is against it and because He commanded the Church to defend the faith and keep
it from being corrupted}. But is this issue that clear? Is it clear that God Almighty (e.g. the
Bible) feels this way? Yes, it is. The following account should prove this.

The central problem of the place of doubt in human life was highlighted in sacred
history from the very beginning. Samuel Preus says,

Against Descartes, the theologians cite several faith-threatening themes from his
program: first, they charge that Descartes’s principles of methodical doubt ... leads
to atheism. The very principle of doubt, they aver, has its roots in the primal sin of
Adam: we all know who first introduced doubt into the world, and who fell for it.\textsuperscript{410}

\textsuperscript{408} \textit{Descartes Embodied}, op. cited, 3.
\textsuperscript{409} Letter to Sorbonne, op. cited.
\textsuperscript{410} 410. J. Samuel Preus. \textit{Spinoza and the Irrelevance of Biblical Authority} (Cambridge: Cambridge
And who was it that introduced doubt in the world? You guessed right: "the Devil, who suggested to the first man the Cartesian principles of philosophizing, namely doubt, on the basis of which the divine warning not to eat was interpreted."  

In order to make the Church's position on this subject simple and clear, it may be helpful if I spoke in the voice of what we can take as a representative 17th century believer. The following then can be likened to a typical sermon:

'As far back as the Garden of Eden it all started. After Eve told the serpent that she and Adam were not allowed to eat the fruit of the tree in the middle of the garden on penalty of death, the devil said, "You will not surely die" (Gen. 3:4). Well, we know what happened after that. The woman she did eat; and she gave to her husband, and he did eat. And the rest, as they say, is history – out of Paradise! We must remember that almost all Christians, Roman Catholic and Protestant, believed in the plain truth of the Genesis accounts.

Because of doubt, Adam and Eve disobeyed God. Because of that doubt, as God revealed to St. Paul thousands of years later, "all die" (1 Cor. 15:22). The consequences of doubt according to the Bible are almost always destructive in some way. Due to our first parents' doubts, the great Fall or Curse came upon all nature. God curses the very earth. This curse is everywhere and always a sign of what doubt leads to:

Cursed is the ground because of you; through painful toil you will eat of it all the days of your life. It will produce thorns and thistles for you, and you will eat the plants of the field. By the sweat of your brow you will eat your food until you return to the ground since from it you were taken; for dust you are and to dust you will return (Gen. 3:17-19).

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411 Ibid.
412 For instance, Pierre Daniel Huet, a well-known scholar and opponent of Descartes, actually "produced a work on the location of the Garden of Eden" (see Pierre-Daniel Huet: Against Cartesian Philosophy, ed. Thomas M. Lennon (New York: Humanity Books, 2003), 19. Such works were typical in the 17th century.
Had Adam and Eve not doubted, all humans would have been able to live forever in Paradise in a universe of total peace and joy. But, because of their doubt, all things have “fallen.” Because of Eve’s doubt all women must suffer pain when giving birth to children and they must all submit to their husband’s rule (Gen. 3:16). Of this horrible Fall of man and the dreadful Curse that then permeated and corrupted all of nature, the Bible has much to say. This curse and corruption of nature will be removed only after Messiah returns andpunishes all unbelievers. At that time children will be able to play with snakes, and lions and lambs will dwell in harmony and peace. And then a new heaven and a new earth will be created. Then God will live with men and “He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away” (Rev. 21:4). And who will not be allowed to enjoy this new heaven and new earth? Answer: “the cowardly, the unbelieving, the vile, the murderers, the sexually immoral, those who practice magic arts, the idolaters and all liars – their place will be in the fiery lake of burning sulfur. This is the second death” (Rev. 21:8). Note that in this passage of the Word of God, “the unbelieving” are clumped together with murders, thus indicating just how seriously God hates doubting. And where do the doubters go? “In the fiery lake of burning sulfur.”

The writer of the famous 11th chapter of Hebrews in the New Testament provides us a summary of the whole history of God’s inspired Word on the heroes of the faith. Incidentally, as this 11th chapter of Hebrews is the roll call of the great heroes of the faith, Jonathan Israel’s The Radical Enlightenment is the opposite: it is the roll call, chapter by chapter, of all those radical enlighteners who preached, campaigned, and wrote against the faith.

\[\text{Note: All footnotes are omitted for clarity.}\]
need to read this chapter carefully because it contains the life blood of the Jewish and Christian religions. We can only quote some passages here.

“Now faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see. This is what the ancients were commended for” (Hebrews 11: 1). Note the terms used here to describe what faith is: it’s “being sure ... and certain.” The essence all of Descartes’ works in epistemology and methodology is to attain certainty. But he goes about it in a very different way then holy writ tell us that true believers are to go about it. The ancients were commended for their faith and not for any high-falutin’ philosophical mumbo-jumbo about finding certainty after only subjecting everything to complete doubt. By faith Noah saved the fate of humankind (that is, by being the only ones to survive so that they could re-populate the world) from the great flood. Because Abraham believed, not only did all the Jews originate from him, but the Messiah did too: “I will make you into a great nation and I will bless you; I will make your name great, and you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse; and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you” (Gen. 12:2-3).

St. Paul calls Abraham “the father of all who believe” (Rom. 4:11). Paul lifts Abraham up as the model for the Christian religion: “Against all hope, Abraham in hope believed” and “Without weakening in his faith, he faced the fact that his body was as good as dead – since he was about a hundred years old – and that Sarah’s womb was also dead. Yet he did not waver through unbelief regarding the promise of God, but was strengthened in his faith and gave glory to God” (Rom. 4:18-21; Heb. 11:8-12, 17-18).

So then, when we read Descartes’ works, even though he talks a big talk about God and how he wants to convince atheists, we do not believe him. As the Good Book says, “Watch out for false prophets. They come to you in sheep's clothing ... Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only he who does the will of
my Father who is in heaven” (Mt. 7:15-23). For Descartes is not doing the will of the Father by spreading the message of doubt, when he should be spreading the message of faith.

Descartes’ method of doubt puts the Lord to the test. But our Lord made this clear: “Do not put the Lord to the test” (Mt. 4:7).415

I fear that this is what M. Descartes is doing. But he should remember what God said about his own people who for forty years kept doubting and testing Him: “That is why I was angry with that generation ... and declared on oath in my anger, ‘They shall never enter my rest’” (Ps. 95:7-8). And we all know what that means. God was so angry at their doubting that he slew most of them.

This same test occurred over and over again in the history of His people in the Old Testament. And over and over again, He would judge them – and judge them harshly and unmercifully. Whenever Israel doubted, God punished. The New Testament writers knew this very well, and used such examples purposely to whip their faith into shape: “See to it, brothers, that none of you has a sinful, unbelieving heart” (Heb. 3:12) and “He who is coming will come and will not delay. But my righteous one will live by faith. And if he shrinks back, I will not be pleased with him” (Heb. 10:38).

Descartes is worried about all sorts of things, but Jesus tells us clearly that only one thing is needful, and that is to trust God. In fact, it was doubting or lack of faith that our Lord excoriated more sharply than every evil (except for pharisical hypocrisy). He was always sighing “O ye of little faith” (Mt. 6:30) and getting angry, even with his own disciples for doubting him. On the other hand, there was nothing the Lord praised more highly than faith. For example, a woman whose daughter was demon possessed, kept pursuing Jesus to

415. Op. cited, Preus. Part of the 1656 decree of Holland and West Frisia that prohibited the teaching of Descartes’ ideas to the young reads: “whatever is revealed by God in Holy Scriptures is to be held to be firmly and undoubtedly the most certain of all, even if human reason seems to dictate something else for itself, however clearly and distinctly: for more is always to be attributed to divine authority alone than to human judgment”, 76.
heal her daughter. Jesus’ disciples tried to get rid of her, but she would not go because she fully believed that Jesus could perform this miracle. Because of her tenacity, “Jesus said to her, ‘Woman, you have great faith. Your request is granted.’ And her daughter was healed from that very hour” (Mt.15:28). Over and over again, he told people “According to your faith will it be done to you” (Mt. 9:29) and “your faith has healed you” (Mt. 9:22). Jesus despised doubting.

All the Christian apostles and evangelists, after Jesus’ resurrection and ascension into heaven, preached the same: “Jews demand miraculous signs and Greeks look for wisdom”, St. Paul wrote (1 Cor. 1:22). The Word of God condemns all such doubting. And God makes it clear that He means intellectuals, like Descartes, too. For it is written: ‘I will destroy the wisdom of the wise; the intelligence of the intelligent I will frustrate.’ Where is the wise man? Where is the scholar? Where is the philosopher of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? For since in the wisdom of God the world through its wisdom did not know him, God was pleased through the foolishness of what was preached to save those who believe (1 Cor. 18-21).

As we have said above, Jesus says the same thing. The scholars of his time used to crowd around him and make all sorts of demands on him – all because they doubted. “The Pharisees and Sadducees came to Jesus and tested him by asking him to show them a sign from heaven”, but Jesus mocked their doubting and said to them in cryptic terms they would not understand [because he would not teach doubters]: “A wicked and adulterous generation looks for a miraculous sign, but none will be give it except the sign of Jonah.” Jesus then left them and went away” (Mt. 16:1-4).

Against doubting, Jesus praised believing. “I tell you the truth, anyone who will not receive the kingdom of God like a little child will never enter it” (Mark 10:15). And, in another place:
At that time the disciples came to Jesus and asked, "Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?" He called a little child and had him stand among them. And he said: 'I tell you the truth, unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. Therefore, whoever humbles himself like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven" (Mt. 18:1-4).

Jesus told the great Jewish teacher Nicodemos the same thing:

'You are a teacher of Israel,' said Jesus, 'and do you not understand these things? I tell you the truth, we speak of what we know, and we testify to what we have seen, but still you people do not accept our testimony. I have spoken to you of earthly things and you do not believe; how then will you believe if I speak of heavenly things ... Whoever believes in [the Son] is not condemned, but whoever does not believe stands condemned already because he has not believed in the name of God's one and only Son" (Jn.3:10-18).

Do you now see how important believing is and how damnable doubting is, according to the Word of God? Jesus actually taught that God hid the truth from the hot shot intellectuals. One time, when Jesus was "full of joy through the Holy Spirit", he said, "I praise you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and learned, and revealed them to little children. Yes, Father, for this was your good pleasure" (Lk: 10:21). So you see, learned scholars and philosophers, all this doubt that Mons. Descartes preaches, is in reality against God and is therefore of the devil. For Christianity is all about faith. If you threaten that, you threaten the very foundations of our holy religion. So, if you look very closely at what Descartes is propounding – despite all his fine sounding words about God - you will see that he is preaching unbelief, the greatest evil there is. The Bible tells us that we must “test the spirits”: “Dear friends, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God, because many prophets have gone out into the world” (1 Jn. 4:1).

Much more can be said to prove the centrality of faith and the Bible's constant teachings and commandments against doubting, but this quick biblical overview, I hope, will suffice for now, and show you why the Church condemned Descartes’ teaching about the method of doubt. But before I end, let me briefly explain and justify the Church's role in
condemning and disciplining those under her charge. The Church condemns and disciplines because *God says to*. It’s what the scriptures teach. Jesus said

> If your brother sins against you, go and show him his fault, just between the two of you. If he listens to you, you have won your brother over. But if he will not listen, take one or two others along, so that ‘every matter may be established by the testimony of two of three witnesses.’ If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if he refuses to listen even to the church, treat him as you would a pagan or a tax collector. ‘I tell you truth, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven’ (Mat. 18:15-18).

Regarding serious sins, Paul the apostle commands the Church to “put out of your fellowship the man who did this” (1 Cor. 5:2). “When you are assembled in the name of our Lord Jesus and I am with you in spirit, and the power of our Lord Jesus is present, hand this man over to Satan, so that the sinful nature [or that his body; or that the flesh] may be destroyed and his spirit saved on the day of the Lord.” And “Don’t you know that a little yeast works through the whole batch of dough? Get rid of the old yeast that you may be a new batch without yeast – as you really are…. But now I am writing you that you must not associate with anyone who calls himself a brother but is sexually immoral or greedy, an idolater or a slanderer, a drunkard or a swindler. With such a man do not even eat. What business is it of mine to judge those outside the church? *Are you not to judge those inside?* God will judge those outside. *‘Expel the wicked man from among you’*” (1 Cor. 5, my emphases).

Many other passages of scripture can be cited to prove to you the legitimacy of the Church’s need and power to discipline, but these should suffice for now. Let me end here by citing one more point in passing so that you get a fuller picture of why the Church (like ancient Israel) has to punish and discipline. We are ordered not to countenance false believers or their poisonous doctrines. The scriptures teach that if we don’t judge or
discipline them, God will judge and discipline us. It is our pastoral duty to protect the flock. Even as the learned Marin Mersenne wrote in his “The Truth of the Sciences”:

That is why the church, the bishops and doctors, can suppress, prohibit, or condemn all the books that the heretics use in order to attack the faith, as they judge necessary, for a time or for always, for they have the right to do everything required for the preservation of the church and of the souls that God has put into its hands for their welfare.

Now that I have explained to you the teachings of the Word of God and the Church, I hope that you understand why the Church condemned Descartes’ teachings about the centrality and value of doubting for one’s beliefs.’

Thus saith the believing voice of 17th century Europe against Descartes’ method of doubt and why so many in the Church attacked it. Aspects of Descartes’ philosophy, such as

416 This doctrine, of course, was not restricted to the ancient Hebrews or the Christians. The Greeks also preached this. Dodds’ says, “To offend the gods by doubting their existence, or by calling the sun a stone … was practically treason – it amounted to helping the enemy. For religion was a collective responsibility. The gods were not content to strike down the individual offender: did not Hesiod say that whole cities often suffered for one bad man”, The Greeks and the Irrational, 191.

417 This was published in 1625 four years before the correspondence with Descartes begins (so far as can judged by Descartes’ correspondence). I’m afraid that my use of the Mersenne quote above may be misleading. I don’t know that Mersenne at this time did or would have joined the Church if the Church at this early date had condemned Descartes (assuming, of course, that Descartes had published his works at this earlier date). I do know is that Mersenne and Descartes eventually became colleagues and friends. But I also do know that Mersenne at this early date must have been very conservative - so much so that in his 1624 The Impiety of the Deists he supported the Church’s condemnation of Noel Fournet. Fournet was a French school teacher who after comparing the gods of the Greeks and the Romans with the God of the Bible argued that the God of the Bible had to be far more evil because of the heinous immorality of predestining most of the world to eternal torment in hell. For his honesty and courage, Fournet was rewarded by the Church when they gouged out his tongue and then burnt him to the stake. For my little study of Mersenne and of the chronology of Mersenne’s works, I take the position that he grew more liberal, or worldly, and mature as his education and his years increased (it is, after all, a common phenomenon that many believers start out with extreme fervor only to grow more liberal and worldly as knowledge and the years wear on). Surprisingly, Daniel Garber doesn’t consider or mention this as a possible explanation for Mersenne’s changing views from originally being against Galileo (and Copernicanism) to finally coming around to his thought. Garber knows that “Mersenne started his career in a rather different way” – that is, as “primarily a writer on religious topics.” He was also something of a supporter of Aristotelianism: “on his view, the opponents of Aristotelianism were worse than merely mistaken. They were dangerous: dangerous to religion” (this give more reason to think that at this time he would have condemned Descartes too). Thus, “In the early 1620s, Mersenne lists Galileo among the innovators in natural philosophy whose views should be rejected” [since this is so, there is good reason than to believe that at this time Mersenne would have supported a condemnation against, or rejection of, Descartes by the Church]. Garber continues: “However, by the early 1630s, less than a decade later, Mersenne has become one of Galileo’s most ardent supporters.” See Daniel Garber’s “On the Frontlines of the Scientific Revolution: How Mersenne Learned to Love Galileo” in Perspectives on Science, edited by Roger Ariew (Mass: Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 2004), 141 and 135.
the method of doubt, then, were seen by many to be a major precursor and also a central characteristic of the Radical Enlightenment.

In praise of doubt and innovation versus the scriptures and the Church

*Descartes’ radical use of doubting as an aid to test knowledge claims and to obtain truth*

Now that we've shown the theological response to such Cartesian doctrines as the method of doubt, let us look at this doctrine from the perspective of the Enlightenment. We’ve seen that the scriptures have a very negative view of doubt. From Genesis to the book of Revelation, doubting, “testing the Lord”, and unbelief are fanatically railed against. In his *Descartes and the Enlightenment*, Peter Schouls lists three key concepts of the Enlightenment in which Descartes made great contributions: freedom (especially of thought), mastery (especially of self-mastery), and progress (especially in the sciences and philosophy).

Schouls rightfully makes much of Descartes’ method of doubt as the way to freedom and truth – which is the exact opposite of the Christian view of doubt as sin, pride, rebellion, and lack of trust in God. If one acted on Descartes’ methodology of doubt, one would, in Descartes’ words, "acquire the habit of never going astray" with regard to true knowledge.418 The language of “going astray” is language that the Bible and theology uses a great deal. But for Descartes, it is used as an essential part of his philosophy. In almost all his philosophical writings, one can tell that Descartes is more concerned to come up with strategies in avoiding error and falsehood than he is of sin or the devil. For Schouls, Descartes’ great contribution to the reformation and revolution in philosophy was to

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liberate reason from the bondage of prejudice and slavery to the ancients. This new Luther is said to have labored to liberate man's reason.

In spectacular contrast to the scriptural view of doubt, for Descartes (as Schouls' superbly delineates it) the use of method including the principle of doubt is a necessary condition for obtaining knowledge... Doubt is, therefore, not a defect... doubt is not a negative quality like, for example, evil or error... It is a doubt which is to be pursued and used... This doubt plays a positive role in that it is the road to freedom from prejudice. Once a person is free from prejudice, the use of doubt is the means to avoid subsequent error and renewed prejudice... it is the practice of doubt which allows for the manifestation of an individual's autonomy. For doubt clears the slate and thus makes it possible for a person to have only such beliefs as his own self-authenticated reason has authorized. Fundamentally, the exercise of doubt is what constitutes revolutionary activity... The exercise of methodic doubt is therefore a prerequisite for acquiring mastery. Both the Meditations and the Principles begin with doubt but end with knowledge.

Schouls' Descartes and the Enlightenment does a good job in highlighting those passages in Descartes' writings in which his radical new methodology takes him. It was passages such as these that helped persuade many divines, universities, and even governments to condemn his teachings. For instance, in Descartes' Discourse on the Method of Rightly Conducting the Reason, he makes revolutionary demands: "as regards all the opinions which up to this time I had embraced, I thought I could do no better than endeavor once for all to sweep them completely away." All these opinions or beliefs need to be swept "completely away, so that they might later on be replaced, either by others which were better, or by the same, when I had made them conform to the uniformity of a rational

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419 For many in the 17th century, the term "prejudice" is used as a watchword for "superstitious religious beliefs." We will especially see this point in our Spinoza chapter.
420 Ibid. 28.
421 Ibid. 35-36. Schouls' book was published over 20 years ago. A great deal of work on the Enlightenment has been done since then. In a personal communication to Professor Schouls, I asked him about this and whether he had any changed views since the writing of his book. Professor Schouls made it clear that, happily, none of the latest research and work done on Descartes or the Enlightenment challenges the central arguments of his book.
scheme."\textsuperscript{422} This kind of talk of conforming "to the uniformity of a rational scheme", to the orthodox theological mind, does not sound anything like the New Testament's teaching to "not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but [to be] transformed by the renewing of your mind" by offering "yourselves as living sacrifices" as the only way "to test and approve what God's will is" (Roman 12:1-2). And why does Descartes adopt these rationalist principles? He tells us in his \textit{Discourse}: "I have adopted them ... only because Reason has persuaded me of their truth."\textsuperscript{423}

\textit{Descartes' method leads to novel or innovative thinking}

Descartes knows that his method is something new under the sun (despite his claim that his work does not present any novelties in his Letter to the Faculty of Theology of Paris in his \textit{Meditations}).\textsuperscript{424} We know that he was quite aware that he was doing something different and new. For instance, in the "Author's Letter" to his \textit{Principles of Philosophy} he says that his method shows a "difference which is observable between these principles and those of all other men."\textsuperscript{425} Speaking about the passions in his \textit{The Passions of the Soul}, he says, in words that were sure to worry those who were always concerned about the dangerousness of innovations and novelties: "I shall be here obliged to write just as though I were treating of a matter which no one had ever touched on before me."\textsuperscript{426} This, says

\textsuperscript{422} Ibid. 15.
\textsuperscript{423} Ibid. 16.
\textsuperscript{424} One way of reading Descartes' meaning about novelties here is to refer to some of the qualifications he makes elsewhere in which he specifies "novelties in theology." Not everyone is convinced of this, however - and this not only from those concerned for the faithful, and not only from 20th century Descartes' scholars that question his sincerity, but also from many of his own contemporaries, both moderate and unbelieving. I take it that Descartes' philosophy which gets rid of the Scholastic apparatus of forms, four causes, etc. \textit{is part and parcel of some Scholastic theology as well}. Since this is the case, it is not the case that his philosophy does not introduce novelties in theology.
\textsuperscript{425} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{426} Ibid.
Schouls, "is the strategy of the person who denies the existence of links with the past rather than that of the one who holds that there is continuity. It is the procedure of the revolutionary rather than that of the reformer."\textsuperscript{427} And this rejection of all past knowledge is not only about the passions. As Descartes says in his \textit{The Search after Truth}, he means the "upsetting [of] all the knowledge ... hitherto acquired."\textsuperscript{428}

How radically different Descartes’ attitude and principles are compared to the pedagogical attitude and principles of his former teachers the Jesuits! In his \textit{Descartes and the Last Scholastics}, Professor Ariew makes the radical difference patently clear (especially in the chapter "Descartes Among the Scholastics"). Though many of Ariew’s works were written partly with the purpose of showing how the context (historical, social, etc.) of a philosopher usually demonstrates similarities and continuities with his predecessors and contemporaries, at the same time, these same works also show the dissimilarities and discontinuities.

The foundational principle for the Jesuits, as for all orthodox Christians, is that “One should have as the primary goal in teaching to strengthen the faith and to develop piety. Therefore, no one shall teach anything not in conformity with the Church and received traditions, or that can diminish the vigor of the faith or the ardor of a solid piety.”\textsuperscript{429} Ariew quotes from one of the memorandum of Claudio Aquaviva, the fifth general of the Jesuits, to make their stricutures even clearer:

Let us try, even when there is nothing to fear for faith and piety, to avoid having anyone suspect us of wanting to create something new or teaching a new doctrine. Therefore no one shall defend any opinion that goes against the axioms received in

\textsuperscript{427} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{428} Ibid. 17.
\textsuperscript{429} \textit{Descartes and the Last Scholastics}, op. cited, 17. See this chapter to get the full context and nuances that Ariew delineates. Ariew especially highlights the rules set for the teaching and following of Scholastic philosophy and theology. In this study, I highlight the biblical and biblical theological aspects from which many of the stricutures of Scholastic philosophy and theology derive.
Descartes' works fail this test. Compare Aquaviva's litmus test for orthodoxy with Descartes' parsing of the distinct role of philosophy (particularly against scholastic philosophy) as opposed to theology:

So it is quite irrational for those who have learnt such opinions, which they themselves confess to be uncertain, to condemn others who are trying to discover more certain ones. The desire for innovation is indeed to be condemned in matters of religion ... But in matters of philosophy, which, as everyone readily admits, men do not yet have sufficient knowledge of, and whose scope can be expanded by many splendid discoveries, there is nothing more praiseworthy than to be an innovator.

As opposed to the Jesuits and the principles they laid down for all teachers to follow, Descartes says that we can't have certain knowledge unless one takes all of one's previous beliefs and "sweeps them completely away."431 In the Discourse he talks about building "on a foundation which is entirely my own."432 For Schouls, "Modest though Descartes' 'reformation' may seem in some of his comments, very little probing is needed to show it up for what it is, namely a complete revolution."433

Like many other Descartes' scholars, Schouls seems to doubt the sincerity of Descartes' faith: "Of course Descartes often professed his adherence to Christianity; and a recent commentator may well be right when he remarks that 'To the end, Descartes remained a devout Catholic. ' Nevertheless his philosophy was quite opposed to it."434

Schouls says that "In the end, the spirit of Descartes' philosophy is caught better ...

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430 Ibid. 17. Of the difference between his view and those of the scholastic followers of Aristotle, "there is no way in which we can better prove the falsity of those [principles] of Aristotle, than by pointing out that no progress has been attained by their means in all the centuries in which they have been followed" (36).
431 Schouls' Descartes and the Enlightenment, op. cited, 17.
432 Ibid.
433 Ibid. 18.
434 Ibid 37, my emphasis.
when [one commentator] speaks of 'Descartes' "faith in human reason' as giving him 'a non-Christian ... conception of man.'"435

Ariew quotes a letter written by Descartes to a Jesuit (who had been one of his teachers at La Fleche) stating that he knows that "the principal reason which requires those of your order most carefully to reject all sorts of novelties in matters of philosophy is the fear that they have that these reasons would also cause some changes in theology."436 The chief reason against new ideas in such fields as philosophy is because of the danger or the threat that they may pose to theology. Descartes clearly understood that "the Jesuits' distaste of novelty" arose "out of their desire to safeguard theology."437

Descartes goes on to assure his old Jesuit teacher that "there is nothing to worry from this quarter about these things" (that is, that there is nothing new or challenging to theology from his philosophy). But I think that there is. For one thing, even trying to separate philosophy completely from theology is, in my view, not only unbiblical438, but also impossible – even if one talks of "secondary causes."

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435 Ibid. 38. "Koyre labels the Discourse on Method "the Cartesian Confessions"!!! (37). Though I think this overstates the case between Descartes Discourse and Augustine's Confessions, I think that Koyre's remark nevertheless captures the spirit of Descartes and his Discourse quite well. As a caution to this claim, though, I should perhaps notify the reader that not all scholars of the Discourse judge it to be accurate autobiography. They see it, at least in the early sections, as a conventional, rhetorical devise that early moderns would sometimes use. Whether this so or not, I think that the overall spirit of the Discourse supports our contentions in this section.

436 Ariew, Descartes and the Last Scholastics, op. cited, 12.

437 Ibid.

438 The Medieval Theology (ed. by G. R. Evans) plots the slow rise of the separation of philosophy from theology to the twelfth-century: "The twelfth-century distinction between philosophy and theology is not only non-Augustinian; it is more generally nonpatristic. There is a sense in which Augustine would think of Plato and Plotinus as both philosophers and theologians. 'Theology' and 'Philosophy' are concerned with the same enterprise: to understand the nature of God, the nature of the world and man's place in that world" (p. 7). So then, what a radical change occurs from the twelfth-century to Descartes and then to the nineteenth-century: "Perhaps the single most important alteration which took place from the nineteenth-century was the mover from disapproving innovation to valuing originality" (p.vii). And why is the question of innovation such a big deal to theology and the faith? Because "Unity and continuity are of the essence of the faith and no greater strain has been put on the survival of Christianity than that which has been created by the modern expectation that a leading thinker will be saying something new" (ibid).
Take Descartes' way of talking about physics and natural causes, for instance. He often does so in a way that seems to completely preclude discussion of God or any theology. Of course, in his metaphysical sections, he is careful to note the occurrence of God in nature; but in other parts, he speaks of nature in a way in which does not need to evoke God's power. Instead, the picture one more often gets is that of a universe that runs according to naturalistic or mechanical processes. This picture is a far cry from the picture the reputed inspired Holy Scriptures gives of God's involvement with nature. In these passages, Descartes' explanations of matter, meteors, and the earth say nothing about the creator and sustainer and planner of all these things. From a theological perspective therefore, some called this “atheistic”, for again, in a vast amount of passages giving explanations of nature, nothing is acknowledged about the designer and creator of nature, “to whom all glory belongs.” Though Descartes says that “the opinions which have seemed to me most true in physics, when considering natural causes, have always been those which agree best of all with the mysteries of religion”\textsuperscript{439}, many could not agree.

For conservatives or the orthodox, any explanations that don’t conform to the theological and scriptural perspective, of course, must be false. All such novelties or innovations must be false because Christian teaching stems from the Word of God, which does not change, but stands forever. As the traditional Church (the "Counter-Enlightenment") understood truth, and as they preached it in sermons and in Church councils via the authority of the Scriptures, “The grass withers and the flowers fall, but the Word of our God stands forever” (Isa. 40:8). “Your word, O Lord, is eternal; it stands firm in the heavens” (Ps. 119:89). As Jesus put it, “I tell you the truth, until heaven and earth disappear, not the smallest letter, not the least stroke of a pen, will by any means disappear from the Law until everything is accomplished” (Mt. 5:18). Moses explains the truth and

\textsuperscript{439} Ibid.

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faithfulness of God’s Word in this way: “God is not a man, that he should lie, nor a son of man, that he should change his mind. Does he speak and then not act? Does he promise and not fulfill?” (Num. 23:19). The New Testament and Christianity charge all believers to “Contend for the faith that God has once and for all entrusted to the saints. For certain men whose condemnation was written about long ago have secretly slipped in among you” (Jude 3); for “Jesus is the same yesterday, today, and forever” (Heb. 13:8).

We see this same spirit played out throughout the history of Christianity. Indeed, how could they not have this attitude – if the scriptures are true? Since the Church thinks and believes that the scriptures are the Word of God, they are fully persuaded that they have The Way and The Truth and The Life. There is no other way. There is only one God and one plan of salvation. It’s only their way or the highway, as the expression goes; for the Church knows the mind of Christ and of God, and “the spiritual person judges all things and is judged by none” (1 Cor. 2:15-16). They therefore know God’s view on things. They know what God wants them to do in life. They know also what God wants them to do with members who don’t follow the Word rightly. They are enjoined to not only to preach the Word, but to also try to persuade everyone to follow it:

In the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who will judge the living and the dead, and in view of his appearing and his kingdom, I give you this charge: Preach the Word; be prepared in season and out of season; correct,rebuke, and encourage – with great patience and careful instruction. For the time will come when men will not put up with sound doctrine. Instead, to suit their own desires, they will gather around them a great number of teachers to say what their itching ears want to hear. They will turn their ears from the truth and turn aside to myths. But you, keep your head in all situations, endure hardship, do the work of an evangelist, discharge all the duties of your ministry (2 Tim. 4:1-4).

And why is the Church charged to obey such things? Again, because “All Scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness” (2 Tim. 3:15). Note again, that these scriptures don’t just say that the scriptures are useful for teaching. They also say that they are to be used to “correct” and to
“rebuke” others who are of a different mind. I take the trouble to type out all these passages from the scriptures in hopes of giving the reader (who may not know these things well) a clearer picture of why the Church behaved toward Descartes (etc.) as they did, and, at the same time, to educate (or remind) the reader as to exactly what Christianity stands for.

Christian theology takes the position that God has already given his children everything that is needed. As Peter, reputed to be the first Bishop of the Church, says:

His divine power has given us everything we need for life and godliness through our knowledge of him who called us by his own glory and goodness. Through these he has given us his very great and precious promises, so that through them you may participate in the divine nature and escape the corruption in the world caused by evil desires (2 Pet. 1:3-4).

And how does St. Peter know this? Listen to this amazing claim. Let me quote his explanation here in full:

We did not follow cleverly invented stories when we told you about the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but we were eyewitnesses of his majesty. For he received honor and glory from God the Father when the voice came to him from the Majestic Glory, saying, ‘This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well-pleased.’ We ourselves heard this voice that came from heaven when we were with him on the sacred mountain.

And we have the word of the prophets made more certain, and you will do well to pay attention to it, as to a light shining in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts. Above all, you must understand that no prophecy of Scripture came about by the prophet's own interpretation. For prophecy never had its origin in the will of man, but men spoke from god as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit (2 Pet. 1:16-21).

Anyone who reads the scriptures and the teachings of the great Church Councils throughout the centuries and believes these things must perforce act as they do. Those whose minds are filled with these things unsurprisingly then do not think that the New Philosophy and the explosions of knowledge by the new sciences should compete with or get in the way of God’s Way. The reaction of the faithful is, “If God had wanted his people to love reason and philosophy and nature, then he would have told us! As it is, we have several hundreds of pages of information from God in His Word and none of them tells us to ‘live by reason’ as Descartes tells us. The scriptures tell us to ‘live by the Spirit’ (Rom. 8). This is
why the scriptures tell us to keep philosophy and philosophers at bay: 'See to it that no one takes you captive through hollow and deceptive philosophy, which depends on human tradition and the basic principles of the world rather than on Christ'” (Col. 2:8).

And it’s not only the scriptures or the most devout that rail against novelty and innovation. In the context of the horrible religious wars between Catholics and Protestants, cultured fideists such as Montaigne also condemned innovation.

I am disgusted with innovation, in whatever guise, and with reason, for I have seen very harmful effects of it ... It seems to me, to speak frankly, that it takes a lot of self-love and presumption to have such esteem for one’s own opinions that to establish them one must overthrow the public peace and introduce so many inevitable evils and such a horrible corruption of morals, as civil wars and political changes bring with them in a matter of such weight – and introduce them into one’s own country.440

Jean-Baptiste Morin also spoke out against novelties. Dan Garber quotes Morin: “There is nothing more seditious and pernicious than a new doctrine. I speak not only in theology, but even in philosophy.” Garber says that “Morin goes on to argue that since knowledge of natural philosophy leads us to knowledge of God, false principles lead us to heresy and atheism. It is obvious, then, why the Church should be interested in what philosophers teach” – and the State: “For false philosophical views, and the heresies they lead to might cause sects to be formed, sects ‘from which follow division and the ruin of provinces and whole kingdoms.’”441 Garber adds: “Contemporaries were probably not wrong in worrying that differences of opinion might lead to armed conflict, just as they had in the sixteenth century.”442

441 Ibid. 138-139.
442 Ibid. 149.
For the young Mersenne, opponents of Aristotelianism were "dangerous to religion", so they needed to be opposed. Galileo, Campanella, Bruno, Telesio, Kepler, and Gilbert were on Mersenne's list of wicked evil anti-Aristotelian heretics. These, it seems then, were the early "New Philosophers." Note that this was in the 1620s, much earlier than Descartes' Discourse of '37 and of his Meditations of '41.

Their warfare was not so much to defend Aristotle's philosophy as it was to defend the Holy Scriptures and right theology that should proceed there from. We see this even today in many respects: in the clash between creationists or intelligent designers versus those who would dispute the 6000 year old earth, or about Noah's ark or the special and instantaneous creation of the humans Adam and Eve – and not of primates and evolution. This attitude, I contend, should be seen as proof of how earlier Christians viewed thinking that was not in accord not only with tradition and Ptolemy and Aristotle, but, more importantly, with Scripture.

It is hoped that this brief discussion has illuminated readers as to why many in the 17th century Church judged Descartes' method of doubt and his other philosophical novelties as the fanning of the fires of the Radical Enlightenment. Arguments such as those given above were also used to portray him as an imposture and not a genuine Christian. Was he an imposture or was he a Christian? Was he only a precursor to the Enlightenment? Were there any respects in which he was not a precursor to the Enlightenment? This will be the subject of our next section.

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443 The Dutch Reform theologian Gisbertus Voetius tried to get Mersenne against Descartes' novelty: "He is trying to found a new sect ... never before seen or heard of in nature, and there are those who admire him and adore him, as if he were a new god who has descended from heaven" (Ibid. 153).

444 Ibid. 141.
Chapter Nine

Christian or Not? Precursor or Not?
Respects in which Descartes was not a Precursor

Introduction

In the last chapter I investigated some of the reasons why many in the Church condemned Descartes and his work. I mentioned then that I thought this strange given the fact that Descartes says so much about God and the immateriality of the soul in his writings. And “Didn’t he write to put to rout the evil atheists and to defend the faith for the glory of God?” He did say that he wrote his philosophy “For the urgency of the cause, as well as the glory of God”, didn’t he?445 He was a good son of the Church and one who sought to carry out the orders of the Lateran Council under Leo X, wasn’t he?446 So why did the Church (and so many universities and governments) condemn his teachings?447

We answered some of these questions in our last chapter. We saw that among his contemporaries many saw him as an enemy of Christianity, but that many also saw him as a

445 Letter of Dedication to the Sorbonne in the Meditations on First Philosophy in Which the Existence of God and the Distinction of the Soul from the Body are Demonstrated (Rene Descartes: Philosophical Essays and Correspondence, ed, Roger Ariew, p. 98.
446. Ibid.
447. My summary account adheres to and adds to the following two works, but I do so highlighting only the biblical and/or theological aspects of these condemnations. See the “Appendix: Condemnations of Cartesianism” in Descartes’ Meditations: Background Source Materials, ed. Roger Ariew, John Cottingham, and Tom Sorrell. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998; and Nicholas Jolley’s essay in “The reception of Descartes’ philosophy” in The Cambridge Companion to Descartes, edited by John Cottingham. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992.
genuine Christian whose philosophy was better able to support Christianity. In this chapter we will inquire among some Descartes' scholars whether Descartes was a genuine Christian or an imposter, a precursor to the Radical Enlightenment or a medieval holdover preserving Christianity come what may.

Descartes as an imposter?

Hobbes “could not pardon [Descartes] for his writing in defense of transubstantiation, which he knew was absolutely against his opinion and done merely to put a compliment on the Jesuits”

In our last chapter we cited several of Descartes' contemporaries and near contemporaries who thought that Descartes' philosophy was a precursor to the Radical Enlightenment. Based on some of their arguments, some of these, such as La Mettrie, felt that Descartes couldn't have been a sincere Christian.

We also mentioned some contemporary Descartes' scholars, such as Peter Schouls, who thought the same thing. For instance, we quoted Schouls saying: "Of course Descartes often professed his adherence to Christianity; and a recent commentator may well be right when he remarks that 'To the end, Descartes remained a devout Catholic.' Nevertheless his philosophy was quite opposed to it." Schouls' says that "In the end, the spirit of Descartes' philosophy is caught better ... when Vrooman speaks of 'Descartes' faith in human reason' as giving him 'a non-Christian ... conception of man'."

Schouls and Vrooman see in many of Descartes' writings including his autobiographical statements that he loved and adored reason more than Christ. For such

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449 Peter A. Schouls. *Descartes and the Enlightenment*, op. cited, 37, my emphasis.

450 Ibid. 38.
scholars, this spirit bespeaks more of a non-Christian than a devout Christian. And there are
other scholars who think similarly. Some, for instance, could point to Descartes’ putative
intellectual autobiography, the *Discourse on Method*, in which Descartes seems to put all his
cards on the table. "Koyre labels the *Discourse on Method* "the Cartesian Confessions"451!

I took it upon myself to review the various occupations that men have in this life, in
order to try to choose the best one; and, not wanting to say anything about the
occupations of others, I thought I could do no better than to continue in that very
one in which I found myself, that is to say, spending my whole life cultivating my
reason and advancing, as far as I could, in the knowledge of the truth, following the
method I had prescribed to myself. 452

And again:

looking with a philosopher’s eye at the various actions and enterprises of all men,
there is hardly one of them that does not seem to me vain and useless, I cannot but
take immense satisfaction in the progress that I think I have made in the search for
truth, and I cannot but envisage such hopes for the future that if, among the
occupations of men purely as men, there is one that is solidly good and important, I
dare to believe that it is the one I have chosen.453

This does not sound like a man who fulfills God’s chief commandment, "to love the
Lord thy God with all thy mind and heart." This sounds more like the sentiments of the
integral Aristotelians condemned by the Bishop of Paris in 1277 for holding such views as:

That there is no more excellent way of life than the philosophical way.
That the highest good of which the human being is capable consists in the
intellectual virtues.
That the philosophers alone are the wise man of this world.454

St. Jerome may have said of Descartes something like what the Lord told him in a
dream because his actions showed that he loved learning and books by Cicero more than
Christ: "You are a Ciceronian and not a Christian."455 For what is Descartes’ highest

451 Schouls, op. cited, 37.
452 Rene Descartes. *Rene Descartes: Philosophical Essays and Correspondences*, edited with
introduction by Roger Ariew, op. cited, 58.
453 Ibid. 47.
454 Aquinas: *Disputed Question on the Virtues*, edited and introduced by Thomas Williams, op. cited,
xxii.
455 Barclay, op. cited, 212-213. See above in my section on the Church Father’s for the full account of
this experience of Jerome’s.
pleasure? Is it God? Descartes tells us: "the satisfaction I had from [my studies] so filled my mind that nothing else was of any consequence to me."\(^456\) Compare this to St. Paul’s autobiographical statement: “But whatever was to my profit I now consider loss for the sake of Christ. What is more, I consider everything a loss compared to the surpassing greatness of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things. I consider them rubbish, that I may gain Christ and be found in him” (Phil. 3:7-9).

Hiram Caton says, “science, not salvation, seems to be his primary concern.”\(^457\) He quotes Maurice Blondel who summarized Descartes’ faith as that of “common and banal faith.”\(^458\) Maritain agrees: “he shuts himself up within himself... not to pray but to think, not to make his devotions but to philosophize; thus he transposes in the most curious way a procedure of Christian spirituality to the level of nature and of reason.” \(^459\) For Maritain, Descartes knew “the profound incompatibility of his philosophy with the whole authentic tradition of Christian wisdom.”\(^460\) This reminds me of Hobbes’ outburst when he said that he “could not pardon [Descartes] for his writing in defense of transubstantiation, which he knew was absolutely against his opinion and done merely to put a compliment on the Jesuits.”\(^461\) We will see in the next chapter that fellow philosopher Gottlieb Leibniz also worried that Descartes’ philosophy belied elements which undermine some important orthodox theological tenets.

Caton wrote a whole essay on “The Problem of Descartes’ Sincerity” that cites several apparently strong arguments to doubt Descartes’ sincerity.\(^462\) But not all Descartes'
scholars agree with Caton, Maritain, and company. They argue that Descartes was a genuine Christian, but that he is misunderstood. He separated philosophy from theology not for covert diabolical purposes, but “for the glory of God”, that is, to put Christianity on a better foundation than Aristotelianism.

Descartes as a genuine Christian

As we saw, Hiram Caton argues that Descartes was not a genuine Christian, but rather, along the line of “Descartes’ interpretation that was dominant in the way of 17th and 18th centuries”, saw Descartes “as a rationalist in the modern sense.” Caton refers to the *cogito* as one of the key signature elements of Descartes’ modernity. He goes on to praise a quote from Gerhard Kruger who formulated the *cogito* in this way: “Self-consciousness constitutes itself in defiance of all divine omnipotence. This is not ‘Christian inwardness’; rather here begins in philosophy as such the rebellion against Christianity that we call *Enlightenment*.”

But there is a problem with this account of the *cogito*. It’s wrong. In his insightful essay “The *Cogito* in the Seventeenth Century”, Roger Ariew demonstrates that this presentation of Descartes as “the father of modern philosophy,” which holds that Descartes’ “primary motivations were epistemological, in opposition to the metaphysico-theological concerns of the Scholastics,” is a mistake. Descartes’ formulation of the *cogito* “is often

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463 Caton, op. cited, 231.
emblematic of modern philosophy, even though [his] line of argument continues in an effort to prove the existence of God and immortality of the soul from these foundations”!465

On the complex subject of what constitutes “atheism” in the 17th century and Descartes in particular, Theo Verbeek says that “Descartes, whom nowadays few, if any, would call an atheist, was called an ‘implicit’ or ‘indirect’ atheist by Reformed theologians of his day only because he rejected the traditional proofs of God.”466 We learn from statements like this that allegations of “atheism” and the like were used quite liberally in the 17th century – and in ways in which we of the 21st century don’t.

I think that Verbeek overstates this claim here, for the Reformed (and non-Reformed alike) cited many other reasons why he thought he was if not an “atheist” at least certainly a threat to Christianity – and these reasons were based on some of the central planks in Descartes’ philosophical platform. Verbeek would no doubt concur with this.

At any rate, there are many apparently strong arguments in defense of the view that Descartes was a genuine Christian. We saw earlier that Arnauld and many other Christians and Cartesians interpreted him as such. And they judged his philosophy as a better ground for Christianity than scholasticism. Many of the philosophes and radical enlighteners also judged Descartes to be a Christian and therefore – from their point of view – a Counter-Enlightenment figure. Spinoza, for instance, makes this clear in his letter to Henry Oldenburg. He cites three serious errors that Descartes (and Bacon) makes, the first two of which I will cite here:

The first and most important error is they, that they have gone far astray from knowledge of the first cause and origin of things. Secondly, they have failed to achieve understanding of the true nature of the human mind ... Only those who are

465 Ibid. 378.
completely destitute of all learning and scholarship can fail to see the critical importance of true knowledge of these points.\textsuperscript{467}

In a nutshell, Spinoza seems to be saying, “If you think that a supernatural, anthropomorphic, creator and sustainer of the universe exists, and if you think that all humans are privileged with an immaterial soul, then your philosophy can’t help but to fall into several important errors.”

Descartes not only preached dualism and creationism, but he also fought against atheists and infidels. He tried to buttress the case of Christianity through his philosophy. If he rejected scholasticism, the geocentric view of the universe, final causes and teleology, it wasn’t because he was an atheist or an imposture, it was because he thought that by separating philosophy from theology he could do a better job in defending Christianity by showing what philosophy could find in its defense instead of the usual begging of the question by citing revelation.

Trevor McLaughlin’s essay “Censorship and Defenders of the Cartesian Faith in Mid-Seventeenth Century France” cites many who – even upon being deposed – testified to Descartes’ piety and orthodoxy, including the Queen of Sweden who “declared that God had used Descartes to bring her to the Catholic fold.”\textsuperscript{468} Clerelser, Descartes’ friend, “swore that Descartes, in his works, correspondence, speech, and way of life, had shown reverence for and faith in the Catholic Church, kept religious feasts, had frequently taken the sacraments and had died as he lived, close to the bosom of the Roman Catholic and Apostolic Mother Church.”\textsuperscript{469}


\textsuperscript{469} Ibid. 576.
Summary of general pro’s and con’s on the question of Descartes as a precursor to the Radical Enlightenment

Cons: The case against seeing Descartes as a precursor to the Radical Enlightenment

We may quickly summarize a few general points against the view that Descartes should be considered a radical enlightener or even as a precursor to the Radical Enlightenment: his Roman Catholic conservatism (see next paragraphs for more on this), his theological-metaphysical dualism, his “I” as an immaterial substance, his program to prove the existence of God (which is, to my mind, more than conspicuously like the God of biblical theism), his program to prove the immortality of the soul, his determination to fight atheists and infidels, his belief in and dependence on the scriptures as the Word of God (and the many beliefs derived from that – such as angels, the afterlife, the Holy Spirit, God as Creator, etc.), his belief and promotion that his philosophy should supplant scholastic Aristotelianism as the better and more biblically sound foundation to support Christian theology.

Descartes did not reject the following as radical enlighteners (or atheists or deists) do: He did not reject the Roman Catholic Church (cf. Spinoza’s letter to Albert Burgh -which can be read also as a criticism of Descartes’ Catholicism - for Spinoza’s list of arguments against the Roman Catholic institution and its theology). He did not reject the mass (to accept the theology and philosophy of the mass is to accept a whole range of theologically and philosophically significant beliefs that are completely antithetical to Radical Enlightenment naturalism). He did not reject the divinity of scripture, or of miracles, or of
divine providence. He did not reject the supernatural or the spiritual. He did not reject the "soul." He did not reject God.

As a faithful Roman Catholic, he had his daughter baptized in the Church (the purpose of baptism is the magical belief that without it one will not be protected from sin, the devil, and from possible punishment from the wrath of God). He sought to defend the Eucharist. He publicly vowed to abjure anything that he wrote that may seem antithetical to the Church or to theology. At bottom, his epistemology, his philosophy of physics (or nature), and his philosophy of mind are all founded on God as a perfect, infinite, eternal, all-good, all just, supernatural Person. Without this God, knowledge and truth and certainty are not possible. Without God in Cartesian epistemology and philosophy of science, there would only be skepticism or fideism. He may say in many places that matter is only extension, yet in other places he shows that all extension, all the world, all creation, and all motion is only made possible through the occurrence of God.

Is one is indeed a radical enlightener (as opposed to a moderate enlightener), one cannot hold these theologically-philosophically fraught positions. As we will see in our chapter on Spinoza, the Radical Enlightenment by and large repudiates the divinity of scripture, miracles, prophecy, the Holy Spirit, supernatural salvation, the sacraments, the theological efficacy of holy water, praying to the saints, the rosary, the Virgin Mother of God, incense, the work of the Holy Spirit, omens, signs in the heavens, the rainbow as a sign from God, belief in a creator, belief in creation, belief in God, belief in Adam and Eve, the story of Noah and all the animals of the world entering the ark, demon possession, witches, the millennium, the kingdom of God, and of Christ as the blood-sacrifice needed to atone for the sins of the world and to assuage the holy and just wrath of God – all these claims are at stake in the Christian view of the world.
Contrary to the Counter-and Moderate Enlightenments, the Radical Enlightenment rejects the notion of divine inspiration, the Abrahamic and Mosaic covenants, the notion of revelation, of dreams and visions sent from God, of the Ten Commandments, of the Love of God, of the Providence of God, of Judgment Day, of hell, of God’s involvement in nature, the Hope of eternal life in heaven, that God hears and answers prayer.

The Radical Enlightenment is atheistic, naturalistic, secular, and humanist. It honors reason and natural experience over claims of revelation, visions, dreams from God, oracles, and eschatological prophecies. It argues that reason, empirical science, and humanistic values should replace theology, religious-magic ceremonies, and the clergy.

Pros: The case *for* Descartes as a precursor to the Radical Enlightenment

To get a clearer picture of how different a philosopher Descartes was compared to most of the philosophers in the history of western philosophy since the Church Fathers, compare his writings with St. Augustine’s. Compare his philosophy with Thomas Aquinas’s. Compare his thinking also with Protestant philosophers and theologians such as Martin Luther and John Calvin. When one takes up Descartes’ pages and then directly compares the typical pages from these other philosophers, the difference comes home more powerfully.

Here we may cite his revolution against scholasticism. He rejected the four causes. He rejected teleology and final causes in nature. He rejected the four elements and argued that matter was only extension. He was against occult qualities, against Pyrrhonism, and against fideism. We must also cite his commitment to and promotion of natural reason, his commitment to and promotion of the progress of science; his demand that all claims to
knowledge must be severely tested; his method of doubt; the founding of his philosophy not on the rock of revelation, theology, or scripture, but on the foundation of his own self as a thinking thing; and of his definition of matter as extension. Finally, we should cite the philosophical and biblical critical radical influence he had on many of Europe’s intelligentsia (Bayle, Spinoza, the latter Enlightenment philosophes, etc.) and the fierce theological condemnations against him from both Roman Catholic and Protestant camps within Christianity (we will take up the very important subject of the influence that Cartesian biblical criticism had in leading to radical conclusions in our chapter on Spinoza).

How do we sum up the question of Descartes being a Christian and precursor to the Radical Enlightenment? There is no black and white, one way or the other, answer. He was both. He was no doubt a Christian, but he was also probably what the devout would call a worldly or lukewarm Christian. As such his philosophy was partly against and partly for some Radical Enlightenment ideals. In the long run though, I think the overall evidence points to the position that he was far more a precursor to the Radical Enlightenment than against it. There is one more very powerful argument to make for this. In our Spinoza chapter we will see that Descartes’ influence led to some Cartesian biblical criticism that that eventually greatly contributed to Radical Enlightenment destructive criticism against the traditional belief that the Bible is the Word of God. I concentrate on the issue of Cartesian biblical criticism for two reasons: one, because it is hardly known, and two, because it had a far greater impact on radical thinking than is commonly given credit for. As Richard Popkin hyperbolically expresses it: “the warfare between religion and science was not the consequence of the development of the new physics and the astronomy of the
seventeenth century, nor of its mechanistic formulation but, rather, of the application of some of the features of the new science to Bible criticism.”

But before we go to our Spinoza chapter, we have to first fulfill our promise to tell the story of Leibniz’s criticism of Descartes and of some of the respects in which Leibniz was not a precursor to the Radical Enlightenment.

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Chapter Ten

Some Respects in which Leibniz was Not a Precursor to the Radical Enlightenment

“Jesus Christ has revealed to men the mystery and admirable laws of the kingdom of heaven and the greatness of the supreme happiness that God prepares for those who love him” – Gottfried Leibniz

Introduction and problematic

The following chapter offers only a partial account of the question of Leibniz’s relation to the Radical Enlightenment. One can only do so much with Leibniz in any essay – or tome! – because he wrote and accomplished so much. This essay only looks at Leibniz’s relation to the Radical Enlightenment in terms of his Christianity (e.g. his defense of and promotion of a Christian view of things rather than the Radical Enlightenment’s atheistic or anti-Christian view of things). As a result, we do not take up his many contributions in the sciences along with his many other achievements that have advanced the cause of Enlightenment and

471 Gottfried Leibniz. G. W. Leibniz: Philosophical Essays, edited and translated by Roger Ariew and Daniel Garber (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1989), 68. This passage is taken from the final, culminating section in Leibniz’s classic 1686 Discourse on Metaphysics. The phrase about the supreme happiness “that God prepares for those who love him” comes from Romans 8:28: “And we know that all things work together for good to them that love God.” This is educated speculation based on Leibniz’s thorough knowledge of the scriptures and theology, but I believe that passages like this verse may have impressed Leibniz a great deal because they provide the scriptural warrant that underpins his famous metaphysical formula that “this is the best of all possible worlds.” Nevertheless, in point of theological detail, all things eventually do not work together for good for them that do not love or believe in God.
Radical Enlightenment elements in the world. The following thoughts also represent only some reflections on Leibniz’s theology (which is part and parcel of his philosophy).  

No one knows the full story of Leibniz’s theology simply because all of his theological writings have not yet been made public. Even so, there are so many volumes of Leibniz’s writings that have been translated and made public that it is a daunting task to master them all to decipher from them "The" definitive account of Leibniz’s theology (especially in relation to his philosophy throughout his long life). One can therefore only guesstimate. As Roger Ariew aptly says regarding Leibniz’s prodigious amount of writings: “Leibniz wrote too much.”

Leibniz’s massive amount of writings is not the only challenge facing the scholar wishing to know Leibniz’s theological views and how they fit in (or do not fit in) with his philosophy. In actuality, as scholars such as Roger Ariew and Daniel Garber have come to learn, Leibniz altered, revised, changed, edited, and improved his views on many issues many times throughout his life. Not only is this so, but much of what he wrote he did not publish. What interpretive rule should we follow then in the face of these contextual realities? Do we privilege his published over his unpublished writings – or vice versa? Do we privilege his later writings over his earlier writings? The truth is this: there are many Leibniz’s. He is chameleon. Since this is the case, a good approach to making claims about Leibniz’s position on many things, is to keep in mind when he took said position and if he published it. Still, this approach is also no panacea.

472 Unfortunately, in this study we will not be able to go into any great detail on any of his works, including some that are important to understanding his overall philosophy. For instance, a great deal of recent important work (as of the fall of 2010) has been done on his only theological work that he published (the Theodicy). Various Leibniz scholars think other works of Leibniz are even more important than the Theodicy to know Leibniz’s richer views on theology. We will not be able to look in detail on these works either. Our purpose in this selective rendering of Leibniz is to summarize our view of Leibniz from the results of our investigation.
Another challenge to determining the extent of Leibniz’s theological orthodoxy has to do with the mind-boggling difficulty in understanding some of his more arcane writings – such as, preeminently, his *Monadology*. The details on how his metaphysics, physics and philosophy of mind blend and work in concert with some rendition of orthodox Christian theology are outside my pay grade. This chapter therefore claims no expertise in these aspects of Leibniz.

One further serious challenge: the problem of his sincerity. The problem of sincerity is one of the staple occupational hazards that early modern scholars of philosophy have to struggle with (this challenge is operative in Descartes, Hobbes, Spinoza, Bayle, and the list goes on). How do we know that what Leibniz wrote (at various times and places in the context of his personal career ambitions and geo-political changes) was what he personally believed. We have not only to deal with a time in history in Europe which in a lot of respects was like being in communist Russia during the 20th century, but we also have to deal with the fact that through most of his life Leibniz was a public servant. He worked for the government. He not only had to watch his step with the ecclesiastical powers of the time; he had to also watch his step with the political powers of the time – including his employers.

My focus in this chapter is on Leibniz not as politician, not as physicist, not as logician or mathematician, but on Leibniz as anti-Radical Enlightenment, Leibniz as theologian, Leibniz as Christian, Leibniz as Bible-believer and Bible-follower (at least according to what he has written as perhaps opposed (or not opposed) to his personal

473 Leibniz scholar Gregory Brown, for instance, argues that Leibniz was far from an orthodox or conservative Christian. According to Brown (to take one key plank in the orthodox platform) Leibniz rejected miracles. See his “Miracles in the Best of All Possible Worlds: Leibniz’s Dilemma and Leibniz’s Razor” (*History of Philosophy Quarterly*, Vol. 12, Number 1, January 1995). If this position is true, then much of what Leibniz wrote that were apparently of an orthodox nature, were not. If this position on miracles is true, it will also have many ramifications on several other theological issues such as transubstantiation. As we will show in this section though, other Leibniz scholars such as Maria Antognazza disagree with this wholesale denial of Leibniz’s sincerity as a Christian.
beliefs). And this is just as well because there has not been much written on this subject (though in the last decade this has begun to change). The scarcity of interest on this subject is due to several factors, I think: it is due partly, I suspect, because scholars don’t have all of Leibniz’s theological writings yet; partly because it’s hard to decipher Leibniz’s genuine theology from the writings that we do have; and partly because theological issues are not as important to contemporary philosophers. After all, the profession of philosophy is philosophy and not theology, right? The two are utterly different and they’re not supposed to be mixed, right? Therefore, there has been a definite tendency to gloss over the theological stuff. In my opinion, this might even be reflected in what the editors and translators of Leibniz’s manuscripts at the Berlin Academy of Sciences (who alone possess all of Leibniz’s manuscripts) have thus far chosen to publish. They chose to translate and publish many volumes of his political writings, many volumes of his mathematical writings, many volumes on his historical and linguistic writings, and many of his philosophical writings. But there is as yet no volume devoted to his theological writings.

Robert Adams’ 1994 essay “Leibniz’s Examination of the Christian Religion” makes similar observations. He asks, for instance, how many philosophy graduate students know that Leibniz “wrote a complete treatise of systematic theology” a hundred pages long around the same time he wrote the Discourse on Metaphysics. Leibniz’s contemporaries didn’t know about it. Neither did any 18th century thinker. It wasn’t published until the 19th century. That means that Wolff, Kant, and so on were not privy to it. But it still has not received much attention. “The twentieth century has paid little attention to it, no doubt in part because many of our century’s Leibniz scholars have not been interested in questions of Christian theology.”474

474 Robert Adams’, op. cited, 517.
As a result of the dearth of Leibniz's theological works that have not been translated or published yet, anthologies of Leibniz’s writings deal mostly with other subjects. Thus, for example, in Loemker’s and Ariew-Garber’s English editions of Leibniz’s philosophical writings, most of Leibniz’s specifically theological writings are naturally precluded. And yet there’s a good deal more theological-biblical-Christian aspects in Leibniz’s philosophy than some have yet to fully appreciate. And some of these aspects determine some of his philosophy. 475

Maria Rosa Antognazza raises all these same issues and problems in her excellent recent work, *Leibniz on the Trinity and the Incarnation*.

The first and most immediately apparent characteristic of Leibniz’s writings on revealed theology is that they are very numerous and extremely fragmentary. In itself, this is not unusual: Leibniz scholars have come to realize that the full scope of his thinking on any issue can only be reconstructed by relating his major statements to far larger collections of more fragmentary texts. But the case of revealed theology is nevertheless exceptional. In part this is because a major, mature, and synoptic statement is lacking, around which the minor writings could readily be grouped. While key aspects of Leibniz’s natural theology are expounded in the *Theodicy* ... nothing strictly similar pulls together his key reflections on revealed theology. This imbalance alone has doubtless contributed to the preconception in the minds of some students of Leibniz that he is a deist rather that a theist; and in an age of increasing secularization, Leibniz’s reputation as a hard rationalist further distracted serious and sustained attention from his scattered reflections on revealed theology. Perhaps in consequence, in the definitive, ongoing edition of his complete works being produced by the Academy of Sciences, which he founded in Berlin, no separate series has been devoted to theological writings, which the diligent student must therefore hunt down and abstract from collections of material on other subjects before even becoming fully aware of their numerical extent, thematic range, technical sophistication, and substantial consistency.476

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475 Robert Adams’ 1994 essay “Leibniz’s Examination of the Christian Religion” makes similar observations. For instance, he asks how many philosophy graduate students know that Leibniz “wrote a complete treatise of systematic theology” a hundred pages long around the same time he wrote the *Discourse on Metaphysics* (517). Leibniz’s contemporaries didn’t know about it. Neither did any 18th century thinker. It wasn’t published until the 19th century. That means that Wolffe, Kant, and so on were not privy to it. But it still has not received much attention. “The twentieth century has paid little attention to it, no doubt in part because many of our century's Leibniz scholars have not been interested in questions of Christian theology” (ibid).

It is true that Descartes, Spinoza, and contemporary philosophers separated philosophy from theology, but Leibniz didn’t.\textsuperscript{477} Leibniz differed from many of his New Philosophy contemporaries. He not only didn’t think that scholasticism should be completely jettisoned, he also didn’t think that theology should always be precluded from philosophy and science either. Many of the most serious controversies of his day (the 17\textsuperscript{th} century) were theological. Worrisome controversies over the Eucharist, the incarnation, the trinity, and scores of other theological issues were among the most serious intellectual problems of the day. And many of these problems not only solicited the attention of most philosophers, but they were treated philosophically (in varying degrees), as well. Take only the Trinitarian controversy as an example.

Although theological in origin, these Trinitarian debates were interwoven with many philosophical problems, such as the relationship between reason and revelation, knowledge and faith; the issue of the limits of human understanding, of the degrees of knowledge, and of the epistemological status of belief; the question of the scope and validity of the principle of noncontradiction; the reflection on the role and meaning of analogy; the inquiry into the concepts of ‘nature,’ ‘substance’, and ‘person’; and the theory of relations ... Indeed, Leibniz’s active participation in theological debates repeatedly compelled him to reflect on problems fundamental to his own philosophy. \textsuperscript{478}

Indeed, Leibniz believed that he had come up with a set of solid metaphysical principles that could found, or at least give some philosophical justification to some of the essential Christian theological dogmas. As Robert Sleigh puts it:

\textsuperscript{477} Leibniz didn’t separate philosophy from theology as much as philosophers like Descartes and Spinoza. Still, Leibniz well-understood the value of separating the two as an exceedingly powerful tool to do as much work based on our own God-given reason as possible. And, in fact, Leibniz himself did a great deal of philosophy and science from this perspective. But, in the final analysis, theology and special revelation should be believed as God’s way of guiding and constraining what our natural reason cannot attain to. Because of beliefs such as this Leibniz felt that the New Philosophy’s tendency to banish final causes and teleology was therefore unacceptable. See below for further details on the way Leibniz, as opposed to the scholastics, defended and utilized the scholastic theology-philosophy (of substantial forms, teleology, revelation, and final causes). I make it a point here to add revelation in this list here because it is often overlooked that part and parcel of scholasticism was the inclusion (and not the separation) of revelation and theology in their philosophizing.

\textsuperscript{478} Ibid. xiii.
Leibniz believed that his metaphysical system provided a structure acceptable to all Christian intellectuals of good will and sound reason, within which the leading issues of philosophical theology could be given a sharp formulation, and, at least in some cases, adequately resolved.\(^{479}\)

Now that we have delineated a few of the problematic issues involved in our subject, let us see what positions Leibniz took with respect to some theological-philosophical issues. Our modus operandi will be to focus on some examples to show some respects in which Leibniz should \textit{not} be considered as a precursor to the Radical Enlightenment.

Some respects in which Leibniz was \textit{not} a precursor (according to Antognazza)

There are \textit{many} respects in which we can argue that Leibniz was not a precursor to the Radical Enlightenment. In this section we will mention a couple of them from the specialized work that Antognazza has done on this subject (which doesn’t go over the usual translated Leibniz material).\(^{480}\)

To begin then, let us take Leibniz’s \textit{Demonstrationes Catholicae Conspectus}\(^{481}\). Maria Antognazza sees this work as important in determining Leibniz’s general theological position. If I’m reading her rightly, she argues that Leibniz’s plan of the \textit{Demonstrationes}


\(^{480}\)All the while, though (besides some of Leibniz’s key writings that deal more directly on theological issues), I also have other works in mind such as: Robert Adams’ “Leibniz’s Examination of the Christian Religion”, Mogens Laerke’s “Leibniz’s Enlightenment” and “Apology for a Credo Maximum: On Three Basic Rules in Leibniz’s Method of Religious Controversy”, Lloyd Strickland’s “Leibniz on Eternal Punishment” and “Leibniz’s philosophy of purgatory”, Daniel Cook’s “Leibniz and Millenarianism” and “Leibniz and Superstition” and “Leibniz on ‘prophets’, prophecy, and revelation”, and George MacDonald Ross’s, “Leibniz on the Origin of Things”, and “Occultism and Philosophy in the Seventeenth Century.”

\(^{481}\)Though an early work of Leibniz (composed around 1668-1669), Antognazza takes it very serious as a strong indication of positions that Leibniz continued to hold.
That Leibniz was serious about theology (and, as this book will try to show, the theology of the Trinity in particular) is immediately obvious to anyone who reads Leibniz’s work without the distorting lens of modern priorities. A warning against hasty conclusions tending to underestimate the presence of an authentic theological-religious interest in Leibniz comes from the philosopher himself. In a curious letter probably dating from the autumn of 1679, Leibniz speaks of a person he met in Paris; in actuality, this person, who studied and successfully practiced the human, and legal sciences, and went to Paris to improve his knowledge of mathematics, is Leibniz himself. Concluding his self-description, Leibniz writes: “I discovered him one day reading some books of controversies, and I expressed my astonishment, having been led to believe he was a professional mathematician because he had done practically nothing else in Paris. It was then that he told me a big mistake had been made, that he had quite other views, and that his main meditations concerned Theology. He said that he had applied himself to mathematics as if it were Scholastic philosophy, that is, only for the perfection of his spirit and to learn the art of invention and demonstration.”

Say what you want about Leibniz’s moderateness in the Enlightenment, he still nevertheless was not so moderate or liberal that he would let anti-Trinitarian Socinianism, deism, and so many other unorthodox theologies and philosophies slide. He attacked these for most of his 50 year career. “Leibniz’s commitment to combating Socinianism, which began in his early period, never waned.”

In a letter in January of 1684, explaining why he does not want to convert from Lutheranism to Catholicism, Leibniz states: “There are some philosophical opinions, for which I believe I have a demonstration, and which it would be impossible for me to change in my present state of mind.” He follows this letter with another saying, “I can assure you

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483 Antognazza, op. cited, 5-6.
484 Ibid. pp. 11.
485 Adams (op. cited) says that Leibniz was “a lifelong member of the Lutheran Church” (517). I’m reminded of another correspondent who zealously tried to convert Leibniz to Roman Catholicism (with dire eternal warnings, too) – Arnauld. He also did not succeed. Yet there was no question in this correspondence that Leibniz was not sincere or a deist or even liberal.
that the philosophical doubts I mentioned in my previous letter hold nothing against the Mysteries of Christianity such as the Trinity, the Incarnation, the Eucharist, and the resurrection of bodies. I do think these things are possible, and since God has revealed them I hold them to be true.”

It would appear from this statement to Landraf Ernst von Hessen-Rheinfels that Leibniz believes in the central orthodox dogmas of the Christian faith. There might be philosophical room in explaining bodies and then the resurrection of bodies and the Eucharist in a uniquely Leibnizian way, but there is not as much elbow room for also assenting to the Trinity and the Incarnation. If this is so, then Leibniz is more orthodox than many think.

In a brief discourse sent to Duke Johann Friedrich in 1671, Leibniz tells of his plan to write “the Elements of Mind” [Elementa de Mente] to “provide the hypothesis whereby all these phenomena or mysteries of faith can be salvaged, since it is not their truth that can be demonstrated, but their possibility (for, as the truth of the phenomena of nature depends on the senses, so the truth of these depends on revelation: and indeed, the task of justifying Revelation pertains to a separate doctrine to be evinced in the light of the Histories, regarding the Truth of the Christian Religion).”

Leibniz uses the term ‘salvaged’ here. This is a strong word to use. It conjures up an image of traditional Christianity as a ship or house in danger of sinking or burning to the ground – as if it cannot be completely preserved. At this point his mission is to salvage as much as possible of Christianity and the mysteries of the faith, for, in his time, the mysteries of the faith were being attacked, and many were abandoning them. Part of this salvaging mission then was in trying to put the brakes on the New Philosophy movement to banish scholasticism and the ancients with their roots firmly implanted in the metaphysics of

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486 Antognazza 173, endnote #6.  
487 Antognazza 34.
substantial forms, revelation, teleology, and final causes. In his 1686 Discourse on
Metaphysics, Leibniz defends his stand to defend some of the old philosophy: “I know that I
am advancing a great paradox by attempting to rehabilitate the old philosophy in some
fashion and to restore the banished substantial forms to their former place.” But, he
explains, the ancient and scholastic abuse of this doctrine in explaining nature “must not
cause us to reject something whose knowledge is so necessary in metaphysics that, I hold,
without it one cannot properly know the first principles or elevate our minds sufficiently
well to the knowledge of incorporeal natures and the wonders of God.”

So then, there it is: Leibniz felt that his contemporaries should not throw out the
baby with the bathwater, as the expression goes; for some of the scholastic’s metaphysics at
least is still needed in order to preserve the enchantment of God in nature. The
consequence of banishing forms, final causes, and revelation are “dangerous to me”, he says.
Moreover,

And I advise those who have any feelings of piety and even feelings of true
philosophy to keep away from the phrases of certain would-be free thinkers who
say that we see because it happens that we have eyes and not that eyes were made
for seeing. When one seriously holds these opinions ascribing everything to the
necessity of nature or to some chance ... it is difficult to recognize an intelligent
author of nature. For the effect must correspond to the cause. Moreover, it is
unreasonable to introduce a supreme intelligence as orderer of things and then,
instead of using his wisdom, use only the properties of matter to explain the
phenomena.

Leibniz is not advocating the preservation of the whole explanatory scheme of
scholasticism, though. No, his scholasticism is less robust, more detailed, more liberal and
refined, “scholasticism light”, if you will.

I agree that the consideration of these forms serves no purpose in the details of
physics and must not be used to explain particular phenomena. That is where the
Scholastics failed ... believing that they could account for the properties of bodies by

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488 Leibniz, Discourse, op. cited, 43.
489 Ibid. 42.
490 Ibid. 52-53. Such an argument seems to be an attack on major planks (or interpreted
consequences) in the philosophies such as Hobbes, Descartes, and Spinoza.
talking about forms and qualities without taking the trouble to examine their manner of operation. It is as if we were content to say that a clock has a quality of clockness derived from its form without considering in what all of this consists; that would be sufficient for the person who buys the clock, provided that he turns over its care to another.  

But to resume the thread of our discussion on revelation, Leibniz recognizes that “the truth of [the mysteries of faith] depends on revelation.” Because of this, he also recognizes “the task of justifying Revelation.” To accomplish this “pertains to a separate doctrine to be evinced from the light of the Histories, regarding the Truth of the Christian Religion.” I’m not sure what he means by this. It seems to mean that Leibniz hopes that a right knowledge of history (particularly the history of the scriptures) can argue for, or “justify”, the claim that the scriptures are “Revelation” from God. This is written in 1671, a year after the publication of Spinoza’s *Theological-Political Treatise (TTP)*, which argues the very opposite! Work by Edwin Curley and Mogen Laerke’s show that Leibniz did in fact read the *TTP* in 1670 or 1671. If this is so, then Leibniz may have written the passage above hoping for a historical antidote to Spinoza’s views, which argues that history undermines and refutes the claim that they are inspired or revelation from God.

Antognazza’s *Leibniz on the Trinity and the Incarnation* delineates many other arguments that can be cited as evidence that Leibniz was not an abettor or precursor to the Radical Enlightenment’s warfare against Christianity. Her book also makes it clear that Leibniz was more conservative in faith than many are aware of.

491 Idid. 42.
Leibniz not a precursor, but a staunch defender of Christianity (based on his many defenses of Christianity and his attacks against all perceived serious threats to Christianity)

Another powerful argument to show Leibniz as defender of the faith and not precursor to the Radical Enlightenment was his consistent attacks against any thinkers whose works were perceived as dangerous to, or deviations from, the faith. He was consistent in this throughout most of his career (except the one short period in which he almost fell into the clutches of Spinozism). Up until his last years, Leibniz railed against Hobbes and Spinoza, for instance. As we will see, he also railed against Descartes.

In a 1669 essay in the Catholic Demonstrations, under the title “The Confession of Nature Against Atheists” and “That Corporeal Phenomena Cannot Be Explained without an Incorporeal Principle, That is God”, Leibniz makes the following very important statement. I say it is important because it shows very clearly that Leibniz sensed the new age that was developing and the two primary causes of it. He knew it to be an age of enlightenment, but he also saw in it the seeds of a radical enlightenment. And it is patently clear from this passage that Leibniz did not like this radical enlightenment. In an earlier chapter, we laid down some arguments on how the New Philosophy, the Scientific Revolution, and the biblical critical revolution should be seen as precursors to the Radical Enlightenment. In this passage we see that Leibniz himself agrees. He considered them the chief causes that lead to atheism (or the “Radical Enlightenment” using our language). At the end of this

493 17th century passages such as this confirm or support the contention of Enlightenment historians that this period of time in Europe was indeed something new under the sun and is thus deserving of a special historiographical term. I’m curious to know how relativizing historians (whose professional lives seem to be largely taken up with blurring the periodization lines of previous historians) would respond to this passage. This passage also supports or confirms the thesis of Jonathan Israel and others who argue that the Scientific Revolution (and New Philosophy) and biblical textual revolution are the great precursors and causes of the Radical Enlightenment. Do you want a quick and easy explanation of two of the primary precursors and causes of the Radical Enlightenment? Here it is.
passage he singles out Hobbes and Spinoza (?) as being the major culprits behind this evil cabal.494

For through the admirable improvement of mathematics and the approaches which chemistry and anatomy have opened into the nature of things, it has become apparent that mechanical explanations – reasons from the figure and motions of bodies, as it were – can be given for most of the things which the ancients referred only to the Creator or to some kind (I know not what) of incorporeal forms. The result was that truly capable men for the first time began to try to save or to explain natural phenomena, or those which appear in bodies, without assuming God or taking him into their reasoning. Then, after their attempt had met with some little success, though before they arrived at foundations and principles, they proclaimed, as if rejoicing prematurely at their security, that they could find neither God nor the immortality of the soul by natural reason, but that in these matters faith must rest either on civil laws or on historical records. This was the judgment of the most acute Mr. Hobbes, whose great discoveries should earn for him our silence on this matter if his authority had not explicitly affected this view for the worse. Unfortunately there are others who have gone even further and who now doubt the authority of the sacred scriptures and the truth of history and the historical record, thus bringing an unconcealed atheism into the world.495

494 In essence, this passage also seems to support or confirm Jonathan Israel’s (and others) Enlightenment historiography that argues that Hobbes and especially Spinoza (or destructive biblical criticism) are the backbone of the Radical Enlightenment.

495 Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz. Philosophical Papers and Letters, translated and edited by Leroy E. Loemker, 2nd ed. (Dordrecht-Holland: D. Reidel Publishing Company, 1970), 109-110. Note Leibniz’s treatment of Hobbes and what appears to be Spinoza. (Leibniz does not explicitly state Spinoza; but it looks like Spinoza is the one he is referring to. It is true that there were other works that cast doubt on traditional views of the Scripture; but none so much as Spinoza’s TTP, which seems mostly likely to fit Leibniz’s description of “an unconcealed atheism.” At this time, Leibniz wouldn’t have known that Spinoza was the author of the TTP because Spinoza did not append his name to the work. One final comment: Though the TTP is usually understood to have been published in 1670, in actuality it was published in late 1669.) Leibniz disregards all the language of faith and piety that one can find in Hobbes’ and Spinoza’s (?) writings (which even some contemporary scholars (ex. Martinich for Hobbes and Verbeek for Spinoza) use to argue that they were not atheists but only unorthodox believers). I assume from this passage that Leibniz doesn’t believe in their sincerity, but judges their claims about God and the soul and other seemingly orthodox positions to be a fraud. More, for Leibniz, their “atheism” is so obvious that it is presented unconcealed - “thus bringing in an unconcealed atheism into the world.” Note also that this passage entails or strongly implies that Leibniz believed in “the authority of the sacred scriptures and the truth of history and the historical record.” I take this to mean that he accepted (at least as of 1669) the genesis and chronology of the earth, humans and animals that the Bible’s “history” presents. His later geological work, the Protogaea, however, will show some differences from his apparently earlier strict orthodox position. In fact, the Protogaea sometimes explains the forces of nature in a way that he criticizes in the above quote – that is, of explaining natural phenomena in largely naturalistic and not theological terms. On the one hand, I would take such a difference in approach to be a sign that Leibniz’s faith had weakened as he matured. Indeed, some Leibniz scholars such as Robert Adams have suggested this. Yet, on the other hand, there are late works by Leibniz that seem just as theologically conservative (at least on some points of theology) as his earlier ones.
Leibniz argued against even perceived unorthodoxies in fellow Christian philosophers

A year before his death, he even fights fellow Christians against their threats to natural religion. In his correspondence with Clark via the Royal Highness of Wales, he begins his letter complaining about the materialism in England. “Natural religion itself seems to decay [in England] very much. Many will have human souls to be material; others make God himself a corporeal being.” Leibniz no doubt has materialists such as Hobbes in mind here. But he goes on to complain about Locke and then Sir Isaac Newton himself. Of Locke he says: “Mr. Locke and his followers are uncertain at least whether the soul is not material and naturally perishable.” And of Newton he makes several charges, two will be listed here. Both have to do with the presentation of a physics in which God’s workmanship seems to be impugned. Leibniz won’t have that. He must defend the glory of God. He must declare His perfections against all slanders to the divine greatness. He first takes Newton’s concept of space to task: Newton “says that space is an organ which God makes use of to perceive things by.” Secondly,

According to [Newton and his followers’] doctrine, God Almighty needs to wind up his watch from time to time, otherwise it would cease to move. He did not, it seems, have sufficient foresight to make it a perpetual motion. No, the machine of God’s making is so imperfect, according to these gentlemen, that he is obliged to clean it now and then and by an extraordinary concourse, and even to mend it, as a clockmaker mends his work; he must consequently be so much the more unskillful a workman as he is more often obliged to mend his work and to set it right.

Whoever thinks such things “must necessarily have a very mean notion of the wisdom and power of God.” Leibniz cares very much to defend not only the existence of God and the immortality of the soul with reward and punishment in the after world, he

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497 Ibid.
498 Ibid.
499 Ibid.
cares very much to exalt the wisdom and power and perfections of God. Any major theologian or philosopher whose works seem to diminish these, he will take up the cudgels against them. Thus he also takes up the Cause against the great Descartes.

Leibniz also shows his anti-Radical Enlightenment stance in his attacks against aspects of Descartes' philosophy that, according to Leibniz, leads to un-Christian theological results – such as, the view of the immortal soul without personality and a view of God devoid of his biblical role of judge, punisher, and rewarder of humankind. In our Descartes chapter under the section “Descartes as Enlightenment revolutionary supported by many testimonies of his contemporaries up to the high Enlightenment”, we promised to add Leibniz’s criticisms of Descartes. This we will do now. We will see that even geniuses and moderate enlightenment voices had fierce words against Cartesianism because of its perceived degenerate influence against Christianity.

**Leibniz’s God Versus Descartes’ God**

“Since you want me to frankly tell you my thoughts on Cartesianism, I will hide nothing from you that I think, at least nothing that can be stated briefly; and I will make no claims without giving or being able to give a reason for them … Descartes’s God, or perfect being, is not a God like the one we imagine or hope for, that is, a God just and wise, doing everything possible for the good of creatures. Rather Descartes’ God is something approaching the God of Spinoza … a God like Descartes’s allows us no consolation….it is impossible to believe that this God cares for intelligent creatures….That is why, in order to satisfy the hopes of humankind, we must prove that the God who governs all is wise and just” -- Leibniz

**Introduction: Problematic**

How can Leibniz say all these things (in the epigraph above) against Descartes’ God?

Did not Descartes write the epoch-making work *Meditations on First Philosophy In Which*

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The Existence of God And The Distinction of the Soul from the Body Are Demonstrated? And wasn’t the purpose of this great work the “righteous cause” of demonstrating the truth of the existence of God and the immortality of the human soul “by the aid of philosophy rather than of theology” in order to persuade unbelievers and thus leave all “without excuse”?\textsuperscript{501} Isn’t he only following the Church’s admonition of the Lateran Council (as Leibniz did) that “enjoined Christian philosophers to refute [atheist’s] arguments”?\textsuperscript{502} Descartes offered this testimony to his work: It is to “the glory of God to which all this is referred.”\textsuperscript{503} And again, at the end of his \textit{Principles of Philosophy}: “recalling my own insignificance, I affirm nothing, but submit all things to the authority of the Catholic Church, and to the judgment of those wiser than myself.”\textsuperscript{504}

Descartes has called thinkers to "lift their minds above sensible things" to meditate long and hard on one’s soul and the ideas which God has implanted therein."\textsuperscript{505} He says that "If you spend long enough time on this meditation, you acquire little by little a very clear, and if I may say so, an intuitive knowledge of intellectual nature in general, the idea of which, considered without limitation, is what represents God for us ... But it is not possible to understand fully what I said afterward about the existence of God if you have not begun in this way."\textsuperscript{506} Descartes claims to corroborate the claim of Holy Scriptures that “What is known of God is manifest in them”, saying “that everything that can be known about God can be shown by reasons drawn exclusively from our own mind.”\textsuperscript{507}

\textsuperscript{502} Ibid. 2.
\textsuperscript{503} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{505} Ibid. 63. This comes from his \textit{Discourse} Part IV #37.
\textsuperscript{506} Ibid. 83, in his letter to Silhon.
\textsuperscript{507} Ibid. 97-98.
Again, how can Leibniz criticize Descartes’ God this severely? For we know, from the study of all Descartes’ works and especially his correspondence and the *Conversations with Burnam*, that he was also personally a believer, a Catholic. We know that his friends didn’t question his faith, but accepted his sincerity. And we know such things as that he had his daughter baptized. He accepted the scriptures as the very words of the Holy Spirit. He therefore also accepted prophecy, miracles, the Virgin birth, transubstantiation of the Eucharist, a 6000 year history of earth (?), Adam and Eve, Noah’s ark, and the rest of scriptural claims. He also accepted the authority of the Pope and Church and submitted to it. He fought against atheists and infidels and sought to serve God, the Pope, and the Church in his writing and philosophy. And he believed that his philosophy grounded Christianity better than all past philosophy, particularly scholastic philosophies. What can be said against a philosopher who writes: “Above all, we should impress on our memory as an infallible rule that what God has revealed to us is incomparably more certain than anything else, and that we ought to submit to divine authority rather than our own judgment even though the light of reason may seem to us to suggest something opposite with the utmost clearness and evidence”?508

*Context: How did Leibniz go from defender of Descartes to severe critic?*

Some problems

Taking Leibniz’s 1679 Letter to Molanus (?) as our jumping off point into Leibniz’s criticisms of Descartes’ God, and, by implication, to what Leibniz’s God is, we must first deal with a few questions to shed light on what led up to this severe criticism. Many issues and questions arise when we ask questions of context and accurate chronology: How well and

508 Ibid. 253, my emphasis.
how accurately did Leibniz know Descartes’ philosophy at this time? When and where did Leibniz derive his opinions, especially since Descartes’ works were put on the Index of Prohibited Books in 1663? Did he receive them second hand from enemies of Cartesianism or from scholastics and neo-scholastics? What writings of Descartes did Leibniz read? Did he have access to all Descartes’ works?

We know from some of Leibniz’s letters on Descartes from 1675 to 1679 that Leibniz “first studied Descartes’s philosophy seriously when he resided in Paris from 1672 to 1676”, yet as late as 1675, in his Letter to Foucher, Leibniz admits that he has still not “been able to read all [Descartes’] writings with all the care I had intended to bring to them.” Professor Ariew mentions that when Descartes was in Paris from 1672 to 1676 that, "He managed to gain access to the unpublished manuscripts of Pascal and Descartes. (In fact, some of Descartes’ papers have survived only through copies Leibniz made of them.)" But here too we don’t know all the details.

Leibniz also confesses that what he does “know of Descartes’s metaphysical and physical meditations is almost entirely derived from reading a number of books, written in a more familiar style, that report his opinions.” What were these books? Did they interpret Descartes correctly? Could they have been part of what caused Leibniz’s criticisms to be so severe? At any rate, he finally concedes, “So perhaps I have not yet understood him well.” Nevertheless, based on “the extent that I have leafed through his works myself,” Leibniz believes that he has received enough of an insight (a “glimpse”, as he calls it) to know “what [Descartes] has not accomplished and not even attempted to accomplish, that is, among

511 Readings, op. cited, 117.
other things, the analysis of all our assumptions.”512 Descartes, I think, would argue with this last point – not to mention the questionability of whether Leibniz himself accomplished a complete analysis of all assumptions (as Kant bore out not too many years hence).

How much did Leibniz really read and take in as he “leafed” through his works, and what works he leafed through, we don’t know. From these passages, it seems fair to say that we should be on our guard as to the accuracy of Leibniz’s criticisms of Descartes because they don’t stem from a scholarly study of the material.

How did Leibniz go from defender of Descartes to severe critic according to contemporary Leibniz scholarship?

Is this apparently accurate account true? Contrary to Leibniz’s self-effacing remarks, contemporary scholarship of Leibniz argues that he knew a good deal more about Descartes’ writings, and the Cartesians, and, finally, what their works led to – the dreaded Spinozism. In fact, Leibniz scholars today know more about this than in any previous generation. We know now, for instance, that Leibniz had access to many of Descartes’ works in Paris from Descartes’ right hand man, Clerselier. We also know a great deal more about Leibniz’s knowledge of Spinoza, which, as we will see, culminated in Leibniz’s change of tone toward Descartes.

To fill in our historical account, then, let us back up and also explain Spinoza’s role in Leibniz’s eventual explosion against Descartes. Before the *TTP* was published, Leibniz only knew Spinoza as the writer of *The Principles of Cartesian Philosophy*. We know from essays such as Edwin Curley’s and Mogens Laerke’s that Leibniz had first read Spinoza’s *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus (TTP)* in 1670 when it was published. Laerke agrees with Paul Verniere’s assessment that “it is not exaggerated to say that during these two years [i.e.

512 Ibid. 117. This has always struck me as hypocritical of Leibniz because he himself failed miserably on this score in relation to his thinking about the scriptures and thus his theology.
1670-71] the publication of the *Tractatus* was for Leibniz the greatest intellectual event in Europe."513

As early as February 1672, Leibniz knew that Spinoza’s *TTP* “develops a critique which is indeed erudite, but also scattered with venom against the very antiquity, authenticity and authority of the sacred writings of the Old Testament.”514 Some time near the end of his time in Paris (probably at the end of 1675 or beginning of 1676), Leibniz read the *Tractatus* again.515 On his way home to Germany, he first visited Henry Oldenburg in London towards the latter part of October 1676. During this eleven day visit, Oldenburg allows Leibniz to see and copy three letters that he had received from Spinoza about the *TTP*. This may be the first time that Leibniz perceives Spinoza’s necessitarianism. He realizes, for instance, that if Spinoza’s necessitarianism is true, “moral philosophy will be destroyed.”516 This then disturbs Leibniz’s philosophical understanding of God Himself and not just issues of biblical interpretation. We know, for instance, that by 1676 Leibniz already had much of his philosophy formed, including his doctrine of pre-established harmony.517 It was also around this time (1675-76) that Leibniz made progress on the ontological argument for the existence of God that he had started working on in 1671.

Leibniz had also been well acquainted with the important exchange of letters between Spinoza and Albert Burgh and Nicolas Steno, but he didn’t think that vituperation was the best way to respond to Spinoza. For Leibniz, Spinoza could only be properly refuted by a “more erudite and solid than vehement and harsh” response.518

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514 Ibid. 10.
515 Ibid. 4.
516 Ibid. 5.
517 See “The early period to the Discourse on Metaphysics by Mercer and Sleigh, Cambridge Comp. to Leibniz, p. 100.
518 Laerke, op. cited, 5-6.
Spinoza died in 1677 and all his works were published soon afterward in the same year. Leibniz then got all of Spinoza's works. By 1678 Leibniz's own views and philosophy were becoming more settled and assured. By this point Leibniz had a deeper insight into just how threatening to the Christian faith the growing movement of the New Philosophy, Cartesianism, and its apparent offshoot, Spinosism, was becoming. One of the turning points in Leibniz's attitude toward Descartes came probably sometime in 1678 after Leibniz had had time to study Spinoza's *Ethics*. In his notes in that year, Leibniz records his impressions from reading the Appendix at the end of Part I of the *Ethics*. Here it becomes clear to him just what Spinoza represents – everything against his own philosophy and that of Christianity. He reads from Spinoza that “all things have been predetermined by God, not from his free will or absolute pleasure, but from the absolute nature of God, his infinite power”; he reads that it is only ignorance, vanity, prejudice, egoism, and even “blind cupidity and insatiable greed” that humans imagine that nature acts “with an end in view” and “that God directs everything to a fixed end”, that is, that “God has made everything for man's sake.”

But, Spinoza continues, if all things are made for man's sake, then how should the great number of “disasters, such as storms, earthquakes, diseases and so forth” be explained? Man has explained that “these occurred because the gods were angry at the wrongs done to them by men ... And although daily experience cried out against this and showed by any number of examples that blessings and disasters befall the godly and the ungodly alike without discrimination, they did not on that account abandon their ingrained prejudice ... they made it axiomatic that the judgment of the gods is far beyond man's understanding.”

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519 *Readings in Modern Philosophy*, op. cited, 174-5.
520 Ibid. 176.
Toward the end of his Appendix (in the Ethics, Part I), Spinoza replies to critics who argue in the following way: “If everything has followed from the necessity of God’s most perfect nature, why does Nature display so many imperfections, such as rottenness to the point of putridity, nauseating ugliness, confusion, evil, sin, and so on?” Spinoza answers that “the perfection of things should be measured solely from their own nature and power; nor are things more or less perfect to the extent that they please or offend human senses, serve or oppose human interests.”

Similarly, men call “good or bad, healthy or rotten and corrupt” only “according to its effect on them”; but “all the notions whereby the common people are wont to explain Nature are merely modes of imagining, and denote not the nature of any thing but only the constitution of the imagination.” The ignorant say that the human body was fashioned “by divine or supernatural art” instead of natural mechanical principles. God hasn’t created all things in an orderly way, says Spinoza. This projection on reality is really only “attributing human imagination to God.”

These are all superstitions, writes Spinoza, for “Nature has no fixed goal and that all final causes are but figments of the human imagination.” Instead, “all things in Nature proceed from all eternal necessity and with supreme perfection ... for if God acts with an end in view, he must necessarily be seeking something that he lacks.” Thus it is shown that the doctrine of final causes “negates God’s perfections.” Spinoza won’t have it. He won’t have this anthropomorphic God at all. For Spinoza’s man’s flight from himself to “take refuge in the will of God” is only a “sanctuary of ignorance.”

My hypothesis is that facts such as these provide the background and consequent explanation for the change in Leibniz’s tone. Hence the extreme tone in the 1679 Letter.

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521 Ibid. 177-8.
522 Ibid. 177.
By 1678 Leibniz’s command of Descartes seems stronger. He certainly expresses different views about Descartes compared to his 1675 Letter to Foucher. In this letter, Leibniz was partly trying to persuade Foucher, who was an anti-Cartesian and skeptic, of the virtues of Descartes and Cartesianism. In this letter he calls Descartes “the world’s greatest genius” and “when I think of everything Descartes has said that is beautiful and original, I am more astonished with what he has accomplished than with what he has failed to accomplish”; but now, in his 1679 letter he says things that would lead one to think differently. While maintaining that Descartes was a great genius and that the sciences are in debt to him, he nevertheless also says: “Descartes himself had a rather limited mind” and “he discovered nothing useful for the portion of life which falls under the senses, and nothing useful in the practice of the arts. His meditations were either too abstract, as in his metaphysics and his geometry, or too subject to the imagination, as in his principles of natural philosophy.”

In his Letter to Foucher he admits that he had not given as much careful study to all of Descartes’ writings as he wished for, and that, as a result, he might be mistaking some aspects of Descartes. But now, in this 1679 letter, we see a powerful assurance of his knowledge of Descartes: “I will make no claims without giving or being able to give a reason for them”; he tells his correspondent all sorts of things about Cartesians and Descartes, even specifics and examples “of what [Descartes] borrowed from others, what he himself accomplished, and what he left us to accomplish. We shall see in this way whether I speak without knowing what I am talking about.”

Having said this, however, we will see that despite some errors, several of Leibniz’s criticisms of Descartes’ philosophy and God are accurate. The focus of my remarks will be

524 Ibid. 240.
525 Ibid. 241.
on his depiction of Descartes’ God and not on details in his epistemology or philosophy of mind. For one thing, from this same letter, Leibniz claims that there are better ways to “bring us farther along” to demonstrate the existence of God than Descartes’ arguments.\footnote{Reading in Modern Philosophy, eds. Ariew & Watkins, op. cited, 119.}

First, Leibniz does not deny that Descartes has a God. Hence Leibniz’s issue is not against an out-and-out atheist argument. He acknowledges that Descartes has a belief in God and in the immateriality of the soul. His complaint has to do with the kind of God Descartes’ philosophy constructs and some “dangerous” ramifications from this. Leibniz’s complaint is that the God that Descartes’ philosophy constructs is not orthodox enough. It is not anything like the God of Christianity and therefore dangerous. Let me once again quote what Leibniz says:

Descartes’s God, or perfect being, is not a God like the one we imagine or hope for, that is, a God just and wise, doing everything possible for the good of creatures....a God like Descartes’s allows us no consolation....it is impossible to believe that this God cares for intelligent creatures ....That is why, in order to satisfy the hopes of humankind, we must prove that the God who governs all is wise and just.\footnote{Leibniz’s Letter to Molanus (?), ca. 1679, from Readings in Modern Philosophy, eds. Ariew/Watkins, 121.}

It seems to me that Leibniz’s criticisms of Descartes’ God are not directed against the God of Descartes the believer, but against Descartes the philosopher. And indeed, there are just grounds for this because Descartes over and over again in his writings and letters made it clear that he wished to do philosophy and not theology, and that he felt it his duty to see how much philosophy and the natural light of reason can reveal about God and the soul. This position in the philosophy of religion was not unusual or unique. Thomas Aquinas, for instance, also made some strong distinctions between natural philosophy and revealed theology.

I don’t know to what extent Leibniz had his philosopher’s hat on when he wrote this letter, but I do suspect that it expresses his most cherished wishes. Nietzsche once noted
that “every great philosophy so far has been ... the personal confession of its author and a kind of involuntary and unconscious memoir.” 528 I think this is ultimately correct with respect to Leibniz's God and to his teaching that this is the best of all possible worlds, for human beings naturally wish for a Leibnizian Best of all possible worlds – a world in which there are no real accidents; a world in which everything that happens, happens according to the most infinitely wise and good plan; a world in which, ultimately speaking, everything works for the best for everyone and everything.

Philosophical his God may be (as is abundantly made clear by great works such as his Discourse on Metaphysics, Monadology, and, to a lesser extent, his Theodicy); but at bottom, Leibniz's God seems more like the product of “a desire of the heart ... that [he] defends with reasons [he has] sought after the fact.” 529 Of course, Leibniz doesn’t think this. He thinks he has arrived at the first principles about God and knowledge from purely philosophical and metaphysical reasoning, or, to use Leibniz’s words, from precisely following “the thread of meditating.” 530 In fact, Leibniz says that “If [Descartes] had followed precisely what I call the thread of meditating [filum meditandi] I believe that he would have achieved the first philosophy” (that is, like Leibniz’s).

Given the premises of the divine as absolutely perfect for Leibniz, the arguments that he builds from these are powerful and insightful. Indeed, when I first read them (in his Discourse on Metaphysics), I wondered why other theologians and philosophers over the centuries hadn’t come up with this notion earlier. However, it would be a serious injustice to Leibniz’s philosophy of religion if one were to imagine that this focused summary of Leibniz’s relation to Scripture and the Scripture’s God tells the complete story of Leibniz's God. This is particularly the case with respect to his last work, the Monadology. There are

529 Ibid. 12, #5.
530 Readings, Ariew/Watkins, op. cited, 117.
depths and nuances to Leibniz’s thinking about the relation of his doctrine of monads to that of his doctrine of pre-established harmony, and indeed to his philosophy of mind (particularly his prescient thoughts on the soul or mind) that requires far more in-depth analysis than this section can do justice to.

Further respects in which Leibniz was not a precursor

On various theological issues, Leibniz is certainly less fanatical, less Christian, less Pascalian, less Jansenist, less Augustinian, less Calvinistic than his more enthusiastic “fundamentalist” brothers and sisters.\(^{531}\) To take only one concrete example of this, let us take Leibniz’s view of how to regard pagans (such as the ancient Platonists and Stoics) in relation to their virtues and salvation. Instead of wholesale condemning them in the manner of Jesus, Paul, Augustine, Luther, Calvin, and Pascal, Leibniz thinks that they “had excellent views about the virtues.” Because of this more liberal perspective, he says that “Augustine is too severe with them. For not content with having sought perpetual sins in their virtues, which is itself too much, he also considered the precepts of the philosophers as entirely evil, as if they had measured everything bearing the name of virtue by the vanity of praise and by pride.”\(^{532}\) He goes on to say: “But we know they often rightly commended the wise man, not out of hope of reward or fear of punishment, but out of love of virtue, and there is no difference between this love of virtue and that devotion to justice which Augustine teaches and which

\(^{531}\) Like Locke (and of course Hobbes and Spinoza), Leibniz rejected religious enthusiasm and what he calls false mysticism. “Hence you may reject the quietists, false mystics, who deny individuality and action … as if our highest perfection consisted in a kind of passive state, when on the contrary, love and knowledge are operations of the mind and will. Blessedness of the soul does indeed consist in union with God, but we must not think that the soul is absorbed in God, having lost its individuality and activity … for this would be an evil enthusiasm…” (Ibid, Loemker, op. cited, 594).

\(^{532}\) Loemker, op. cited. 593.
he refers to the essential justice, that is, to God himself, in whom is the source of the good and the true.”

Leibniz shows in places like this that he does not follow Luther’s or Paul’s or Augustine’s theology on pagans and non-Christians. The former see pagans and all non-Christians, including Jews as “unregenerate”, “by nature sinful”, “depraved”, “even to the point in which their reason and therefore philosophy are totally corrupt.” Leibniz’s thinking then differs in some respects (but not too radically) also from their teachings about morals or ethics, about human nature, God, Christ, sin, the devil, the world, philosophy, the Holy Spirit, the need for the Holy Spirit to enlighten people about God, the need for the Holy Spirit to regenerate, to un-blind, to save, to give rebirth, to show the truth of scriptures, etc.

Still, while he highly admires and agrees with Plato in some regards, especially because “No ancient philosophy comes closer to Christianity”, he also says that we should “justly censure those who think that Plato is everywhere reconcilable with Christ.” All in all, Leibniz thinks that “the ancients must be excused for denying the beginning of things, or creation, and the resurrection of the body, for these doctrines can be known only by revelation.”

So while Leibniz seems to honor revelation over pagan philosophy here, he nevertheless also seems to deny orthodox Catholic and Protestant theology that stipulates that all who are not in Christ are by nature objects of the wrath of God, and therefore all the Greeks, all the Romans, and all the philosophers, the sages, the wise of this world were on the wide road that leads to destruction and eternal damnation; for he says, “But the ancients must be excused for denying” these various Christian teachings because these teachings can only be known via Christian revelation, and they did not have that. Still, he may only be

533 Ibid. 594.
534 Ibid. 592, my emphasis. This is written in 1707, late in his career, only nine years before his death.
saying that the ancients may be excused “for denying the beginning of things, or creation, and the resurrection of the body” and not excused from the judgment and eternal condemnation.

The statement above would seem to affirm that Leibniz believed in revelation. And that’s a big thing. I take it then that his attitude toward Plato and the Stoics is not the same attitude of the New Testament’s – certainly not of Paul’s toward philosophy and philosophers. This letter is also telling in that I think it shows how and when Leibniz’s philosophical thinking (which is largely derived from Christianity) over-rules, trumps certain orthodox and Reformed theological beliefs (in this case, Reformed, Lutheran, Pauline, Augustinian theology).

So, on the one hand, his philosophy overall is aligned with Christian theology (such as that God is the creator, that He is perfect, that He is good, providence, belief in scripture as revelation, and more); on the other hand, it is not aligned with some elements of the Bible, the New Testament, with Paul’s teachings, with Augustine’s, with Luther’s, with Calvin’s, with Pascal’s, or with Arnauld’s. In this sense then, there are aspects in Leibniz’s philosophy and theology that are both unique. Like Augustine and Pascal, he theologizes-philosophizes his own way. Leibnizian theology (and philosophy) overall then may be considered Christian, yet it is distinct in its own way, for Leibniz does not always tow the Christian conservative line. He also can be unorthodox or, at least un-Calvinistic (for example, as we saw, against the view of the total depravity of man and the doctrine of original sin). This shows a more independent mind. This shows a more courageous man. This shows a serious thinker on theological and philosophical issues. In this sense, then, Leibniz doesn’t always buy the Word of God or Christian theology when it conflicts with his sense of right and wrong and truth. Thus, for Leibniz, he probably didn’t think that most people go to hell.
One can also consider Leibniz as a more moderate Christian in that on the whole
(outside of the way he wrote sometimes wrote about Hobbes, Spinoza, and Descartes),
Leibniz's manner of writing and speaking about other theologians and philosophers and the
differences he has with them is generally much more civil, gracious, and kind then the usual
kind of theological venom displayed by Jesus, Paul, Peter, James, John, Augustine, Tertullian,
Luther, Calvin, some of the Jesuits, Pascal, and many of the bulls of popes. Now this can
be interpreted as 'more Christian' or less. Some devout Christians might aver that he is
more civil, urbane, 'kind', 'friendly', etc. toward heretics and infidels because he is more
worldly and because he is not as God-filled as he should be. Other could argue that being
civil, kind, etc. is what the Christian demeanor in the world should be.

Whatever the case may be here, in some respects Leibniz and Descartes were
certainly not liberal or worldly insofar as they both attacked atheists, infidels, and
movements and philosophies that were not in line with orthodoxy. There's much that we
can say, for instance, about Leibniz's "worldliness" or "liberalness", but we cannot accuse
him of being liberal toward anti-Christian philosophies such as Spinoza's, or toward deists,
Socinians, and many other heterodox theologies and philosophies. He attacked these
throughout his fifty-year career.

Some will perhaps disagree with me, but I take it that simply supporting "a more
Enlightened view" of Christianity is to support a more false view of (original) Christianity,
and therefore, eventually leads to a further undermining of Christianity when more and
more people see the disparities between the traditional-biblical view of Christianity and the
latest, "modern", "Enlightened" view of Christianity.

Working on and supporting the progress of geology, astronomy, biblical criticism, and so on,
along with Christian theology is like Peter working against Paul. I know that this is not how
men like Descartes and Leibniz saw it. But I think that we can conclude in this manner due
to our vantage point – that is to say, in historical hindsight. For we know what the New Philosophy and the Scientific Revolution will lead to – Nietzsche, Mendel, Darwin, Marx, Freud, and to advances in biblical scholarship that completely undermine traditional or orthodox Christianity.

I need to qualify my point above, for while Descartes and Leibniz tried to incorporate and synthesize (or harmonize) the New Philosophy with some kind of orthodox Christian theology, they both recognized that if they did not provide some metaphysical arguments along with their Enlightened philosophies, an atheistic (that is to say, a completely naturalistic) world view could easily ensue. Hence they both worked energetically to provide philosophical bases to buttress their view of nature with God.

For example, Leibniz’s philosophy demands that mechanical philosophy requires God. In 1668 or 1669 in his “Confessio naturae contra atheistas”, Leibniz writes that “corporeal phenomena cannot be explained without an incorporeal principle, that is, God.” Daniel Garber says that “Leibniz argues directly that not only is mechanistic philosophy consistent with theology, but that mechanistic philosophy demands that there is a God.”

But the mechanical philosophy of some of the New Philosophers seems to lead to atheism. As we stated and quoted above, Leibniz understood that there was something new going on under the sun in his time. His 1668 or 1669 “Confessions of Nature Against Atheists,” states the following:

Through the admirable improvement of mathematics and the approaches which chemistry and anatomy have opened into the nature of things, it has become apparent that mechanical explanations – reasons from the figure and motion of bodies, as it were – can be given for most of the things which the ancients referred only to the Creator or to some kind (I know not what) of incorporeal forms. The result was that truly capable men for the first time began to try to save or to explain natural phenomena, or those which appear in bodies, without assuming God or taking him into their reasoning. Then, after their attempt had met with some little success, though before they arrived at foundations and principles, they proclaimed, as if rejoicing prematurely at their security, that they could find neither God nor the

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immortality of the soul by natural reason, but that in these matters faith must rest either on civil laws or on historical records. 536

For Leibniz then, when we go deeper into the mechanical philosophy, and ask how the principles thereof are possible, then we are forced to refer to metaphysical or theological sources. Leibniz concludes then that “through the analysis of bodies, it becomes clear that nature cannot dispense with the help of God”; moreover:

since we have demonstrated that bodies cannot have a determinate figure, quantity, or motion, without assuming an incorporeal being, it readily becomes apparent that this incorporeal being is the one [cause] for all [these phenomena] because of the harmony of things among themselves, especially since bodies don’t derive their motion each from its own but mutually. But no reason can be given why this incorporeal being chooses one magnitude, figure, and motion rather than another, unless he is intelligent and wise with regard to the beauty of things and powerful with regard to their obedience to his command. Therefore such an incorporeal being will be a mind ruling the whole, that is, God.537

Leibniz would not completely jettison the scholastics’ roots in Aristotle. Leibniz is in agreement with Aristotle’s *Metaphysics* when Aristotle says that it “would be inappropriate to relegate so momentous an issue to automatism [mechanism] and chance.”538 Leibniz also seems to mimic Aristotle’s view of science, as the latter expresses it in the opening lines to his *Physics*:

In any subject which has principles, causes, and elements, scientific knowledge and understanding stems from a grasp of these, for we think we know a thing only when we have grasped it first causes and principles and have traced it back to its elements. It obviously follows that if we are to gain scientific knowledge of nature as well, we should begin by trying to decide about its principles.539

536 Loemker, 109-111, op. cited, or Garber, op. cited, 11. This says a lot. It says, first, that there are people (so-called ‘atheists’ and real atheists) who are arguing that God is no longer needed to explain nature or natural phenomena; that nature functions by mechanical laws and hath no need for further, transcendent posits – which reminds one of the story of Laplace’s reply to Napoleon’s question, “Where is God in all this astronomy?” To which Laplace is said to have answered: “Sire, we no longer have need of that hypothesis.”

The New Philosophy, the new science, of Galileo, Descartes, Gassendi, and so on, seemed to show that God was no longer needed to explain the world, that explanations without the use of scripture or theology not only can be used, but, are also actually even more serviceable. This, needless to say, represented science’s great challenge of Christianity in the seventeenth century.

537 Garber, op. cited, 12.


Knowing Leibniz's view of these things then, it should come as no surprise that Leibniz would attack philosophies that denied the first principles he believed were necessary for a true understanding of nature and for the preservation of the true religion.

In this sense then, Leibniz's harsh words about Descartes and Descartes' God often remind me of Pascal harsh words about Descartes and Descartes' God. Pascal railed:

> I cannot forgive Descartes. In all his philosophy he would have been quite willing to dispense with God. But he could not help granting him a flick of the forefinger to start the world in motion; beyond this he has no further need of God.⁵⁴⁰

Descartes proves the existence of God and the distinctness of the soul from the body, and then shows how God orders everything. But, says Leibniz,

> it is unreasonable to introduce a supreme intelligence as orderer of things and then, instead of using his wisdom, uses only the properties of matter to explain the phenomenon. This is as if, in order to account for the conquest of an important place by a great prince, a historian were to claim that it occurred because the small particles of gun powder, set off by the contact of a spark, escaped with sufficient speed to push a hard and heavy body against the walls of the place, while the little particles that make up the brass of the cannon were so firmly interlaced that this speed did not separate them, instead of showing how the foresight of the conqueror enabled him to choose the suitable means and times and how his power overcame all obstacles.⁵⁴¹

Indeed, what Leibniz says here seems to hit the mark. But if Descartes read this, I imagine that he would respond in something like the following way: ‘Through the light of natural philosophical reasoning I established the existence of God and the distinctness of the soul. This is as much as can be proven by natural philosophy. Ultimately, I don’t deny final causes. In fact I believe in them just as much as you do. The difference between us evidently has to do with the fact that I think that the only way to truly explain final causes is by referring to special revelation or theology. I can do this, too; but it has been my aim, as I wrote to the Theological Faculty of the Sorbonne, to follow the urging of the Council of Trent

⁵⁴⁰ Quoted by Peter A. Schouls in his essay “Arnauld and the Modern Mind” in Kremer's Interpreting Arnauld (Toronto: University or Toronto Press, 1996), 43.

to confute the atheists and heretics, and to defend the faith as a philosopher and not as a theologian. As I mentioned in that letter of dedication, if I were to refer to special revelation, as it seem to me that at bottom you do, unbelievers will take me to be begging the question at issue. That is why I don’t. I separate theology from philosophy for the glory of God and not as you have accused me of doing as a ‘clever pretext’.542

Concluding remarks

To my thinking Leibniz was not a precursor to the Radical Enlightenment primarily in those respects in which he was not only a Christian, but also a zealous promoter of Christianity. However, like Descartes’ work, some of Leibniz’s philosophical and scientific work unbeknownst to him, did strengthen the forces of the Enlightenment. I therefore see Leibniz as I see Descartes, namely, as a moderate or somewhat “liberal” Christian whose compromise with rationalism strengthened the Enlightenment movement move away from tradition, orthodoxy, and, eventually, Christianity.

After mulling over Descartes’ and Leibniz’s works (and a lot of scholarly books on their works, including books on the question of their sincerity as Christians) on questions like this for many months, I conclude that in general one can take Descartes at his word; that is, that he genuinely held to the positions that he says he held and for the reasons he says. However, I agree with Leibniz in that he recognized that if enough people followed Descartes’ way of philosophizing, and if enough people accepted his philosophical-scientific non-teleological view of the world, that it could lead people away from the Judaeo-Christian God. The Radical Enlightenment is a proof that he was right.

542 Ibid. 242.
PART V

SPINOZA: APOSTATE, ANTICHRIST543, RADICAL ENLIGHTENER

Chapter Eleven

Historical Context of the “Antichrist”

“Who is the liar? It is the man who denies that Jesus is the Christ. Such a man is the antichrist – he denies the Father and the Son. No one who denies the Son has the Father, whoever acknowledges the Son has the Father also…. I am writing these things to you about those who are trying to lead you astray… Dear friends, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God, because many false prophets have gone out into the world. This is how you can recognize the Spirit of God: Every spirit that acknowledges that Jesus Christ is come in the flesh is from God, but every spirit that does not acknowledge Jesus is not from God. This is the spirit of the antichrist” – St. John, “the beloved disciple” (1 Jn. 2-4)544

543 My title is somewhat reminiscent of Walter Kaufman’s study of Friedrich Nietzsche which he entitled Nietzsche: Philosopher, Psychologist, Antichrist. Substituting Nietzsche for Spinoza, this would also be an apt title for this chapter. Spinoza was an apostate to both his Jewish and Christian critics. Christians often referred to him as “the apostate Jew.” But, even more seriously, his Christian critics also saw him as the “antichrist.” They didn’t literally mean that they thought that Spinoza was the antichrist, that is, the New Testament end times antichrist or “beast” modeled on various passages from the Jewish Bible and then developed into a full-blown eschatology in the New Testament. According to various theologians and Bible scholars, New Testament passages such as 2 Thessalonians 2:7-8 and chapters from the book of Revelation (such as 13, 17, 19) tell the story that “the” antichrist is Satan’s incarnation in the world to “lead the whole world astray.” He will produce wondrous miracles in full view of all the eyes of mankind. And many will be deceived by him. And then the end will come. The “antichrist” that Spinoza’s accusers meant when they used the term is what it means in Koine Greek, that is, against, opposite of, in place of, Christ or Messiah. Thus, in its wider sense, “antichrist” is anyone who does not accept the incarnation of God as the man Jesus (this is how the epistles of John put it. See epigraph of chapter above). One last important point on this subject: Spinoza was a Jew, and Jews don’t believe in Jesus Christ. They reject the Christian Christ. In this sense, according to the Christian perspective, Spinoza and all Jews are anti-Christ or anti-Christian. But for Spinoza the epithet “antichrist” carries far more seriousness to his accusers because his works attack all the central presuppositions of Holy Scripture and biblical theology. To undermine the Jewish scriptures is to also undermine Christ and Christianity because Christ and Christianity are absolutely and irrevocably dependent on Moses and the prophets. In this sense, Spinoza is antichristian. But to the Jew he is an apostate. For the meaning of “apostate” and “apostasy”, see next chapter under “Apostasy.”

544 Spinoza was a master of the Jewish scriptures; not so with the New Testament however, at least in my opinion. In his in-depth analysis of the Torah and the prophets in his Theological-Political Treatise (TTP), he demonstrates that the traditional-orthodox interpretations of authorship and dating of most of the books of the Bible are erroneous. But when he gets to the New Testament, in-depth analysis falls off. Had he subjected the books of the New Testament with the same detailed study and vast erudition as he did the Jewish Bible, he may have discovered that the epistle of John, like the Pentateuch, was not written by the authors traditionalists have claimed (more on this later in
“Lastly, to open my mind [to you] more clearly ..., I say, that it is not entirely necessary to salvation to know Christ according to the flesh... For the rest, as to the doctrine which certain Churches add to these, namely that God assumed human nature, I expressly warned them that I do not understand what they say. Indeed, to confess the truth, they seem to me to speak no less absurdly than if some one were to tell me that a circle assumed the nature of a square” – Benedict Spinoza

Introduction: historical background and context of “the antichrist”

We finally arrive at the finale of our study. We are come now to “the antichrist”, “the devil”, “Beelzebub”, “the great apostate.” These are only some of the ferocious theological denunciations conservative Jews and Christians (or the Counter-Enlightenment) used to demonize Benedict Spinoza. Here the Radical Enlightenment and the Counter-Enlightenment meet head on. But before we proceed, a few words are in order about what this chapter will focus on and then a quick recapitulation over the ground we have covered to provide background to put our philosopher, and the Radical Enlightenment he helped to spawn, in context.

Our focus: There are many aspects of Spinoza’s philosophy. This chapter does not aim to give an exhaustive analysis of his epistemology, philosophy of government,
philosophy of mind, or metaphysics. In keeping with the focus and aim of this dissertation, we continue our investigation about some aspects of what some have seen as a warfare between philosophy (or reason) and faith in revelation. We will therefore give special attention to major aspects in Spinoza’s writings (especially his *TTP* and *Ethics*) that reveal his attitude and arguments against revelation, prophecy, miracles, spiritual enlightenment, the scriptures, Moses, the prophets, Jesus, the apostles – that is, against Judaism and Christianity. And indeed, this is not something out of the way or of minor or merely scholarly interest. Nor is it out of keeping with what his contemporaries (as opposed to later generations) were most exercised by. On the contrary, questions about God, the scriptures, and theology inform, either explicitly or implicitly, much of his work. This is simply a fact.

There are multitudes of studies about Spinoza on most things under the sun - his metaphysics, his work on Descartes, and so on and so on. But, strangely, there is no exhaustive work (that I have found) that offers a full commentary on how many of Spinoza’s philosophical doctrines are anti-theological; nor is there any full commentary on Spinoza’s biblical exegesis. We will be studying his philosophy of religion, which is not only just as

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547 In the Preface to his *Theological-Political Treatise*, the Appendix of Part I of his *Ethics*, and in many of his letters, Spinoza not only delineates his philosophy of religion toward Judaism and Christianity, but actually formulates a full blown general theory of the origin and development of religion. Spinoza argues that “Numerous examples of [his theory that fear and hope are the springs of all religion] can be cited, illustrating quite clearly the fact that only while fear persists do men fall prey to superstition, that all the objects of spurious reverence have been no more than phantoms, the delusions springing from despondency and timidity…. This being the origin of superstition … like all other instances of hallucination and frenzy, is bound to assume very varied and unstable forms, and that, finally, it is sustained by only by hope, hatred, anger, and deceit. For it arises not from reason but from emotion …” (*TTP*, Shirley trans., 1-2).

548 I’m reminded of Professor Ariew’s chapter “The *Cogito* in the Seventeenth Century” (see his upcoming new edition of *Descartes and the Last Scholastics*). He tells us in the introduction to this chapter that “My contribution to this mass of commentary [on the cogito] takes the form of an investigation of its intellectual context and the criticisms it received by seventeenth-century philosophers. I do so in part for what these can tell us about the seventeenth-century philosophers and in part for what they can reveal about Descartes and the *cogito* itself” (356). I try my hand at this in putting Spinoza’s work in its intellectual and religious context and what most of the criticisms he received were about. See also Wiep van Bunge’s essay “On the Early Dutch Reception of the *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus*” and Stephen Nadler’s “A Book Forged in Hell.”
legitimate as his philosophy of physics, philosophy of mind, etc. but, in the case of Spinoza, of similar if not greater importance. Indeed, as we hope to show in a later section, even his purportedly “purest” philosophical work, the *Ethics*, is in many of its parts largely taken up with arguments that upon analysis shows that biblical theology is ultimately one of his foils.

I take it that many of the central philosophical positions in the history of western philosophy in Christendom (the concept of God as transcendent to the world, God as creator, the notion of some kind of dualism of soul and body, of empirical and spiritual causation, belief in final causes, and so on) are primarily or largely kept alive and inspired by Christian theology. While Galileo argues that we must accommodate our interpretation of scripture to fit with scientific truth (see the Grand Duchess Christina for this), while Descartes argues in part “For the urgency of the cause, as well as the glory of God to which all this is referred” (see his Letter of Dedication to the *Meditations*), while Pascal argues for the truth of the Christian scriptures and salvation in Jesus Christ based on the messianic prophecies that have been fulfilled (see his *Pensées*), Spinoza’s cause, arguments, and proofs are against all these. This is not to deny that his philosophical works don’t speak to specific philosophical issues such as the doctrine of substance, which have a heritage from Greek philosophers such as Plato and Aristotle. Or that he does not take Descartes and his philosophy on as a philosopher. On the contrary. The point I’m trying to make here is that Spinoza also often addresses Jewish and Christian theological concerns that are often the subtext of some of these philosophical arguments.

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549 If we could speak psychologically (which is admittedly abused and speculative), how could Spinoza not deal extensively with biblical theological issues, for he suffered so much from it most of his life. He could not have been unaffected by being despised and rejected by his own, by his horrible excommunication, by the labors of the Jewish rabbis to persuade the leadership of Amsterdam to get rid of him, by the rejection of his whole family, friends, teachers, and community. And then there are the constant accusations in letters to him (and about him) by so many people, the persecution of friends, the imprisonment of friends, and even the memory of the stories of the Inquisition in Spain and Portugal that caused so much grief. All these things, and the intensely religious time in which he lived, all make it natural that these issue would percolate in his writings.
I also treat something here which I have not found written about in all the major books and papers on Spinoza that I have read beyond vague generalities. I have two things in mind here: one, I will show how Spinoza's views directly contradict various central and specific scripture passages and orthodox theological teachings by citing specific central scripture passages and theological teachings that he contradicts; and two, I will provide some justificatory information from the biblical Counter-Enlightenment’s side of things (though I think that much more of both these need to be done in early modern works in order to better understand Spinoza and his world). We only read of general statements such as that the Jewish community or the Calvinists or the Roman Catholics, etc. were hostile against Spinoza, that they called his works “blasphemous”, and so forth. But we don’t often read the specifics or their full arguments, as we do for the “good guys”, the Enlightenment guys. There are long treatises on the nuances of Descartes’ Meditations, of Locke’s Two Treatises on Government, and so on. These scholars rightly go out of their way to situate their authors and explicate the details of their arguments as sympathetically and contextually as possible to help their readers to appreciate where their subjects are coming from. But we rarely get the same treatment for the suspected enemies of the Enlightenment. Of course, most of us know on a vague, general basis that religion and the Bible say some things that might be interpreted by believers to make them hostile to the likes of figures such as Spinoza; but beyond this, in any clear and specific detail, nothing. In this part of my dissertation, I wish to make clearer wherein Spinoza was “blasphemous”, “impious”, “the antichrist”, and so on by citing the biblical and theological texts that his enemies based their arguments on in order to, once again, press the point of how the struggle for the fate of the biblical God was preeminent in this early phase of the Enlightenment.
Background and context: Now that we’ve seen the spiritual Enlightenment’s viewpoint from the perspectives of Greek religion, Judaism, and Christianity in the early chapters of this study, and now that we’ve seen what moderate Enlighteners like Descartes and Leibniz say about theology, what says the Radical Enlightenment to their claims? What saith Spinoza to Descartes, to Leibniz, the Torah and to the New Testament, and indeed to all claims of revelation, inspiration, miracles, prophecy, theological ethics, dreams, visions, and so on? That is what this part of the dissertation will show.

In an early section of this study we showed how the term “Enlightenment” was originally and historically defined by religious writers as “God acting in and shedding light and knowledge in an individual’s soul.” We saw that by the time of Kant’s “An Answer to the Question: ‘What is Enlightenment?’” this term was “hijacked” or utilized by many to argue for either a more sophisticated version of God and the things of God (the moderate enlighteners), the total repudiation of the old God and all theological superstition (the radical enlighteners), or the preservation of orthodoxy come what may (the counter enlighteners). “Enlightenment” then has essentially fallen into three very different camps: one relies on reason and science completely, another on revelation from God completely, and the other on revelation plus reason and science.550

550 Professors Roger Ariew, Theo Verbeek, and Wiep Van Bunge have expressed skepticism about this neat tripartite division, and rightfully so. As usual, real history is a lot messier than what cut-and-dried categories can encompass. For instance, there are some philosophers and theologians in each of these camps that embrace some significant teachings of one of the other camps. What to do with this mixing or blurring of the lines? The categories that historians often use towards their subjects are, like the common use of general terms, set up for ease and simplification of communication. But in the process nuances and important details are often missed. Israel is aware of this issue and does make some qualifications on this model as he goes. He alludes to some of these problems in historiographical type-casting, for instance, in the Preface and Introduction of Radical Enlightenment. But he deals more explicitly and fully with some of these issues in his second volume on the Enlightenment, Enlightenment Contested (see chapter 2 “Historians and the Writing of Intellectual History” and the “Postscript.”) More than this, he also provides details on the differing positions of many philosophers in the course of his works, which provide the nuances as one goes (at least this has been my experience reading and reflecting on his works). This summary presentation of Israel’s views cannot not do justice to all the nuances and qualifications he makes during the course of his works and in the context of many of his claims.
We began our history of the precursors to the Radical Enlightenment with the ancient Greeks by citing passages from Hesiod and Homer (that is, their Bible) and how some philosophers rose up that questioned this Bible with its many claims of revelation, inspiration, prophecy, divine providence, augury and so on. After that we showed how this struggle between the claims of reason and revelation (and vice versa) continued among the Jews from Hellenic times into the New Testament and Christian era up to St. Augustine. From Augustine we summarily went through a thousand years of the medieval period and the scholastics to the Renaissance, the Scientific Revolution, and Galileo. We then entered the early modern period of Descartes, Leibniz, and other luminaries. As we noted in our chapter on defining the Enlightenment, several precursor elements of the Radical Enlightenment were necessary. One chief component was, without a doubt, that “triumph of the mechanical philosophy” wrought by the Scientific Revolution. When John Donne famously wrote “And new philosophy calls all in doubt”, he did “not allude to the latest innovation in logic, metaphysics, or epistemology, but to the Copernican upheavals in astronomy and cosmology and to the Renaissance revivals of ancient atomism.”

Yet it was unquestionably the rise of powerful new philosophic systems, rooted in the scientific advances of the early seventeenth century and especially the mechanistic views of Galileo, which chiefly generated that vast Kulturekampf [culture war] between traditional, theologically sanctioned ideas about Man, God, and the universe and secular, mechanistic conceptions which stood independently of any theological sanction.

In this revolution we noted that Descartes played a considerable role, both in science and in philosophy. But there was another absolutely necessary factor in the development of the Radical Enlightenment, one which (as we referred to in our Descartes

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552 Jonathan Israel. The Radical Enlightenment, 14.
chapter) Descartes and his followers had no small part - one arguably just as momentous as the Scientific Revolution, and that was the revolution in the study and interpretation of the Bible. It is here that philosophers such as Hobbes and Spinoza hold a preeminent place (though their work too had precursors and contemporaries as major influences).  

The Early Enlightenment revolution in biblical criticism from moderate Cartesian to radical Spinozist according to Richard Popkin

"one of the major factors, if not the major one, in the development of modern irreligion [i.e. Radical Enlightenment], was the application of the Cartesian methodology, and the Cartesian standard of true philosophical and scientific knowledge, to the evaluation of religious knowledge. When this was done by certain bold seventeenth-century thinkers, a world shorn of the biblical deity was revealed" – Richard Popkin

The history of the development of biblical criticism in the 17th century is still being worked out. At present there is no all-inclusive account of the subject. Differences of opinion on who influenced who, who was more influential, and so on, are pervasive in the literature. And, with the growth of history of philosophy in the last few decades, more biblical critical writers are being discovered in this period than have hitherto been known or given credit to. My treatment on this subject here is meant only to provide some background and context in order to concentrate on the work of Spinoza. Consequently, this short discussion

553 Unfortunately, because the focus of our study is on Spinoza, we will not be able to delineate all the respects in which Hobbes was a powerful precursor to the Radical Enlightenment. The reader should know therefore that Hobbes’s philosophy and his exquisite humanist biblical criticism is under-reported in this study. The author is currently at work on a fuller treatment of several facets of Hobbes’s philosophical and biblical critical radical enlightenment work, but the results of this research will not be completed until sometime after the current project is finished.

will be cursory with an emphasis on the contributions that Cartesianism made to the development of a more neutral, scientific, and secular study of the Bible.

As was mentioned in our chapter on Descartes, the Cartesians played no small part in the development of the revolution in biblical criticism. Jonathan Israel notes that “the rise of Cartesianism and the New Philosophy also meant that a new philosophically and scientifically grounded criticism was being nurtured, a critique using the techniques of philology but now chiefly concerned with the impartial, systematic study of the arguments and belief structures revealed by ancient texts rather than testimony, dogmatic formulation, rhetorical exercises, usage, and stylistic matters for their own sake” (more on Israel’s interpretation of this subject below).^555

Several Enlightenment historians besides Jonathan Israel have referred to this textual critical revolution. Take the work of historian of philosophy Richard Popkin, for instance. He argues that

Two of the major intellectual developments of the seventeenth century were (1) the launching of ‘the new philosophy’ ... [with Descartes playing a major role], and (2) the unfolding of the theological consequences of a historical and critical approach to the Bible. Modern philosophy issuing from Cartesianism and modern irreligion issuing from Bible criticism became two of the central ingredients in the making of the modern mind, the ‘enlightened’ scientific and rational outlook.^556

Popkin notes that “These two movements, though developing at the same time and often through the activities of the same persons, have rarely been studied as parts of a common intellectual drama” (Ibid). The raison d’etre of this dissertation has been to address this deficit in the literature, especially with regard to the works of the major philosophers of the

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^555 Enlightenment Contested 420-421.
^556 “Cartesianism and Biblical Criticism” in Problems of Cartesianism, edited by Thomas M. Lennon, John M. Nicholas, John W. Davis (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 1982), 61. It must me noted though that neither Descartes nor many or most of his followers were “atheists” or anti-Christians. On the contrary, they thought that Cartesian principles set Christianity on better foundations than Aristotle or Scholasticism. The devout Jansenist theologian and philosopher Antoine Arnauld is an excellent example of this.
period. The centrality of the Bible in the minds of the 17th century philosophers has not been recognized or emphasized enough. And it needs to be, for as Popkin stresses it:

one of the major factors, if not the major one, in the development of modern irreligion [read Radical Enlightenment], was the application of the Cartesian methodology, and the Cartesian standard of true philosophical and scientific knowledge, to the evaluation of religious knowledge. When this was done by certain bold seventeenth-century thinkers, a world shorn of the biblical deity was revealed.557

This rational “evaluation of religious knowledge” and how this eventually led to “a world shorn of the biblical deity” is the central focus of this chapter. Popkin’s research results on this history are fully in accord with Jonathan Israel’s on this point.

Bible criticism, emerging from humanistic studies and Reformation and Counter-Reformation polemics ... kept within an acceptable religious framework, at least until the mid-seventeenth century. Those who were trying to establish a more accurate text of Scripture and a more precise understanding of its meanings through the utilization of historical and critical tools were, as far we know, trying to explicate their own versions of the Judeo-Christian tradition. Prior to Spinoza (or maybe Uriel da Costa and Juan de Prado just before him) we do not know of any Bible critics who were denying that Scripture presents the fundamental message for mankind. The Bible scholars had vehement disagreements, and very often denounced their opponents as heterodox, as atheists, and the like. But, just the same, I think it can be maintained that prior to about 1650 nobody was denying that Scripture contained some special, revealed knowledge about the supernatural dimension of the world, and that this knowledge was essential for comprehending the origin, nature, and destiny of mankind. The interpretations of the nature and content of this knowledge, of course, cover an enormous number of positions, many of which are fundamentally incompatible with one another.

Out of the welter of theological views, a way of discerning the biblical message began to become structured, namely, the historical and critical approach. Its leading figure before Spinoza, from the Catholic Erasmus to the Calvinist Jacques Cappel, pressed the importance of philological and historical information in order to comprehend and interpret Scripture.558

I skip over much of Popkin’s history of the rise of modern biblical scholarship dealing with such figures as La Peyere, John Toland, Pierre Jurieu, Pierre Bayle, and others to focus on the major philosophical stream that influenced Spinoza. Popkin states that Spinoza read La Peyere’s views and that he wrote a long defense of them (which disappeared) shortly before

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557 Ibid.
558 Ibid. 63-64.
his excommunication. He also makes it clear that Spinoza carefully studied Descartes and Cartesianism, and the result of this intensive study was not only Spinoza's *Principles of Descartes' Philosophy* (1666), but much more.

Modern Bible criticism, as outlined by Spinoza, got much of its force and perspective from his use of Cartesian methods and standards and from his extension of Cartesian rationalism to evaluating the biblical framework of interpreting man and his place in the universe. Spinoza's application of these Cartesian elements to Bible studies led him to remove Scripture from the intellectual world ... The revolutionary implications of Spinoza's biblical criticism were immediately apparent... When applied to biblical statements, many of them turn out to be impossible as claims of what God is like. These statements, then, were analyzed by Spinoza in terms of how their occurrence can be accounted for, since they cannot be true on philosophical (i.e. Cartesian) standard.559

This brief account summarizes Popkin's research results. Our next section will cover some of this same territory, only this time from the latest investigations in this area from Jonathan Israel's work. Israel's mammoth studies both confirm and add to Popkin's account.

Jonathan Israel on the role the interpretation of the scriptures played in the Early Enlightenment and how the views of Spinoza (and Hobbes) on biblical exegesis contributed to the Radical Enlightenment

*Israel's interpretation of the place of the Scriptures in the Radical Enlightenment*

We must remember that we're not in Kansas anymore. We're no longer in 21st century semi-secular Europe. We're in a century that in some respects is more like what is still occurring in certain backwaters of Pakistan and Afghanistan. We're in the seventeenth century, a time in which some people are still being burned alive at the stake if they hold to

559 Ibid. 67.
unorthodox religious beliefs. For instance, the same year in which Spinoza’s *Theological-Political Treatise* was published (1670) a man was burnt at the stake for his heterodox theology.\textsuperscript{560} This is still a century in which witches (ex. Salem 1692) and others are still being tried and hanged, and in which many can still not publically say anything too strongly against the reigning religion of one’s country.\textsuperscript{561}

As almost everyone knows, even if only vaguely and on a superficial level, the scriptures arguably played the most important cultural role in European civilization. The scriptures have been considered the very Word of God, that is, *God’s Book*. Hence it has been the foundation and cornerstone of our society for over 1700 years - and still is in many people’s personal lives. The Bible has informed and guided western notions of right and wrong, of reward and punishment, of truth and error, of freedom and censorship, of sin and righteousness, of heaven and hell, and the list goes on and on.

So, since the Bible has been so central to the very essence and being of our culture, if a philosopher were to discover *errors* in it, or some falsehood, and, moreover, learn that the interpretation his world has given to it for the last 1700 years has been utterly wrong, well, such a discovery would throw such a culture into confusion and hand-wringing.\textsuperscript{562} And, as

\textsuperscript{560} See Yirmiyahu Yovel’s *Spinoza and Other Heretics: The Marrano of Reason* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989) for an excellent historical, social, and religious context to the world of Spinoza, including details on Inquisitions, excommunications, and religious executions of the period.

\textsuperscript{561} And these persecutions were not only occurring in the provinces or hinterlands outside the great cities of Europe. See Steven Nadler’s chapter “Rasphuis” in his upcoming (Spring 2011) “*A Book Forged in Hell*: Spinoza’s Scandalous Treatise” on the awful ordeal Spinoza’s friend Adriaan Koerbagh suffered in Europe’s “freest and most liberal” of city and country, Amsterdam and the Netherlands. Such facts must be known in order to get a better feel of the great danger and fear there was for heterodox thinkers. “Spinoza was deeply touched by Koerbagh’s death” (61). I think Nadler is well-aware of this background too because he uses as the epigraph of his book the following excerpt from Spinoza (that seems to reflect such outrages as happened to his friend): “The vilest hypocrites, urged on by that same fury which they call zeal for God’s law, have everywhere prosecuted men whose blameless character and distinguished qualities have excited the hostility of the masses, publically denouncing their beliefs and inflaming the savage crowd’s anger against them. And this shameless license, sheltering under the name of religion, is not easy to suppress.”

\textsuperscript{562} Indeed, Jonathan Israel’s works, especially his *Radical Enlightenment* makes it a point to quote people from every walk of life and in most countries throughout Europe (and in his 2010 book *A Revolution of the Mind* from America) of the vertigo and horror that most people suffered from the
it turns out, that is exactly what did happen. This “Crisis of the European Mind”, as historian Paul Hazard calls it (or the “death of God”, as thinkers such as Nietzsche and others referred to it), shook the world like an earthquake during the Radical Enlightenment. As was shown in chapter one of this study, most of this took place in a short amount of time, from 1650 to 1750, and its chief spokesman according to Israel was the philosopher Baruch Spinoza.

Thanks to the new historical and philological investigations of incredibly courageous thinkers (which culminated in such 17th century thinkers as Spinoza and Hobbes) God Himself is now put in question. And this means everything that belief in this God represented is now put in doubt – history (from “Adam and Eve”), the races of mankind challenges and threats to the faith which grew more and more severe towards the end of the seventeenth century. Many have written on the subject of losing one’s faith, both from the social-historical and personal or psychological points of view. See for instance Mircea Eliade’s The Sacred and Profane (for the affect it has on cultures) or Friedrich Nietzsche’s famous madman aphorism (which I take to be largely an expression of his own personal horror upon realizing that “God is dead”) for the affect it has on personal lives.

564 Israel’s case for Spinoza as the Radical Enlightenment’s principal apostle (over Hobbes, as well) will be developed below. This, by the way, is one of Israel’s greatest claims to fame (at least according to some students of the Enlightenment). He almost single-handedly demonstrated that Spinoza was one of the key players who helped fuel the Radical Enlightenment’s rejection of biblical religion and the many central theological and philosophical dogmas that biblical religion entails. Before Israel’s great Radical Enlightenment, many did not see Spinoza’s place in history as that influential. The most comprehensive treatment of this claim is made in his Radical Enlightenment, especially chapter 8. However, in this last decade some Spinoza and Enlightenment scholars such as Theo Verbeek and Wiep van Bunge have taken Israel to task on some claims such as Israel’s definition of “Spinozism”, its purported pervasiveness, and his supposed liberal democratic views. See for instance, Theo Verbeek (2007) ‘Spinoza on Natural Rights’, Intellectual History Review, 17: 3, 257 — 275 and Bunge’s From Stevin to Spinoza: An Essay on Philosophy in the Seventeenth-Century Dutch Republic, Brill, 2001, especially chapter 5. According to personal correspondence to me from Jonathan Israel, he will most probably answer some of these criticisms in his next work on the Radical Enlightenment which is slated to be published in the summer of 2011. Verbeek, however, also has made it clear (in personal correspondence) that Israel’s interpretation of Spinoza as one of the chief philosophers whose work undermined western religious orthodoxy is sound.

565 See also, for instance, “Isaac La Peyrere and the Beginning of Religious Scepticism” in Richard Popkin’s great The History of Scepticism from Erasmus to Spinoza for a more detailed account of the history of biblical criticism to Spinoza. Popkin (and Israel) credits La Peyrere “with starting modern critical (and sceptical) Bible scholarship” (214-5). Popkin argues that “La Peyrere’s influence was very great” (225), and that “Of La Peyrere’s contemporaries, the one whom he seems to have influenced the most is Spinoza” (227). We know that Spinoza had a copy of La Peyrere’s work and even used some of it in his Tractatus. “There he used material from La Peyrere to make out his challenge to the Bible” (228).
("split up from the Tower of Babel"), demon possession, witches ("suffer not a witch to live"), salvation, ultimate purpose, divine providence, man's future hope, and so much more.

The ramifications of the Radical Enlightenment's investigations into scripture and theology were culture-changing from top to bottom, from government to education, from philosophy to theology, from the churches to the taverns.\textsuperscript{566} Indeed, what was initiated then has still not really been fathomed by our world.\textsuperscript{567}

To get to the Radical Enlightenment and Spinoza though, some ground clearing was needed. We briefly treated some of this from Richard Popkin's 1980s research results in the section above; but we will now go over some of this territory again from Israel's latest research results to both confirm and then add to Popkin's work. As the previous section set forth, this "ground clearing" was largely derived from Descartes, his followers the Cartesians, and from the pioneering work of biblical critics such as Isaac La Peyrere. The "New Philosophy" (as the new naturalistic, mechanistic view of philosophers such as Descartes was called) gained fuel from such events as the Copernicus-Galileo controversy. Israel writes that some groups, such as "the Calvinist orthodox were primarily concerned, in this controversy, with upholding the authority of Scripture and the unity of truth, including the Aristotelian conception of 'substantial forms', rather than assessing the astronomical evidence as such."\textsuperscript{568} But the scientific view won out and thus caused many to wonder and

\textsuperscript{566} See Chapter One for Israel's arguments for most of these claims.
\textsuperscript{567} As Nietzsche's famous "God is dead" aphorism puts it: "This tremendous event is still on its way, still wandering; it has not yet reached the ears of men" (aphorism #125 (p. 182), see also #108 (p. 167) in Walter Kaufmann's \emph{The Gay Science}).
\textsuperscript{568} The issue on how to interpret "the new mechanistic view" and the "Copernicus-Galileo controversy" are actually very complicated. Some contemporary historians of philosophy and science (and philosophy of science) have written much on both subjects. I don't wish to take up these issues here, but only to use Israel's generalization that \emph{some} people (in this case orthodox Calvinists) interpreted the earth-is-in-motion and the sun-is-still business as a threat to the veracity of the God's Word. What Israel means by the "astronomical evidence" here I don't know. Descartes and Leibniz, for instance, didn't think the "astronomical evidence" repudiated scriptural teaching. But then, like Copernicus and Galileo, their method of interpreting scripture was also different in some important respects from the more fundamentalistic orthodox Jewish, Christian, and Islamic interpreters. The same goes for the question of "the new mechanistic view." It wasn't the end of the world for many
to doubt how much of the Bible, tradition, and the Church could be relied on. Some began to think that reason and philosophy may be a better interpreter of scriptures than faith and spirituality. Perhaps now theology ought to defer to philosophy, instead of the other way around. Worse, perhaps all the mysteries of the faith are not mysteries at all, but rather falsehoods passed on and uncritically accepted generation after generation until finally this generation - which will now subject everything to the test of criticism.

Israel points out in various places how many thought that the Cartesians wished to subordinate Scripture “to a philosophy based on mechanistic principles, deeming Scripture to be adjusted to the ‘ignorant notions’ of the common people.” Israel reports testimonies such as the following: “Cartesianism ... plainly generates radical offshoots which, as everyone sees, destroys faith, tradition, and morality.” We’re told that “in his youth Spinoza steeped himself in Descartes” and that “Spinoza’s doctrine that God is equivalent to the unalterable laws of nature derives directly from the mechanistic categories introduced by Descartes. If Spinozism demolishes Christian faith, Cartesianism ... corrodes true belief by rendering incomprehensible the Church’s teaching on the Trinity, the Incarnation, and the Eucharist as well as making it hard to conceive of angels.”

The road was thus prepared so that in the fullness of the Radical Enlightenment certain thinkers critiqued the Bible without the presuppositions of faith and devotion. They approached it partly using the hermeneutical or literary principles learned from the humanists since the Renaissance (which we explicated earlier in this study) and partly from the more objective, rationalistic, scientific spirit of the New Philosophy (which was Christians such as Boyle and Newton, for instance. Nevertheless, the major point still stands: many people, including many theologians, philosophers, and scientists interpreted the new findings as contradicting sacred writ.

569 See for example, Rad. Enl. 36.

570 Rad. Enl. 27. Again, as has been pointed out previously and in our Descartes’ chapter, Descartes and most or many Cartesians didn’t see things this way. On the contrary, they saw Descartes’ world picture as not only superior to Aristotle and the Scholastics, but also best in accord with Christianity.
becoming emancipated and independent of theology). Thus they approached the scholarly study of even “the Word of God” as they would the study of Homer’s Odyssey or Virgil’s Aeneid. In a word, their literary-historical methodology was secularistic; the presuppositions that they worked with assumed the falsehood of the old beliefs of divine revelation, inspiration, prophecy, and miracles even before engaging in the work of biblical interpretation.571

Jonathan Israel’s The Radical Enlightenment: Philosophy and the Making of Modernity has a lot to say about the role that the new radical demythologizing interpretation of scripture played in the Radical Enlightenment. In fact, in a very large sense, that’s what the whole book is about, for the Radical Enlightenment is the product of the undermining and repudiation of the old faith in scripture.

571 Ibid. 53-54. Of this new methodology, even well-educated and “moderate” thinkers were aghast. In his well-researched biography of Spinoza, John Colerus reports that that: “If [Spinoza’s TTP is] true, good Lord! What respect could we have for the Scripture? How could we maintain that it is divinely inspired? That it is a sure and firm prophecy; that the holy men, who are the authors of it, spoke and wrote by God’s order, and by the inspiration of the Holy Spirit; that the same Scripture is most certainly true, and that it gives a certain testimony of its truth to our consciences; and lastly, that it is a judge, whose decisions ought to be the constant and unvariable rule of our thoughts, of our faith, and of our lives… The Lord confound thee, Satan, and stop thy mouth!” The Life of Benedict De Spinoza (London, 1706), 58-59. Colerus supports a learned author’s assessment of the TTP as a book that “ought to be buried forever in an eternal oblivion” as “very judiciously said seeing that [that] wicked book does altogether overthrow the Christian religion by depriving the sacred writings of the authority on which it is solely grounded and established” (59-60). Colerus knew whereof he was speaking.
Brief discussion of Israel’s comparison of Spinoza and Hobbes in relation to the Radical Enlightenment

“Spinoza, the most impious and most dangerous man of the century” -- Antoine Arnauld

As we stated earlier, Israel gives a great deal of credit for the Radical Enlightenment to Spinoza, “the backbone of the Radical Enlightenment”, and to his views on scriptural exegesis. Israel states that “No other part of Spinoza’s assault on authority, tradition, and faith proved so generally disquieting as his Bible criticism.” Hobbes also did a great deal to shake up the biblical critical enterprise. But Hobbes may not have completely repudiated miracles (or magic), which was one of the major planks on which the Radical Enlightenment

572 As was mentioned earlier, because the focus of this study is on Spinoza, we will not be able to also delineate in any sufficient and deserved detail the enormous contributions to the Radical Enlightenment that Hobbes’s philosophy and biblical criticism made. Nor will I here discuss at length the relations between the two. There are many essays on this latter question. For the reader who would like to pursue this issue further, see, to start with, “Hobbes and Spinoza” in Noel Malcom’s Aspects of Hobbes.

573 Steven Nadler. Spinoza: A Life. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 336-7. Arnauld was considered by many, such as Leibniz, to be one of Europe’s greatest theologians. He was also a Cartesian and an eminent philosopher. Israel’s work and Nadler’s cite testimonies about the large, dark, threatening shadow that Spinoza was casting over Christendom from people in the know like Arnauld in France, England, Germany, the Netherlands, Italy, and much of Europe. It is evidence like this that lends support to Israel’s thesis that Spinoza was among the foremost forces of not only the Enlightenment, but, more importantly, of the Radical Enlightenment (see both Nadler’s biography of Spinoza just cited and, even more, his upcoming “A Book Forged in Hell”, especially chapter 10, “The Onslaught”). His role as one of the world’s great religion-destroyers, however, is not well-known today. Far more people think of Copernicus and Galileo as threats to the faith and Holy Scripture than Spinoza. Yet the Copernican Revolution only showed a few scriptures about the sun and the earth to be in contradiction to the truth, not most of the books of the Bible as Spinoza did. For more on the undeserved neglect of Spinoza –especially of his Theological-Political Treatise – see Edwin Curley’s “Notes on a Neglected Masterpiece: Spinoza and the Science of Hermeneutics” (From Spinoza: The Enduring Questions, ed. By Graeme Hunter, Toronto, 1994, and also Nadler’s “A Book Forged in Hell” (op. cited), especially his Introduction and in Chapter 10, “The Onslaught.”

574 In Spinoza: Critical Assessments, Vol. 1 by Genevieve Lloyd, in the essay “How Much of Hobbes Might Spinoza Have Read?” by William Sacksteder, Sacksteder notes something I have pointed out: First, that both the TTP and Hobbes’s works are usually treated as mostly or primarily political treatises: “Neither of the works mentioned is exclusively political, though we have tended to truncate our reading of Hobbes to that limited field alone and to overlook” the biblical criticism. Like the TTP, biblical exegesis in the Leviathan “occupies more pages by far than the directly political portions, even though we studiously ignore the former today” (227).
stood. According to Israel, “Between the rise of Christianity and the mid-eighteenth century then, only Spinoza categorically denies the possibility of miracles.”

This is a debatable point. For example, some hold that Hobbes ultimately did deny the possibility of miracles and magic. To make this case, they argue that the primary hermeneutical principle to follow in interpreting philosophers such as Hobbes should be the philosopher’s philosophy over what he may have said in letters or in public. Leibniz is also believed to have rejected miracles based on this interpretive principle (See Gregory Brown’s “Miracles in the Best of All Possible Worlds: Leibniz’s Dilemma and Leibniz’s Razor,” History of Philosophy Quarterly, vol. 12 (1995), pp. 19–39). Professor Doug Jesseph formulates a similar argument as Brown’s. In his “Hobbes’s Atheism”, Jesseph acknowledges “that Hobbes never publically announced his disbelief in a deity” and that “he filled many pages of his published works with seemingly sincere references to God, even to the point of appearing to offer arguments for the existence of a supreme being.” Despite Hobbes’s many professions of faith however, Jesseph argues that Hobbes was not sincere and that in actuality “Hobbes was really a sly and ironic atheist who concealed his disbelief behind a screen of disingenuous theological verbiage while constructing a philosophical system that makes the concept of God [and by implication miracles, magic, and demonology] inadmissible.” But the way to make this case (as Brown does for Leibniz) is “constructed from principles central to Hobbes’s philosophy.”

Edwin Curley’s essay “‘I Durst Not Write So Boldly’ or How to Read Hobbes’s Theological-Political Treatise” does the same thing. For instance, Curley nicely sums up many of the central planks in Hobbes’s philosophical platform and then logically infers from

575 Rad. Enl. 218.
these that Hobbes must have been an atheist. Curley lists the following which he takes from Hobbes’s works:

God is corporeal. The universe is the aggregate of all bodies. Therefore, God is identical either with the whole of the universe or with a part of it (an inference from the first and second premises). To hold that God is identical with the whole universe is equivalent to atheism, since it denies that the universe has a cause. If God is identical with a part of the universe, he is finite, since no part of any whole can be infinite. To hold that God is finite is equivalent to atheism, since God, by definition, is infinite. Therefore, to affirm that God is identical either with the whole of the universe or with a part of it is to embrace atheism.577

Israel concedes that many in England believed that Hobbes was the more evil free thinker, but, when considered in the context of the fuller Radical Enlightenment picture, Spinoza is the more radical.

Admittedly, in Britain many (but by no means all) writers deemed Hobbes more widely pervasive than Spinoza as a promoter of free thinking, irreligion, and incredulity. But given Hobbes’ politics, and his attitude to ecclesiastical power and censorship, as well as his being (by his own admission) philosophically less bold and comprehensive, he simply was not, and could not have been, the source and inspiration for a systematic redefinition of man, cosmology, politics, social hierarchy, sexuality, and ethics in the radical sense Spinoza was. When placed in full historical context, Spinoza evidently had no real rival even in England ... [in] eliminating divine Providence and governance of the world, in other words, the Naturalistic, materialistic, one-substance undercurrent culminating [later]in [France and elsewhere with] La Mettrie and Diderot.578

See this whole chapter in Israel’s Radical Enlightenment (chapter 8) for a fuller delineation of Israel’s argument for Spinoza as the one person who no one else “remotely rivaled” as “the chief challenger of the fundamentals of revealed religion, received ideas, tradition, morality, and ... divinely constituted political authority.”579

578 Rad. Enl. 159.
579 Ibid.
Some see Israel's championing of Spinoza as something that the messiness of history can't decide. Some also argue against Israel's contention that Spinoza was the chief challenger of religion over Hobbes, such as in an excellent round table conference discussion on this subject that I attended in New York (which one can see and listen to online at http://philoctetes.org/Past_Programs/Spinoza). Finally, and very importantly for this discussion, if Hobbes was indeed an atheist (as Curly and Jesseph argue for) then Israel's interpretation and claims on Hobbes are erroneous and false.

A Swiss Calvinist theologian of the time noted that "Hobbes and La Peyrere may have begun the process of eroding confidence in Scripture as divine Revelation in some men's minds, and questioning the Mosaic authorship of the Five Books, 'but no-one struck at the foundations of the entire Pentateuch more shamelessly than Spinoza'. His principles of Bible hermeneutics seemed to threaten the very foundations of theology and religion and, for that very reason, had to be powerfully confronted and refuted" (Ibid. 447).

The perception that Spinoza's work more than anyone else's was a threat to the very foundations of European culture was not only expressed by professional theologians, but also by some of the greatest philosophical minds of the time, such as Gottlieb Leibniz. Leibniz more than anyone else, except maybe Bayle, understood the radical implications of Spinoza's work for mankind. As Israel puts it in his chapter on Leibniz: "if Spinoza's arguments against Revelation and divine Providence stand, revealed religion cannot

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580 Rad. Enl. 38. For Leibniz, God chose this world because it was the best of all possible worlds. Yet, as Leibniz was to learn later on when he read Spinoza's Ethics, not only does Spinoza get rid of the Bible's God, he gets rid of any notion of God having rationality or goodness. As Nadler's puts it "Spinoza's God does not choose the best of all possible worlds. Spinoza's God, in fact, does not choose anything whatsoever.... The metaphysics of God in the Ethics, motivated as it is by an extreme antianthropomorphism, rules out any depiction of God that involves Him considering alternative possibilities, acting for purposes, making choices based on reasons, and outcomes" (The Best of All Possible Worlds: A Story of Philosophers, God and Evil Worlds: A Story of Philosophers, God and Evil, 227. See all of Chapter 8 "The Specter of Spinoza" also for further details on some of the major differences between Spinoza and Leibniz on God).
underpin the social, moral, and political order.”

Leibniz thus tried to get competent Bible scholars to refute Spinoza’s scriptural exegesis. Leibniz also understood how serious this business was because he too almost fell in this precipice: “I once strayed a little too far in another direction, and began to incline to the Spinozists' view.” To many observers, philosophers, and theologians, it was Spinoza more than any other who was turning the world upside down.
Spinoza "had transcended Hobbes and all other intellectual malefactors in undermining belief in the divine authorship of Scripture." And again, "Where Hobbes [according to one writer] is merely 'trifling' with Scripture and 'wresting some particular places to his odd opinions', Spinoza begins at the very root and foundation by taking away all divine authority from prophecy, miracles or inspiration, and making all sacred pen-men, to be no other than either mad-men or imposters."

Regarding Spinoza's *TTP*, Hobbes himself admitted that he "durst not speak so boldly", which suggests that his work did not completely sever itself from all theological beliefs, whereas Spinoza's new view on scriptural exegesis "is hence not just a revolution in Bible hermeneutics but simultaneously a revolution in theology." These arguments comprise further evidence of Spinoza's primacy in the Radical Enlightenment. As one contemporary put it, Spinoza might have been "following the 'Hobbesian path' but [he] went much further." And Hobbes probably did not have as much influence as Spinoza also because the interpretation of Hobbes's writings were various and unsettled (for more on this, see A.P. Martinich's *Thomas Hobbes*, 128).

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thinking and to tolerate all thought. Leibniz, though, was not nearly as intolerant as his more conservative brethren. Note too how at this date Leibniz believed that Hobbes was the complete source for Spinoza's blasphemies. But he shows that he has not read either Hobbes's *Leviathan* or Spinoza's *Theological-Political Treatise* carefully because he states that "there is nothing in the astounding critique of Sacred Scripture put into effect by this audacious man, the seeds of which have not been sowed by Hobbes in an entire chapter of *Leviathan*" (Ibid.). No doubt Leibniz is engaging in some hyperbole here, not to mention he does not say that Spinoza got "everything" from Hobbes but only "the seeds" that Hobbes planted. Nevertheless, though Hobbes's critique of scripture is in several respects groundbreaking, it is not as detailed and thorough and destructive as Spinoza's work.

585 Ibid. 600.
586 Ibid. 608.
587 Ibid. 449.
588 Ibid. 449.
589 Ibid. 503.
Not only are these things true, but there are some influential Hobbes’ scholars who aver that Hobbes was a Christian (though of an unorthodox variety). A.P. Matinich, for instance, offers an extensive argument for the position that Hobbes was a Christian (despite the fact that many considered him an atheist in his time). Still this does not jibe with Hobbes’s extremely unconventional scriptural exegesis on many central teachings such as the nature of God. For Hobbes, God was not an incorporeal substance but body, which, needless to say, caused uproar from the theologians. (Hobbes was, after all, a materialist.) His approach to scriptural exegesis, like Spinoza’s, is also rationalistic. But, unlike Spinoza, Hobbes still countenances scripture as a rule for human life and nations – even if only the sovereign should have the authority to say what scripture means. Still, his exegesis of “Spirit” and angels and prophets and dozens of other intrinsically significant doctrines of scripture and theology show genius, uniqueness, imagination, courage, and many great insights that could not fail to stimulate open-minded, thoughtful readers.

The overall effect of reading Hobbes on the scriptures for most was that it led readers to question and to doubt the Bible, which is the source and foundation of the three world’s great religions. Edwin Curley explains in his Introduction to Hobbes’s Leviathan that “Hobbes’ analysis of scripture concludes that the books of the Bible, as we now have them, were characteristically written by unknown authors, long after the events they claim to record” (xliii). This leads to skepticism as to what “God’s Word” is in the scriptures. Hobbes denied natural immortality and eternal hell (xlvi), and he attacked not only the

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Nadler’s upcoming book (which will be published in the Spring of 2011) “A Book Forged in Hell”: Spinoza’s Scandalous Treatise mentions in passing that an early biographer of Spinoza thought him a Protestant. Nadler, however, quickly and easily puts this question to rest, even if one were to allow for a very liberal Protestantism.


As opposed to most readings of Spinoza as only a pure Radical Enlightenment atheist totally against scripture, Verbeek points out in his Spinoza’s Theologico-political Treatise (Ashgate, 2003) that there are good grounds in the TTP itself for arguing that for Spinoza the scriptures offered at least some moral value for the masses since they don’t have the luxury to philosophize and in many cases, even the ability to reason correctly.
Catholic Church, scholasticism and its priests (xliv), but Protestants, too, such as the
Presbyterians (xlv). Because of such things, Martinich himself concedes that
the interpretation of Hobbes's treatment of religion "was one of the milestones on the road"
from theism to deism to atheism (Hobbes 206). Yet, even though he disagrees with this
interpretation of Hobbes's writing, he nevertheless confesses that Hobbes "clearly failed" in
trying to reconcile Christianity and modern science (Ibid).

Reviewing all these apparently anti-religious or anti-Christian positions of Hobbes,
one might be tempted to think the opposite of what Martinich argues for: that not only was
Hobbes not a Christian, he might have even been an atheist (again, see defenses of this view
in Edwin Curley's "I Durst Not Write So Boldly" and Douglas Jesseph's "Hobbes's Atheism").
Whatever the truth is on this subject though, it is accurate that "Hobbes is one of the
founders of the higher criticism" (Curley's Intro to Leviathan, xliii). Yet in the final analysis,
we simply don't know for sure if Hobbes was a genuine atheist, anti-Christian, or extreme
liberal Protestant: as Patricia Springborg says in her essay "Hobbes on religion" in the
Cambridge Companion to Hobbes, "Hobbes's religious beliefs ultimately remain a mystery"
(369). Not so with Spinoza's religious beliefs.593 At any rate, however various early modern
scholars may argue this issue, which admittedly is something of an intellectual parlor game
(though with heuristic value), Israel argues the position that Spinoza's overall philosophy
and influence was the most powerful of the early Radical Enlighteners.594

593 Verbeek however says that "There is little unanimity as to whether ... the book is against all
religion or only against specific aspects of a specific religion" (op. cited 1). In my opinion, one can
only argue in this way in the context of Spinoza's realization that in the real world it is very unlikely
that all "religion – that is, the relics of man's ancient bondage" (TTP, Shirley, 3) will die.
Understanding this, Spinoza offered his ideas on a politics that could make some accommodation to
religion. In the final analysis, though, this is not ultimately what Spinoza wished for. To my lights
when one adds-up all the anti-biblical, anti-theological arguments that Spinoza makes both in his TTP
and Ethics, one can't but help to conclude that Spinoza was certainly an enemy of religion (that is, as
religion was traditionally understood).
594 No matter what the case may be here between Hobbes and Spinoza, one thing is clear, which all
sides agree on, and that is that both contributed a great deal to the Radical Enlightenment, which

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Summary of Israel’s account of Spinoza’s biblical hermeneutics and his place in the Radical Enlightenment

This study will be taking up Spinoza’s treatment of various specific scriptures in greater detail in a later section on the *TTP*, but it will help the reader at this point to give a bird’s eye view of Spinoza’s hermeneutics here for perspective. Then, in later sections, when we will look more closely at how he interprets various specific scriptures, we will hopefully remember this broader or more general viewpoint. Some repetition will therefore be unavoidable.

In several places in his books, Israel plots the affects that Spinoza’s works had on the consciousness of Europe. We learn from these portions just how influential Spinoza’s critique of scripture and theology was, and how much this contributed to the Radical Enlightenment. In his chapters on “Publishing a Banned Philosophy” and “The Spread of a Forbidden Movement”, Israel delineates the extent to which Spinoza’s epoch-making and faith-destroying book of biblical criticism, the *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus*, was attacked and yet still spread throughout Europe. “Spinoza begins by dismissing the entire corpus of previous Bible interpretation, whether Christian or Jewish.” and then argues that “the chief concern of theologians on the whole has been to extort from Holy Scripture their own authority from invented ideas, for which they claim divine authority.”

What is needed then to correctly understand the Bible? Spinoza says we first need to “free our minds from the prejudices of the theologians” and instead interpret Scripture “no different from the method of interpreting Nature.” All sound Bible interpretation then must be primarily historical and critical. The end result of new, higher, destructive

“marks the most dramatic step towards secularization and rationalization in Europe’s history” (*Rad. Enl. vi*).

595 Ibid. 447.
597 *Rad. Enl.* 448.
critical method was (as Richard Popkin's put it): "a devastating critique of revealed 
knowledge claims, which has had an amazing effect over the last three centuries in 
secularizing modern man", and in “the liberation of the human spirit from the bonds of fear 
and superstition.”

Summarizing Spinoza’s view on scriptural exegesis: Spinoza’s method of scriptural 
exegesis "approaches Scripture as a collection of historical narratives devoid of any special 
status or miraculous content." In a word, the scriptures are viewed "as a purely human 
document and entirely secularized." The way to truly understand the Bible then is not by 
the Holy Spirit’s help and guidance, or by the Pope or some Church council’s interpretation 
or by some charismatic Reformer’s book. The way to accurately interpret scripture is 
through a thorough study of its history and language. Once one applies this method to the 
66 (or 73 for the Roman Catholics) books of the Bible, the many changes in both content and 
style become patently evident. Following Spinoza’s method, as opposed to the traditional 
method followed by Christianity for over 1700 years, one is no longer led by a religious 
commitment that "All scripture is inspired by God" (2 Tim. 3:16) and therefore cannot 
contain contradictions since "God is the God of all truth.” On the contrary, the biblical 
exegete following Spinoza's method finds that several portions of the Bible are "incoherent 
and truncated, and frequently marred by discrepancies and contradictions.”

Spinoza’s treatment of the relations between reason and revelation is radical 
(though he says in several places that the two are of separate domains and therefore don’t 
conflict) and in-depth. Israel’s (Nadler’s, Curley’s, et. al.) account that Spinoza’s analysis of 
revelation, theology, scripture, prophecy, Moses, the prophets, the Roman Catholic Church, 
the apostles, faith, imagination, and so on – are advanced in textual criticism and philosophy

598 Popkin, op. cited, 229, 237. 
599 Rad. Enl. 448, my emphasis. 
600 Ibid. 
601 Rad. Enl. 449.
cannot be denied. He is direct. He is courageous. He vigorously took on that great
leviathan of orthodox biblical religion that has stood in the way of free philosophizing since
the Lord commanded Moses to stone to death anyone who tries “to turn you away from the

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602 Spinoza scholar Steven Nadler says that “Without a doubt, the *Theological-Political Treatise* is one of the most important and influential books in the history of philosophy, in religious and political thought, and even in Bible studies. More than any other work, it laid the foundation for modern critical and historical approaches to the Bible” (upcoming “A Book forged in Hell”, op. cited, 326. This is a strong position to take. It’s certainly not true that Spinoza was the only one who did biblical criticism in a critical and historical way. Strauss, Popkin, Curley, and others (including Nadler) show this. Theo Verbeek is even stronger about this matter. For instance, after acknowledging respects in which Spinoza’s work is distinct despite influences such as from Hobbes, he says: “A more accurate comparison between the *Theologico-political treatise* and *Leviathan* would be necessary, on the other hand, to assess Spinoza’s dependence on Hobbes’s theological argument and to dispel once and for all the myth of Spinoza being a pioneer in Biblical scholarship” (Verbeek’s 2003 *Spinoza’s Theologico-political Treatise*, 182, my emphasis. Verbeek (if I read him rightly) also might take issue with Nadler (and others) on the question of the extent of the “neglect” of the *TTP*. Even stronger than Nadler’s argument that “More than any other work, it laid the foundation for modern critical and historical approaches to the Bible”, Nadler says that Spinoza’s *Theological-Political Treatise* is “Arguably the most important – and certainly the most scandalous and vilified – work of philosophy of the seventeenth century” (even though it was later neglected) (Nadler op. cited, 3, my emphasis). Some might think that Nadler is engaging in hyperbole here as one may think that Arnauld used hyperbole when he singled out Spinoza as “the most impious and most dangerous man of the century.” But in a personal communication to me, Nadler takes both claims literally. Of Arnauld’s quote he says, “I would not say that Arnauld is engaging in hyperbole here -- I would think that he truly means it (as many of Spinoza’s other critics also meant it).” And of the quote that the *TTP* is “Arguably the most important work of philosophy of the seventeenth century” he says, “Arguably, yes. The only other possible candidates are Spinoza’s Ethics, Descartes’ *Principia* or Newton’s *Principia*.”

Regarding Nadler’s claim that the *TTP* was “certainly the most scandalous and vilified - work of philosophy of the seventeenth century”, many other early modern and Spinoza scholars concur: “For more than a century, Spinozism was widely held to be the most dangerous philosophical worldview that had ever been concocted.” See for instance, *Disguised and Overt Spinozism Around 1700: Papers Presented at the International Colloquium held at Rotterdam, 5-8 October 1994*, edited by Wiep van Bunge and Wim Klever (New York: E.J. Brill, 1996), vii). As to the important question of whether this view was an accurate interpretation of Spinoza, Bunge and Klever take issue with some Spinoza scholars (including Verbeek?) who aver that the first generation of critics of Spinoza misunderstood him and that he was not totally against religion or God: “The well-worn cliché that the Dutch philosopher was essentially misunderstood by his early critics no longer seems adequate. Rather, it would seem, Spinoza was so violently attacked precisely because his early readers clearly saw what his philosophy amounted to. Indeed, they saw themselves confronted with a way of looking at the world that at the time was truly revolutionary” (ibid.). For one of the best thorough treatments of the early reception of Spinoza, see Wiep van Bunge’s “On the Early Dutch Reception of the Tractatus Theologico-Politicus.”

In a new work hot off the presses (*Spinoza’s Theological-Political Treatise: A Critical Guide*, edited by Melamed, Yitzhak and Rosenthal, Michael (Cambridge University Press, 2010)), Jonathan Israel adds to the monumental research he has done on Spinoza reception and even more forcibly concludes that no other work in early modernity “matches the *TTP* or the *Ethics* as a candidate for the honor of being the most analyzed, refuted, and – what counts most – obsessively pored over, wrestled with, and scrutinized text of the era 1670-1820” (73). The date range he gives for this might make it easier for some to accept compared to Nadler’s “Arguably the most important work of philosophy of the seventeenth century.”
Lord your God” (Deut. 13:10), or when St. Paul wrote that “there are many rebellious people, mere talkers and deceivers ... They must be silenced, because they are ruining [the faith of] whole households by teaching things they ought not to teach” (Titus 1:11, my emphasis), or when he told Timothy to “fight the good fight of faith, holding on to faith and a good conscience. Some have rejected these and so have shipwrecked their faith. Among them are Hymenaeus and Alexander, whom I have handed over to Satan to be taught not to blaspheme” (1 Tim. 1:18-20, my emphasis), or when Augustine misinterpreted the scripture “Compel them to come in”, or when Constantine shut down the pagan schools of philosophy and declared Christianity the religion of the empire, or when ... - the instances of religious stifling of freedom are too numerous to cite.

It is true of course that this is not an entirely fair judgment because each of the philosophers that we have studied had different strategic aims, professions, loyalties, and so forth. We grant this. Our only point is to say that as far as explicit writings about religion go, one can see the makings of secular and anti-(traditional)-religious modernity far more in Spinoza than in Descartes, Pascal, Locke, Newton, and Leibniz put together. No other major philosopher in the history of biblical European culture gets even near Spinoza as the philosopher against Judaism and Christianity – as the philosopher who directly and fully undermines the very foundations of biblical religion.603 But how was he able to accomplish this mammoth task? How was he able to “drink up this sea? Who gave him the sponge to wipe away the entire horizon? What did he do when he unchained this earth from its

603 Yovel illuminates this discussion by pointing out that Spinoza’s philosophy not only distanced himself from traditional religion, but also “from the accepted philosophical tradition; he was a heretic not only from the point of view of established religions, but also from the point of view of the free thinkers and from the several varieties of philosophic deism they were espousing at the time. Deism rejects religion in the name of an external and remote philosophic deity that does not intervene in the affairs of this world and does not possess the attributes of particular providence, punishment and reward, commandment, or ritual. But the deistic heretics at least acknowledged the existence of a transcendent deity elevated above the world, whereas Spinoza dismissed this idea and identified God with the whole universe” (Spinoza and Other Heretics, 5).
Spinoza knew whereof he spoke. This is not certain, but there is strong evidence to believe that Spinoza’s early life was more influenced by the biblical religious spirit than either Descartes or Leibniz, for he was almost certainly more devout. He therefore knew the religious mindset well. He therefore understood the difference between the religious and the rationalist mindsets having lived and experienced both worlds in his own life. He was a native to both worlds, therefore he is particularly suited to compare, contrast, and judge both. Many deeply religious people of the 17th century didn’t have a clue as to what a life of reason or philosophy could be. And, while many people and philosophers of the period (especially those who were religious in ideology and formal commitment) did have some understanding of what a deeply devout and experiential faith might be like, nevertheless the difference in attitude and life between a deeply religious person and a nominally religious person is almost as great as the difference between a religious person and an unbeliever. Spinoza however was versed in the best and the worst of all these possible worlds.

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Chapter Twelve

On the Making of an “Antichrist”: Biographical context

“the apostate Jew working together with the devil” 605

Biographical context

We are come now to “the antichrist”, “the beast”, “the devil incarnate”, “the apostate Jew working together with the devil.” These epithets strike most educated secular people today as entertaining rather than with the horror606 that was experienced by many in Spinoza’s

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605 See Nadler’s “A Book Forged in Hell” for the details on the source of this quote on pages 315 and 317. Stephen Nadler’s biography of Spinoza notes that when his TTP came out, some “accused him of being an agent of Satan, perhaps even the antichrist himself” (295). Nadler is not the only one to cite many such allegations made against Spinoza. Perhaps more than any work on earth, Jonathan Israel’s Radical Enlightenment plots these charges made against Spinoza from almost every country in Europe and from almost every walk of life – government officials, Catholics, Lutherans, Calvinists, Mennoites, theologians, philosophers, scientists, the masses. Edwin Curley and Mogens Laerke’s work on the reception of the TTP by Leibniz and others also cite how prevalent such charges were. These charges were not meant as metaphors. They were not meant allegorically or rhetorically; nor are they exaggerations or hyperbole. They were meant literally, and, as such, many completely believed that Spinoza was as grave a threat and as fearful a person as these words belie. This has to be pointed out emphatically because readers of such charges today are so far removed from such a mentality that they too often don’t really take in how serious and fearful these beliefs about Spinoza were. See also Wieg van Bunge’s “On the Early Dutch Reception of the Tractatus Theologico-Politicus”, as well (Studia Spinozana 5, 1989, pp. 225-251. The value of this work is that it gives several quotes and a relatively lot of space to the arguments of the orthodox who opposed Spinoza, instead of just summing up their positions in three words or one quick sound bite).

606 See for instance some of the first responses of horror to Spinoza’s works in Colerus’s biography of Spinoza [64-69] on the Ethics. Colerus himself carefully studied Spinoza’s works and lays out his own critique of Spinoza’s “abominable” TTP and some on his Ethics. He concludes his thorough study of Spinoza’s works warning his Christian readers: “I don’t design to examine here all the impious and abur’d Doctrines of Spinoza; I have mentioned some of the most important, only to inspire the
world. Most educated people in the west today don’t hurl such accusations as freely, nor take them as seriously as they used to be taken. Most well-educated people today, for instance, are not in dread of evil spirits, nor do they believe that if a society does not stop an atheist’s writings from spreading that God will punish the whole society (as many did in Spinoza’s Amsterdam concerning his books). Most well-informed people today - even many theology professors - wouldn’t be caught dead throwing an ink well at the devil as Martin Luther did. As far as I know, Jewish synagogues are no longer practicing the kind of biblical excommunication that Spinoza’s synagogue practiced against him. To the modern mind then, these theological denunciations seem literary, colorful, and rhetorical, as the study of Greek literature and religion (which Christians called “myths”) seemed to Renaissance Christian humanists. But it must be made emphatically clear here that this is a misreading of these texts. For the ancient Greeks, as well as for the orthodox Jews and Christians of the seventeenth century, these texts were certainly not “literature” or

Christian Reader with the aversion and horror he ought to have for such pernicious Opinions” [p. 68, my emphasis, see also [74]. The 17th century treatment of Spinoza’s works is instructively different from the 20st century’s treatment of Spinoza’s works. Once again, for a brilliant example of how later generations interpret and indeed distort a great philosopher’s work, see “The Cogito in the Seventeenth Century” in Roger Ariew’s forthcoming edition of his Descartes and the Last Scholastics. Here the theological components of the 17th century philosopher’s work on the cogito are not seen and instead made “modern.”

I say “most educated secular people today”, but of course this is not meant to deny the fact that hundreds of millions of people in the world today still do believe such things – as many in the United States do, for instance. But things are far worse in countries such as Afghanistan, Pakistan, Iran, and others which still follow many of the practices of the Koran and Torah such as the issuing of fatwa’s by supreme leaders against anyone in the world who seems to have insulted Islam or the prophet Mohammad; or from Islamicists who consider all who do not follow the one God Allah infidels and of Satan; or who stone adulterous women (but usually not men) to death; or of the Orthodox Jews in Israel who are fighting to gain control of all the land that God promised them in the Torah; or of Pentecostals and charismatics throughout the world who cast out demons, prophecy, speak in tongues, and believe that this generation will see the return of the Son of God and the end of the world.

Following biblical teachings, the provincial synods and classis of Amsterdam complained that Spinoza’s work (and others) were spreading atheism “against which the almighty God will issue his anger from heaven; and already the appearance of his anger pours upon our dear fatherland” (which I take to be a reference to events of 1672 such as the invasion by the French of the Netherlands and the assassination of De Witt). Stephen Nadler. “A Book Forged in Hell”: Spinoza’s Scandalous Treatise, op. cited, 310-311). Those who believe in the Bible today are still arguing in such fashion. In America, Evangelical preachers and many other religious teachers assert that hurricanes, 9/11, and so on are the result of God’s anger at America’s ever growing slouch towards Sodom and Gomorrah.
“rhetoric.” They were taken to be “the very words of God” (Rom. 3:2) and “It is a dreadful thing to fall into the hands of the living God” (Heb. 10:31; Isa. 33:14: Ps. 50:22, 76:7, 90:11).609

I’m sorry to have to belabor this issue, but it seems necessary because many modern readers just don’t understand or feel the believed-reality and horror of these things as the very religious people of the seventeenth century did. We have to remember that we were not brought up in their world, a time in which most people were not educated, in which most people didn’t really understand what Galileo, Descartes, Harvey, Gilbert or Newton were up to. Their minds were “pre-scientific”, pre-Enlightenment, pre-Darwinian, pre-Nietzschean, pre-Marxian, pre-Freudian, pre-Einsteinian, etc. Many in this seventeenth century world, especially outside the great cities, had beliefs not far from those delineated by Sir Walter Frazier in his famous and important anthropological study The Golden Bough. Something like this is the world in which Spinoza was brought up into. 610 The vast majority of the masses then are very superstitious, so much so that even some Christian theologians lamented the excessive credulity of the people. 611

Outside the flats of Descartes and Spinoza and the ivory tower universities are the masses. This is the world of tanners, shop keepers, candle stick makers, smiths, and so on.

609 In Lucas’ record of the inquisition-like trial of Spinoza (days before his excommunication) in front of the judges of the synagogue, he tells us that Spinoza’s famous teacher Moteira asked Spinoza “if he was not afraid of falling into the hands of the living God?” See The Oldest Biography of Spinoza, ed. by A. Wolf, 49-50.
610 For further background and context, see Keith Thomas’s Religion and the Decline of Magic (New York, 1997) and Stuart Clark’s Thinking with Demons. The Idea of Witchcraft in Early Modern Europe (Oxford, 1997).
611 I’m reminded of Charles Dickens’s famous lines from his account of the later Enlightenment French Revolution: “It was the best of times, it was the worst of times; it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness; it was the epoch of belief, it was the epoch of incredulity; it was the season of Light, it was the season of Darkness; it was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair; we had everything before us, we had nothing before us.” This is indeed the full context of the Enlightenment. Compare this with Lucas’s testimony to what he most admired about his friend Spinoza: “But what I esteem most in him is that, although he was born and bred in the midst of a gross people who are a source of superstition, he had imbibed no bitterness whatever, and that he purged his soul of those false maxims with which so many are infatuated. He was entirely cured of those silly and ridiculous opinions which the Jews have of God” (Lucas, op. cited, 69).
The masses of these people are not learned Thomists or Scotists or Baconites or Cartesians or Hobbsians or Spinozists. On the contrary, these are the people that Spinoza so often refers to as the “common people”, the “masses”, “the ignorant”, “the credulous”, the “superstitious”, and so on. It is with the beliefs of many of these people that several early modern philosophers and theologians often speak of with contempt.612

Yet many of these same philosophers and theologians retained many of the superstitions of the masses. It has often seemed to me when reading some early modern philosophy scholars that they tend to forget that these scientists and philosophers themselves still maintained many of the most egregious superstitious beliefs of the people, even if in a far more educated and moderate way. Mersenne still felt it was justified that Noel Fournet had his tongue gouged out and then body burnt to a stake for arguing that the God of the Bible who predetermined the masses to an eternal torment was more immoral than the gods of the Greeks and Romans.613 Hobbes was believed to have a “fear of

612 For more on religious background of the seventeenth century in relation to its philosophy, see works such as Richard Popkin’s “The Religious Background of Seventeenth-Century Philosophy” in The Cambridge Companion History of Seventeenth-Century Philosophy, Volume I, edited by Daniel Garber and Michael Ayers with assistance from Roger Ariew and Alan Gabbey (UK: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 393-422. Popkin makes clear that the world of our early modern philosophers is not the world of our philosophers. He talks about undercurrents of “religious ideas and developments which may now look strange and distant from philosophy but were familiar to, and were taken seriously by, all the major philosophers of the period. These philosophers lived in societies dominated by religious institutions and lived through tremendous upheavals that were fundamentally generated by religious concerns – the Reformation, the Counter-Reformation, the Thirty Years’ War, the Puritan Revolution, the pogroms in Poland, the revocation of the Edict of Nantes. The point is not simply that religious ideas and events had an important influence on the philosophical thought of the period. Rather, these religious issues were deeply intertwined with philosophical conceptions of knowledge, revelation ...” and so on (393). “All of the heroes of modern philosophy were involved in, or influenced by” these issues. “Perhaps, if we recognized that our philosophical heroes ... lived in historical time and space, in some part religious time and religious space, we could better understand why they wrote on various topics” (416). In an earlier essay, Popkin tracks what he calls “The third-force philosophy” (p. 61) with “some of the strange combinations of new science and theology that develop during the century” (p. 35) in his “The Third Force in 17th Century Philosophy: Scepticism, Science and Biblical Prophecy” from Nouvelles de la Republique des Lettres, 1983, 35-63.

613 An anecdote reported by Mersenne: “saying [of a certain Noel, executed at Metz] that he would rather have preferred to adore a Saturn who eats his children, an adulterous Jupiter, a drunkard Bacchus, a deceiving Mercury, or believe that there is no God at all, than to believe Him to be the author of the ruin of humankind, and of the perdition of reprobates, who surmount the number of the
phantoms and demons"\textsuperscript{614}; Locke and Bishop Berkeley left "ample scope for credence in Satan, demons, magic, and witchcraft to persist"; "Boyle, Henry More, Ralph Cudworth, and Joseph Glanvill battled to stabilize belief in the existence and operations of apparitions and spirits as part of a wider drive to uphold religion, authority, and tradition."\textsuperscript{615} Pascal and Arnauld still believed in the miraculous healing powers of relics such as the sacred thorn.\textsuperscript{616} Leibniz, as we saw, still evidently believed many central doctrines of Christian theology including prophecy and eternal torment. Newton spent more time trying to work out the chronology of end time Bible prophecy than he did on math and physics. The point I'm trying to make here is that these things are, if not in the foreground, at least powerfully in the background, of even many (or most) of the early modern philosophers and scientists. "For while the Scientific Revolution, the rise of the mechanical world-view, and Lockean empiricism all helped erode the foundations on which older notions about magic, wonder-working, and the supernatural rested, neither Cartesianism with its dichotomy of substances, nor Locke's epistemology, nor any mainstream trend of the Early

\textsuperscript{614} As we mentioned above, regarding the rule of giving priority to the central principles of a philosophers' philosophy, the accuracy of this claim is in serious question. If Hobbes was truly an atheist, as some argue, than by entailment, he could not have believed in the demons. The full passage of the quote above from Israel's \textit{Radical Enlightenment} reads as follows: "During the last third of the seventeenth century, the scene was set for a vast triangular contest in Europe between intellectual conservatives, moderates, and radicals over the status of the supernatural in human life and the reality of the Devil, demons, spirits, and magic. The intellectual battles was heralded by Naude and Hobbes, the latter, despite being celebrated for his personal timorousness and 'fear of phantoms and demons' – as Bayle and, later, d'Holbach delighted in informing readers – nevertheless injecting a measure of skepticism about diabolical power and the reality of spirits" (\textit{Rad. Enl.} 375). Israel cites several passages from Hobbes's \textit{Leviathan} (q.v. 210-19, 331-2, and 349-63) plus arguments in Martinich's \textit{Two Gods} (250-4, 252-5) and Clark's \textit{Thinking with Demons} (303 and 310).

\textsuperscript{615} Israel, \textit{Rad. Enl.}, 375-6. See rest of chapter 21 "The Death of the Devil"

\textsuperscript{616} See for instance Angelique Arnauld \textit{abbess of Port Royal} by Francis Martin (New York: Macmillan, 1873). For an epistemological study of this, see Peter Dear’s essay "Miracles, Experiments, and the Ordinary Course of Nature" (\textit{Isis} 81, 1990, 663-683.)
Enlightenment provided a rationale for total repudiation of belief in spirits and magic."\textsuperscript{617}

Spinoza’s philosophy, however, is more radical. He dispenses with all of it. As Yovel puts it:

After all, Spinoza was not just a reformer of revealed religion but its adamant enemy; his philosophy of immanence (of so-called pantheism) did not merely oppose the established religions but all other philosophies of reason that affirmed the transcendent status of God and the duality between God and his world. Spinoza was in this respect a loner even among the daring heterodox minority.\textsuperscript{618}

The Question: How?

We introduced our chapter on the Greeks as precursors to the Radical Enlightenment with the following words:

The question I explore in this dissertation and chapter is similar to the question historian Will Durant poses in the Preface to his \textit{The Age of Voltaire: A History of Civilization in Western Europe from 1715 to 1756, With Special Emphasis on the Conflict Between Religion and Philosophy}. He asks: ‘How did it come about that a major part of the educated classes in Europe and America has lost faith in the theology that for fifteen centuries gave supernatural sanctions and supports to the precarious and uncongenial moral code upon which Western civilization has been based?’\textsuperscript{619}

And:

One can ask this same question with respect to the history of the ancient Greeks. How did it come about that a culture that believed what the divinely inspired poets sung of (such as that the Milky Way was the breast milk of the goddess Hera, Zeus’s divine wife, etc.) eventually produced philosophers who denied the literal truth of such claims? How did the Greeks get from Hesiod to Plato or Epicurus, from theological accounts of things to a more naturalistic account of things?

The question I wish to ask in this section is similar to the one I investigated with respect to the Greeks. The question I want to ask in this section however has to do with

\textsuperscript{617} Ibid. 376.
\textsuperscript{618} Yovel, op. cited, 143.
\textsuperscript{619} This question, in keeping with the language that we have been using, is the same as: “How did the European Radical Enlightenment come about?”
only one individual and not a whole culture. The question I want to ask is this: “How did it come about that a young, innocent, devout Jew, brought up in an orthodox believing household and community, came to lose the precious and holy faith in the religion of his Fathers that for approximately twenty centuries gave meaning, nurture, and sustenance?”

To speak in the language of the orthodox defenders of revelation who came to condemn him: How did Spinoza go from being a kind of “son of the morning” (Isa.14:12; Ezek. 28) whom the elders look upon as the “future light of their community and their faith” to “the apostate Jew working together with the devil”? How did he go from being like a Jesus in the Temple asking questions, learning, and amazing his teachers at 12-years-old, to the greatest of Jewish apostates and an antichrist? What happened to him to account for how he used to believe in a God who literally inscribed the Ten Commandments on stone tablets at the top of Mt. Sinai and handed them over to Moses, to calling such accounts crass, common, imaginary, frenzied, childish, and superstitious? How did he go from believing that he and his people were the Chosen Ones specially selected by God from all the nations to someone who taught that such notions are arrogant and bigoted? How did he go from devout observer of the Law to a preacher who taught that the Lawgiver Himself is merely the anthropomorphic projection of our desperate human imaginative hopes and fears?

This will be the subject of our next section.

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621 Nadler reports that “Spinoza must have been an intellectually gift youth, and he would have made a strong impression on his teachers as he progressed through the levels at the community’s school on the Houtgracht. He probably studied at one time or another with all of the leading rabbis of Talmud Torah, including Menasseh ben Israel ... who was perhaps the most famous Jew in Europe, and who was teaching in the elementary grades when Spinoza attended the school; the mystically inclined Isaac Aboab da Fonseca; and Saul Levi Mortera, the chief rabbi of the congregation whose tastes ran more to rational philosophy and who often clashed with Rabbi Aboab over the relevance of the kabbalah” (Stephen Nadler. *Spinoza’s Ethics: An Introduction* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 3.
622 In the Preface to his *Theological-Political Treatise*, the Appendix of Part I of his *Ethics*, and in many of his letters, Spinoza not only delineates his philosophy of religion toward Judaism and Christianity, but actually formulates a full blown general theory of the origin and development of religion. Spinoza argues that “Numerous examples of [his theory that fear and hope are the springs of all
Unto us a child is born: The orthodox education of Baruch

religion] can be cited, illustrating quite clearly the fact that only while fear persists do men fall prey to superstition, that all the objects of spurious reverence have been no more than phantoms, the delusions springing from despondency and timidity. This being the origin of superstition ... like all other instances of hallucination and frenzy, is bound to assume very varied and unstable forms, and that, finally, it is sustained only by hope, hatred, anger, and deceit. For it arises not from reason but from emotion ...” (TTP, Shirley, 1-2).

623 His given Hebrew name, “Baruch”, ironically enough, means “blessed one.” “Baruch” is the name his parents gave him and “as he would have been called in the classroom and in the synagogue” (Nadler, Spinoza’s Heresy, 2001, 1). “Bento” (also understood as “blessed”) is the Portuguese name he was called as a boy. During his “backsliding” period, when his views and his life got further and further away from the Jewish community, he took on the Latinized version of his name “Benedict” or “Benedictus.” On the first page of Colerus’s biography of Spinoza, he states: “His Parents, a little while after his Birth, named him Baruch. But having afterward forsaken Judaism, he changed his name, and called himself Benedict in his Writings, and in the Letters” (if this account is true, this would be tantamount to a kind of reverse name-change compared to the famous name changes of Petra (pebble) to Peter (rock), or of Saul to Paul; that is, instead of marking a religious new step in life, Benedict marks his repudiation of the old religious life). R.H.M. Elwes’ puts it this way: “His separation from Judaism was marked by his substituting for his name Baruch the Latin equivalent Benedictus” (http://users.telenet.be/rwmeijer/spinoza/bio.htm). Nadler hypothesizes that he may have made this name change in “association with university life – where all instruction and learned discourse was in Latin” (See Nadler’s biography of Spinoza on his name on p. 42 and 163).

624 Regarding the name of Spinoza, Matthew Stewart states the following: “To the delight of the philosopher’s future detractors, the family name, Spinoza ... derives from the Spanish for ‘thorny’” (Matthew Stewart. The Courtier and the Heretic: Leibniz, Spinoza, and the Fate of God in the Modern World (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 2006), 19). For these detractors, Jewish and Christian, Spinoza was considered “a thorn in their sides.” And, because they knew what God taught in His Word, they sought to rid the land of his presence and teachings. Scripture passages like the following explain how it is that they could treat “infidels” like Spinoza the way they did. These scriptures, to them, also command and justify how they must treat such “atheists.” This is an extremely important historical point, which is usually overlooked or misinterpreted in the light of the more liberal interpretations given to such scripture passages today. Many commentators today explain away the true reason why various synagogues and churches treated their opponents as they did. This revisionist account claims that their forefathers acted unbiblically, that they were misled by cultural factors, or that such egregious acts were perpetuated only by fanatics. This does not appear to be the case, however. On the contrary, they actually practiced scripture more conscientiously in this area than their future more liberal believers. The fundamental point here is that they didn’t just say that the scriptures guided them; in many respects such as this one, they actually practiced what it taught. The following passage is only one of hundreds used to explain and justify their actions: “And the Lord spake unto Moses, ... saying, Speak unto the children of Israel, and say unto them, When ye are passed over Jordan into the land of Canaan; Then ye shall drive out all the inhabitants of the land from before you, and destroy all their pictures, and destroy all their molten images, and quite pluck down all their high places: ... But if ye will not drive out the inhabitants of the land from before you; then it shall come to pass, that those which ye let remain of them shall be pricks in your eyes, and thorns in your sides, and shall vex you in the land wherein ye dwell” (Numbers 33: 50–52, 55, my emphasis (KJV)).

625 You’ll forgive me for using biblical themes like this (e.g. referring to Spinoza’s birth and life using a passage of scripture that both Jewish and Christian biblical scholars interpret as referring to the Messiah-Saviour (“Unto us a child is born”, Isa. 9). I do so advisedly because one of the major aims of
There was every reason to believe that Baruch de Espinoza would grow up to become a great rabbi in the synagogue or an important religious leader in the Jewish community. Stephen Nadler reports that “As a boy—known to his fellow Portuguese as Bento—he had undoubtedly been one of the star pupils in the congregation’s Talmud Torah school. He was intellectually gifted, and this could not have gone unremarked by the congregation’s rabbis. It is possible that Spinoza, as he made progress through his studies, was being groomed for a career as a rabbi.”627

He was born into a Portuguese Jewish family in the Jewish quarter of Amsterdam in 1632. His father, Michael de Espinoza, was a prominent merchant and supporter of the Jewish community, and so Baruch (or Bento) was lodged in a highly regarded school of

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626 The focus of these biographical vignettes is mostly to give some account of Spinoza’s overwhelmingly religious education and then, next, to note what forces and ideas led to Spinoza’s religious and Jewish philosophical apostasy. It is outside the purview of this dissertation to look into all the scholarly issues involved here exhaustively. For the latest, most comprehensive, and, I think, by far the best biography in English to date, see Stephen Nadler’s *Spinoza: A Life*. Nadler somehow manages to weave 17th century history, geography, art, culture, economics, politics, Judaism, the various church confessions and theologies, and philosophy all together in one magnum opus – a brilliant tour de force. See also W. N. A. Klever’s “Spinoza’s life and works” in *The Cambridge Companion to Spinoza* (UK: Cambridge University Press, 1996) and Yirmiyahu Yovel’s *Spinoza and Other Heretics: The Marrano of Reason* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989).

627 Nadler, [http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/spinoza/](http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/spinoza/). If this is so (and I think that it is so) then a further element needs to be pointed out. And that is that their lives as rabbis, though consumed in biblical and rabbinic studies as part of their religious exercises, were also given to prayer and worship. In other words, intellectual ability and accomplishments are not the only requisites for becoming a rabbi or religious teacher and leader. If he was seen as a possible future rabbi or leader, his devoutness would also be part of the analysis. The Nadler quote focuses on only his intellectual qualifications for the rabbinate. But there are spiritual or religious qualifications as well. If he was seen as a promising light for the religious community, as most of his biographers and the evidence shows, than it couldn’t have been *only* because he was smart. He had to be devout too.
Jewish learning, the Talmud Torah School. Spinoza, it seemed, had a bright future in the Jewish community before him. It is important to note here that Spinoza was “educated as a Jew”, and an orthodox Jew to boot. Despite the many agreements in theology with Christianity (creation, the Fall, Noah, Abraham, the Promised Land, etc.), his upbringing and education was emphatically different from the upbringing and education of a Roman Catholic, a Lutheran, an Anglican, a Calvinist, a Quaker, a Soccinian, or a humanist. In 1639, at the age of seven, Spinoza begins his education at the Talmud Torah School where he learns some Portuguese, Spanish, and Dutch, “But the education, of course, was primarily an introduction to Hebrew, the language of the Holy Scriptures, and the study of the law and the Talmud”. He thus received no education in Latin (the language of European learning) from his school.

His school was praised by many Jews of the time because the children learned Hebrew, “the entire Bible”, and “the essentials of Judaism.” His school taught the boys, as one observer put it: “until they are well versed in the Five Books of Moses down to the last verse.” They even chanted the Hebrew text, and one of the exercises that each of the boys had to do was to recite a verse “at the top of his voice in Hebrew and explain it in Spanish.” And there were further personal-devotional religious exercises: “All students under the age

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628 W. N. A. Klever. “Spinoza’s life and works” in The Cambridge Companion to Spinoza (UK: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 3. I should say here that, like Nadler, Klever warns his readers that his biography of Spinoza is “a reconstruction of Spinoza’s life story” (Klever 14) and is therefore speculative in parts. As I have learned from personal correspondence with Nadler, there is some question as to what “orthodox” means in the Jewish quarter in 17th century Amsterdam. So far as we can tell, it is not like the “orthodox” of the “ultra-orthodox” that may be found in Israel and Brooklyn New York today. So there are, as usual, important parsing and nuances to make in the use of such key terms as “orthodox” that we should keep in mind.

629 I think this difference in upbringing and education is important because I suspect that Spinoza did not know Christianity near as well as he did Judaism, even though he read the New Testament and had Christian friends from various denominations. This, I think, becomes important when we try to answer questions later such as “How could Spinoza have used the passage of 1 John as the epigraph to his TTP if he really knew his audience?”

630 Klever, op. cited, 14.

631 Nadler’s biography 61-62.

632 Nadler biography 62.
of sixteen were also expected to be present *every day* in the synagogue for evening prayers and to sing psalms.633 Beyond these more personal and emotional biblical exercises634, they also learned the prophets and translated parts of the Torah into Spanish.635 One Spinoza commentator summarized his education in this way: Spinoza’s “education was as deep as it was narrow”, for the “program consisted principally of memorizing the Bible, studying the Hebrew language, and learning Jewish customs” and, presumably, hardly any liberal education.636 The school’s educational curriculum was described by a visiting rabbi in the following words (which again shows the centrality of the Bible in his early years): “I saw that the small children learned the Pentateuch from the first to the last words, after this the other twenty four Books of the Bible and then the whole Mishna.”637

It is true that Spinoza had great teachers, but it must be underscored that they were orthodox638 through and through. Take Rabbi Mortera, for instance. Yovel points out that Rabbi Morteira’s dictum was that “he who philosophizes is evil.”639 Though Nadler points out that he was far more read in Jewish and non-Jewish writings than many have thought,

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633 Ibid. 63.
634 A further point regarding what kind of orthodoxy Spinoza’s synagogue practiced. In a recent (Sept. 2010) personal communication to this author, Nadler expresses his lack of certainty about the kind of devoutness Spinoza may have lived out: “The Portuguese Jews of Amsterdam were definitely not hasidic-like in fervor; I would say [they were] probably more like modern orthodox. But remember that it was a very oddly constituted community, since many of its members, especially in the early years, had been converses raised in Catholic environments. So the kind of ‘orthodox’ Judaism found among the Sephardim was unusual in Europe at the time.” And again: “I don’t see any overwrought Hasidic type of davening going on here. The modern orthodox, while certainly feeling their faith personally and deeply, do not adopt the ostentatious emotional displays that tends to accompany Hasidic prayer. Nadler goes on to say that “his ‘inner life‘ is completely hidden from us, and I would resist any kind of psychological speculating (such as Gullan-Wuhr does in her biography).”
635 Nadler, op. cited, 62-3, my emphasis.
636 Stewart, op. cited, 24.
637 Nadler, op. cited, 14-15.
638 It should be pointed out that by “orthodox” here is meant that they took the Bible literally and that it was the center of their beliefs and life. However, due to the history of their community, especially from Portugal and Spain, there were confusions and disagreements regarding several doctrinal issues. For details on these see Yirmiyahu Yovel’s *Spinoza and Other Heretics* (especially chapters 1 to 3), Nadler’s biography of Spinoza (chapters 1 to 4 and 6) and Nadler’s *Spinoza’s Heresy* (chapter 1, especially pages 4-5).
nevertheless, he still believed and wrote to persuade others that the Law of Moses is truly and literally from God. Thus he “was no liberal when it came to proper understanding of Jewish law.” Jews who continue to profess Christianity (even against their desire), who attend mass, and deny their Jewishness are “guilty before God.” Worse, he believed that Jews who don’t get circumcised “risk eternal punishment” and that “anyone who failed to follow the laws of the Torah, and who openly denied the principles of the faith, is no righteous person and will be eternally punished for his transgressions.”

Nadler also makes it clear that “the Jewish leaders … no doubt frowned upon members of the congregation turning to the non-Jewish world to further their education (unless it was for purposes of professional training, such as in medicine or the law) …. one probably risked censure by steeping too far into the contemporary domain of Gentile letters and sciences.” That way lies “rabbinical opprobrium.”

In his youth therefore Spinoza almost certainly believed everything in the Torah and the prophets as he had been taught to. He believed in the Creation of the world by Yahweh; he accepted Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden and the talking serpent as literal history; he held to the story of Noah’s ark and of God killing everyone in the world by rain except for Noah’s family; he accepted, on its face, all the stupendous miracles God did in behalf of the Israelites so that they could escape Egypt and expropriate God’s gift of the Promised Land after exterminating its inhabitants. He believed in the Temple worship and its animal sacrifice, the Levitical priesthood, and of course, the all-important coming of Messiah and his kingdom - that “He will judge between the nations and will settle disputes for many

640 Ibid. 52-3; see also 92 ff. We should remember that the doctrine of eternal punishment is not unique with Christianity; forms of Judaism and Islam also preach it. Christianity though receives most of the criticism for it. It must also be pointed out that while Klever thinks that Morteira was among Spinoza’s schoolmasters (Klever 15), Nadler says he’s not sure if Spinoza was one of Moretera’s students. We know that he was a teacher at his school, but we don’t know for sure if he studied under him. Nadler does say, however, that Spinoza probably studied under Morteira once a week in the Keter Torah yeshiva sometime after Spinoza left daily school at Talmud Torah.

641 Nadler biography 100.
peoples. They will beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks. Nation will not take up sword against nation, nor will they train for war anymore” (Isa. 2:4).

Bento most probably also looked forward to the visionary millennium and future time in which “The wolf and the lamb will feed together, and the lion will eat straw like the ox, but dust will be the serpent's food. They will neither harm nor destroy in all my holy mountain,' says the Lord" (Isa. 65:25).

The foregoing facts and more lead us to infer that the young Spinoza was probably devout. In 1645 at 13 he underwent his bar mitzvah, with the religious ceremony of publically reading and explaining a passage of Torah. According to Jewish law, at 13 boys are considered morally responsible for their lives and actions. Not too long after this Spinoza decides to leave his school despite his father’s wishes. His life then takes a new track whose trajectory will take him far from everything he has held dear. In fact, the rest of his life looks like a reaction to the faith of his upbringing, for just about every book he wrote takes this heritage to task – if not explicitly, at least implicitly.

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642 Nader: “to all appearances, [he lived] a perfectly normal orthodox life and remarkable perhaps only for his intelligence.” However, Stephen Nadler’s extensive biography of Spinoza is at first cautious on this subject. To him there is no absolutely certain documentary proof that Spinoza was a devoted Jew. He argues that this period "is, unfortunately, hidden from us, possibly forever", and that “There is so little surviving material, so little that is known for certain about the details of Spinoza’s life, particularly before 1661 (when his extant correspondence begins), that we can only speculate on his emotional and intellectual development ... But what a rich field for speculation it is.” And again, later: “But nothing is known about Bento’s activities during these years, aside from whatever ordinary assumptions one can legitimately make about the life of a young man in an orthodox Jewish community in Amsterdam” (Nadler, Spinoza: A Life, op. cited, xi, 79). Yet none of the biographies I’ve read on Spinoza, including his earliest ones, say anything that would make us think otherwise. Moreover, there’s a lot that one can know by inference from things he has written in his future books and correspondence. Indeed, as Nadler’s biography proceeds, he tells us more and more about the early life of Spinoza that makes one feel convinced that he most probably was devout. In a personal communication on this issue, I asked Nadler about this and he answered my query: "We do not have any documentary evidence one way or another on this. But there is every reason to believe that, as a boy growing up in a family that was part of an observant Jewish life" [Note the “there is every reason to believe that.” All these reasons may not be “documentary evidence”, but they are nevertheless evidence.] Nadler goes on to say something which I take to be very important in understanding why Spinoza devoted so much of his labor, time, and life to assessing and criticizing biblical and theological claims: “I’m certain that his loss of faith and commitment – which seems not to have occurred until the early 1650’s – was a major even in his life” (5/24/10). I agree.
Spinoza biographers W.N.A. Klever and Nadler believe that Spinoza “did not finish the higher education which prepares for the rabbinate”\textsuperscript{643}. They argue that Spinoza “must have attended the school until he was a young man of about fourteen years old” and then went on to work for his father.\textsuperscript{644} This means that Spinoza's formal schooling went only up to the 4\textsuperscript{th} grade. Still, after this he may have, or probably did, further schooling at \textit{Keter Torah} once a week. Spinoza then never did get to study Talmud, Mishna, Gemara, “and other classical texts” while at Talmud Torah. These he had to study on his own, though it may be the case that he studied these texts under rabbi Mortera at \textit{Keter Torah}, as well.\textsuperscript{645}

Nadler and Klever believe that his father was against his son’s decision to leave school.\textsuperscript{646} If this is so, then why would he go against his father’s wishes and leave Talmud Torah, especially because he could have had a bright future there if he stayed? So many questions; so few definitive and certain answers. There are some things that are definitive and certain, however: the Spinoza of 1646 at 14 and the Spinoza of 1656 at 24 are as different from each other as the Counter-Enlightenment is from the Radical Enlightenment. He had not only lost his faith, but he was to become one of the world’s most deadly philosophical enemies of traditional religion. How did this happen?

Before answering this question in some detail, let us first give a quick overview of Spinoza’s life to give the reader a clear and simple representation of the timeline of Baruch to Benedict, from believing Jew to apostate to one of the 17\textsuperscript{th} century's greatest philosophers. Then we’ll be at a better vantage point to assimilate more of the scholarly details.

\textsuperscript{643} Klever, op. cited, 15.
\textsuperscript{644} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{645} Nadler’s biography, 64-65.
\textsuperscript{646} Ibid. 59.
Brief chronology of an apostate and antichrist

[The following is a rough chronology of Spinoza’s life from his birth in 1632 to his excommunication in 1656. It is my synthesis based on all the major Spinoza biographies, especially Klever’s and Nadler’s.647]

I. 1632 to 1646 (0 to 15)

1632: Born to Portuguese-Jewish parents in Amsterdam.
1639: At seven begins orthodox Talmud Torah School.
1645: At 13, Spinoza has bar mitzvah.
1646: At 14, he probably leaves Talmud Torah and begins work with his father.
1647: At around 15 Spinoza raises questions which his rabbis do not answer sufficiently.

II. 1646 to 1650 (14 to 18) (?)

Spinoza the business man by day and student by night enters the larger world of European culture, of the Gentiles, of Christians – Lutherans, Roman Catholics, Calvinists, Collegiants, free thinkers, materialists, and so on.

Probably reads the great Jewish theologians, Bible commentators, and philosophers.

Probably also read some non-Jewish biblical critical works.

Probably has a circle of contacts and friends, including free spirits, which encourage his learning further.

III. Early 1650s to 1656 (18 to 24)

His father dies in 1654 (when Spinoza is 22).

Leaves Jewish community and begins to study Latin, the classics, science, and philosophy at the Van den Enden household. It is highly probable that he learns Bacon and Descartes.

647 As was pointed out above, not all Spinoza biographers are agreed on the dating of, or even the actuality of, some occurrences in Spinoza’s life. In my chronology above, I’ve done my best to avoid the most debatable points. The least substantiated by certain documentary evidence in my account above is in II. 1646 to 1650. The subdivisions in this timeline are what I take to be the most important periods of Spinoza’s life in relation to the question of what Klever called his “process of secularization.” Others may differ.
Spinoza is summoned to give an account of his beliefs and behavior before the judges of the community.

On July 27, 1656 the Jewish community pronounces the most stringent cherem in its history against Spinoza’s apostasy.

IV. 1656 to 1663

Writes his Treatise on the Emendation of the Intellect along with the Short Treatise on God, Man and His Well-being.

1663: Publishes The Principles of Cartesian Philosophy.

V. 1663 to 1677

1670: Publishes the Theological Political Treatise which is an unrelenting assault on both Judaism and Christianity.

1677: Spinoza dies. Most of his works, including the Ethics and correspondence, are published. Though less direct, the Ethics also is at bottom a sustained attack on the theologies and philosophies generated by Jewish and Christian ideas.

With this quick and simple outline before us, we can now look more closely at Spinoza’s life to gain greater insight into the far-reaching transformation he underwent in his thinking.

We begin in 1646 when he is 14-years-old and has decided to leave school.
"the ever-entrancing question: how did Spinoza come to be Spinoza? i.e., how did this young man, raised in the Portuguese Jewish community in Amsterdam, come to rebel against the religious tradition in which he was raised, and become the symbol in Western thought of the rational reconstruction of religion" – Edwin Curley

[In the ten year period from 1646 to the 1656 excommunication, from ages 14 to 24, Spinoza leaves school, goes into his father’s business, meets all sorts of people, including free thinkers, his faith dissipates, studies a great deal, his father dies, he leaves the Jewish quarter, he comes to reject the religion of his father, he meets, lives with, and studies Latin, the classics, the sciences, philosophy, Bacon and Descartes, under Franciscus van Enden, and then begins his writings.]

Questions to doubts

At the end of our section on Baruch’s orthodox education, we mentioned that in 1646 at 14 he decides to leave school. We asked the question then, “Why would he go against his father’s wishes and leave Talmud Torah, especially because he would have had a bright future there if he stayed?” Why did he leave Talmud Torah when he could have gone on to the rabbinate or greater leadership, with all the accruements that such a life would have brought? Something or some things evidently happened.

648 Edwin Curley, “Spinoza and the Science of Hermeneutics,” 4. I’m not entirely sure all that Curley may mean by the expression “rational reconstruction of religion”, but as he himself points out, there are two schools of thought with respect to the question of Spinoza and God or religion: one that argues that Spinoza and his philosophy are atheistic through and through; and another, “atheistic” with respect only to traditional and all anthropomorphic religious conceptions, but that might nevertheless hold out some kind of heterodox view of God.

649 I wish to point out, once again, that the following account should be thought of as hypothetical (e.g. my current best guess) and not certain. Most of the top contemporary Spinoza scholars make this caveat, and therefore so should this account which is mostly based on theirs. But even if much in the following account were somehow false, the biographical, educational, religious, social, and historical details provided to give some account of Spinoza’s journey from faith to unbelief can’t help but to enrich our knowledge of Spinoza, his life, and times. And for nothing else, such enrichment makes the study valuable. This is attested to by Spinoza biographers and scholars, as well. Take Nadler’s exhaustive account, for instance: though he sometimes makes the most skeptical of comments about many of the details in on Spinoza, he nevertheless devotes whole books to discussing these details.
At 14 or 15 we learn in the earliest biography we have of Spinoza (which was probably written by his friend Lucas which may have been reported by Spinoza)\(^{650}\) that he started to have some questions and doubts at this time. This biographer records that Spinoza’s narrow education’s “study of Hebrew Literature” “was not capable of satisfying completely a brilliant mind like his.”\(^{651}\) He had raised questions to some of the rabbis, but they were not able to sufficiently answer or resolve his questions or doubts. Baruch knew enough not to ask further questions so as not to embarrass the rabbis. So he kept his doubts and questions to himself, and worked on these on his own.

He was not yet fifteen years old when he raised difficulties which the most learned among the Jews found it hard to solve. And though such extreme youth is hardly the age of understanding, still he had enough of it to perceive that his doubts embarrassed his teacher. Being afraid to irritate him, he pretended to be very satisfied with his answers, contenting himself with writing them down in order to make use of them at the proper time and place.\(^{652}\)

So there we have it. Spinoza’s earliest biographer tells us one of the first causes of Spinoza’s eventual loss of faith. Klever and Nadler seem to agree with this account. For them, Spinoza used the decision to leave Torah Talmud to get free from the intellectual constraints, pressure, and narrow-mindedness of Talmud Torah. Klever interprets Spinoza’s decision to leave in this way:

He had refused to continue his studies in the higher courses in Jewish theology, although his father, a faithful and perhaps also conservative member of the community recommended them forcefully … [But Spinoza’s] critique of the Jewish system … deepened. He could only free himself from their pressure by a commercial participation in public life in his father’s business; this seemed to him a promising way out.\(^{653}\)

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\(^{650}\) Lucas notes that because “it was not safe to write about Spinoza in a friendly or respectful manner” and that it was in fact better to go “out of their way to throw mud at Spinoza in order to divert attention from themselves”, “our reliable information about the life of Spinoza is rather meager” (The Oldest Biography of Spinoza, ed. A. Wolf, 18-19). More evidence for this is the fact that the oldest biography was written anonymously.

\(^{651}\) Ibid. 42.

\(^{652}\) Ibid.

\(^{653}\) Klever, op. cited, 17, my emphasis. Like Klever, Nadler is also in general agreement with the Lucas account. See his Spinoza: A Life, 100.
His thinking evidently started to change. Somehow or other he began to think *independently*. Somehow or other he began to think *differently*. He began to believe his own thought in spite of the conspiracy of his society to be a conformist. He began to entertain and then to take seriously *doubts* – doubts about the beliefs, interpretations, and practices of the ole' time religion of his faith-community. He probably heard some things and read some things, and these, along with his reasoning, fueled further doubts. He was a smart, dedicated, studious kid, so he almost certainly read a great deal. There are several factors that one can cite as (at least) influences in his thinking which led to further doubts and then, eventually, to the total loss of faith in Judaism and in all traditional religion. Some of these probably had a more profound effect on Spinoza’s thinking then others.

More questions, more doubts, more knowledge: 1646 to 1650 from age 14 to 18 (?) 

From Jewish sources\(^{654}\)

*Introduction*

So Spinoza leaves school and begins to work for his father’s import-export firm. This takes him away from the pressures to conform at school and into the larger world of European culture, of the Gentiles, of Christians – Lutherans, Roman Catholics, Calvinists, Collegiants, free thinkers, materialists, and more. Sometime during this period, it is believed that he gained a wider circle of contacts and friends, and may even have eventually been going to meetings in which some members were unbelievers. None of Spinoza’s biographers doubt that all these contacts and influences went into the cauldron of the thinking, comparing,

\(^{654}\) Because most works which discuss Spinoza’s intellectual influences emphasize non-Jewish philosophical sources, I wish to focus on the major Jewish influences (as Yovel and Nadler have done) especially with respect to their biblical theological underpinnings.
contrasting, and testing that were going on in this young man’s mind about his religion and all religion.

We can’t give a month by month or even a year by year chronology of what he read, what influenced him, who he met, who he talked to, what Jewish thinkers most influenced him, what non-Jewish meetings he may have went to, etc. But we do know that from 1646 to 1650 he amassed a great deal of knowledge. During this period, some think that he read some of the great Jewish theologians, Bible commentators, and philosophers. His weekly *Keter Torah* classes under rabbi Mortera may have helped in this. Nadler says that he kept up his studies even after he went to work for his father.655 Nadler also believes that it is almost certain that Spinoza began to closely study the great Jewish philosophers during his businessman period while attending weekly yeshiva classes. But he makes it clear that Spinoza probably did not study the Talmud or the Mishnah or Gemara much, though he no doubt heard many quotes and thoughts on them from his teachers. Even though “Mortera’s Keter Torah group was devoted to studying primarily ‘The Law’ … He may also have provided his more enterprising and capable students – among whom no doubt, he counted Spinoza – with readings in medieval Jewish Bible commentary (particularly Rashi and Ibn Ezra) and classical Jewish philosophy … Mortera would [probably] have introduced his students to the works of Maimonides, Saadya Gaon, and Gersonides, among others.”656

Like Nadler, Yovel also takes up the question of what Jews and Jewish theological and philosophical influences may have assisted Spinoza in his eventual rejection of religion. Yovel credits Harry A. Wolfson with showing that

the young Spinoza’s reading the works of Jewish medieval philosophers may well have provided him with ample food for heterodox thought...In other words, the tradition of Jewish philosophy itself – from Maimonides and Gersonides, Ibn Ezra and Crescas to Yehuda Abrabanel (Leone Ebreo) – provided Spinoza with ideas and clues that ... could well inspire bold and dangerous thinking. In this sense, there is

655 Nadler’s biography 89.
656 Ibid. 93.
some justice in Rabbi Morteira’s dictum, that “he who philosophizes is evil”...Yet in
to plunge into philosophy, a young man like Spinoza must have already
possessed an inquisitive disposition and a restless mind; and this he could have
drawn through a thousand arteries from the mental and educational background of
his youth... The combination of his specific cultural [Marrano] and personal
background with the body of ideas and arguments in Jewish philosophy could well
have sparked in Spinoza a critical and inquisitive flame – nourished mainly, if not
exclusively, from Jewish life itself – long before he came into contact with outside
influences and before he met other heterodox figures within the community and
entered into a mutual relationship with them.657

Like Nadler’s account of Spinoza’s thought, this contextual assessment adds to the standard
contemporary philosophical and scientific story that is usually emphasized in accounts of
the influences that led Spinoza to reject religion. The only thing that I would disagree with
in Yovel’s/Wolfson’s account as given above is that he fails to realize or note that the major
Jewish philosophers that he cites obtained much or most of their philosophical ideas not
from specifically Jewish sources, such as preeminently in the Bible. On the contrary, much
or most of their sources ultimately stem from the pagan rationalist Greek philosophers.

Menasseh ben Israel

Another probable significant influence in Spinoza’s thinking, which serves as
another example to demonstrate that doubts and challenges to the faith were in the air in
17th century Europe (even in strongly devout areas such as the Amsterdam Jewish quarter),
we may take the case of rabbi Menasseh ben Israel. Menasseh ben Israel is important for
our study because some scholars believe that Spinoza was greatly influenced by Menasseh
ben Israel, who was “perhaps the most worldly ... rabbi of the seventeenth century.”658 Not
only was he more worldly than the other rabbis, but “He was, without question, the most
famous Jewish apologist of his time.”659

657 Yovel, op. cited, 84.
658 Nadler biography 93-4.
659 Ibid. 96.
In his essay "Maimonides, Spinoza, and the Book of Job" Edwin Curley reports that Manasseh ben Israel's book *The Conciliator* attempts to explain *all* the apparently contradictory passage in Scripture. His premise was that since the Bible is "in the highest degree true, it cannot contain any text really contradictory of another." Here we must note two very important details. First, it shows once again that the Spinoza’s teachers believed the literal truth of the scriptures very much as the Protestants like the Reformed did, that is, as the word of God. Secondly, because Ben Israel takes the Bible to be literally true, based on this premise, he assumes a methodology in biblical interpretation that the Bible cannot contradict itself.

Curley reports that Ben Israel’s methodology in reconciling scriptures that contradict one another is not very convincing. So, for instance, in "Whatever difficulties Spinoza may have had with Maimonides' [more liberal] treatment of Job, I suspect he recognized it to be superior to Manasseh's." But he also had a great deal of disagreement with Maimonides’ philosophy and treatment of scripture. Sounding very much like Hobbes against the scholastics, Spinoza complains that the religious thinkers in his time don’t teach anything but Aristotelian and Platonic speculations. Not to seem to constantly follow pagans, they have accommodated Scripture to these speculations. It was not enough for them to be insane with the Greeks, they wanted the prophets to rave with them. This clearly shows that they do not see the divinity of Scripture even through a dream.

We can tell from such background information then that Spinoza would have come face to face with some of the major intellectual defenses for (and therefore by entailment, some of the major arguments against) Judaism in his time. Ben Israel wrote another work published in 1651 in which "he tried to reconcile the apparent inconsistencies in Scripture..."

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661 Ibid. 34/42.

662 Ibid. 35/42.
with the help of ancient and modern commentaries.” He wrote this also “so that the
marranos, above all, could see that the central text of Judaism is not full of
contradictions.”663 Now why would a rabbi be writing such books unless at that time and
place there was a lot of talk, rumors, and books that taught that the Scriptures had
inconsistencies and was ‘full of contradictions’? And if this was the case, then anyone who
was paying attention to such debates, would no doubt be influenced by it.664 Eventually,
Spinoza will write his TTP, which will highlight many of the inconsistencies and
contradictions in biblical and traditional teachings. But, again, Spinoza’s anti-apologetics
was not unique for his time. This challenge to God’s Word was out and about, in the air, and
in people’s minds.

It should not be thought, however, that Menasseh was a rationalist or only
interested in rationally inclined apologetics. On the contrary, as in most things religious,
there is usually a mixture of the reasonable and the beyond-reasonable. In 1650 Menasseh
wrote Hope of Israel arguing that the Messiah was close at hand: “Menasseh could not say
for sure when redemption was to arrive – 1648 was a date bandied about by certain
kabbalists – but he believed it to be close at hand, ‘for we see many prophecies fulfilled’.”665
Spinoza owned a copy of a kabbalist work and Menasseh’s Hope of Israel and “was familiar
with Menasseh’s own writings...All of this...suggest – but by no means establishes – that
Menasseh played some kind of formative role in the broadening of Spinoza’s intellectual
horizons.”666

663 Ibid.
664 It is a well known phenomenon in the field of Religion that students who study at seminaries that
deal with apologetics often end up imbibing a lot of reasons to disbelieve, which then often leads to
the ending of their faith.
665 Nadler biography 96-7.
666 Ibid. 99-100. By the way, Ben Israel’s works, such as The Conciliator and The Hope of Israel, offer a
gold mine of information about many of the beliefs and practices of the Jews of the day. In his
dedication to The Hope of Israel, for instance, we learn that the prayer life of the Jews was more than
merely formal reading of prayers. Ben Israel states, “But I entreat you to be certain that I pour out
continual prayers to God for your happiness” (A3). I don’t know the extent to which Spinoza
About the influence that Menasseh probably had in Spinoza’s life, Nadler states:

It is possible that this enterprising, cosmopolitan, and well-connected rabbi with messianic interests was, at some point, Spinoza’s teacher... Menasseh was familiar with the writings of Issac La Peyrere, a French Calvinist who held that Moses was not the author of the Pentateuch, that there were many people in existence before Adam and Eve... and the arrival of the Messiah expected by the Jews was imminent. Menasseh, who wrote a refutation of the ‘pre-Adamite’ theory in 1656, may have been responsible for introducing the ‘young rebels’ in the Jewish community to La Peyrere’s ideas. Spinoza could certainly have been among his circle. He owned a copy of the Prae-Adamitae and used material from it in his own Bible criticism, and his familiarity with La Peyrere’s theses may stem from the time when he was still in the Jewish community.

Somewhere along the line then Spinoza also heard or read some of the heretical works of Uriel da Costa, Juan Prado, and biblical critics such as Isaac La Peyrere. Yovel and Nadler believe that this period of Jewish reading increased his critical questions and doubts about Judaism. It is plausible to believe also that these doubts extended to most biblical theology and to a great deal of the philosophy and science based on them.

Of the many Jewish sources that Spinoza read that no doubt nourished further questions and doubts, we may take Uriel da Costa as a kind of model example to show the reader how Enlightenment skeptical ideas even among the Jews were much in the air in 17th century Europe.

The case of Uriel da Costa as skeptical influence on Spinoza.

In the order of his book, Nadler suggests the case of Uriel Da Costa as possibly one of the first influences in Spinoza’s life that may have caused him some doubts because of the “dark shadow of heterodoxy” over the Talmud Torah congregation that came from him. However, there’s no certainty when Spinoza read Da Costa. We refer to this case here because, biographers and scholars such as Nadler have studied these works, but I can say that anyone who wants to get a better understanding of the Jewish mindset, theology, and devotional life at the time of Spinoza should study these works.

667 Ibid. 99.
668 See also Yovel, op. cited, on the influence other Jewish thinkers (including Da Costa) had on Spinoza - such as Juan Prado, Isaac La Peyrere, and others, pp. 42-84.
according to Nadler and other contemporary Spinoza biographers, Da Costa’s views “without question had an impact on Spinoza’s intellectual development” regarding doubts about the faith.669 Nadler suggests that Spinoza may very well have been influenced by Uriel da Costa’s heretical thinking. There were even probably some kinship ties between the Da Costa and the Espinoza families: “Either way, there is no doubt that Spinoza himself, like any member of the community at the time, was familiar with Da Costa’s heretical ideas; he probably meditated long and hard over them.”670

In the early to mid-1600s, Uriel da Costa (whose family was prominent in the Jewish community in Amsterdam) wrote books that were deemed blasphemous and heretical by the rabbis, teachers, and community. His father was a Christian and his mother a Judaizer. In his autobiography he tells us that he was brought up as a Christian in Portugal, and, like all good Christians, “he feared eternal damnation and confessed his sins regularly.”671 But then doubts started to annoy him. And then they got worse. This threw him into great turmoil. In his autobiography, he writes:

Since I found it difficult to abandon a religion to which I had been accustomed ever since the cradle and which, thanks to faith, had established deep roots in me, I uttered these doubts (when I was around twenty-two years old): Could what is said about another life be a fiction? Does the faith given to such sayings agree with reason? For reason directly repeats for me a number of things and ceaselessly whispers things altogether contrary [to faith].672

Note his mention that because his faith was inbred in him since the cradle, it established deep roots in him. This explains the extremely difficult, painful, and lengthy time it took him to finally accept the whispers of his reason against the prejudices of his upbringing. We think there is good reason to think this same slow and painful process occurred in the adolescent-to-young-adulthood years of Baruch. Note, too, Uriel’s use of the word “reason”

669 Nadler, op. cit., 72-3.
670 Nadler, op. cited, 66.
671 Ibid.
672 Ibid. 67.
here, and how he juxtaposes it with faith. Spinoza will use this same language not many years hence from his bar mitzvah.

Uriel’s autobiography shows that there are other Christians and Jews of the time that were suffering from attacks of Enlightenment rationalist works against their biblical theological beliefs even before Hobbes’s *Leviathan* or Spinoza and his *TTP*. At any rate, Da Costa worries: “Could what is said about another life be a fiction?” Talmud Torah Rabbi Mortera, of course, didn’t think so. He preached that Jews who violate the covenant and who reject the doctrines of the immortality of the soul and of the afterlife will suffer eternal torment. Da Costa’s case may be instructive to us in our attempts to understand the mentality of the young Spinoza. Some Spinoza biographies imply that Spinoza probably didn’t suffer much over the loss of his faith. But this seems hard to believe for several reasons, one of which may be learned from the case of Da Costa. Since thinkers such as Uriel feared eternal damnation because he was brought up to believe in such doctrines, why should it not be the case that Spinoza, his contemporary, would not equally fear eternal damnation, since he too was brought up to believe in it?

Wishing to resolve these doubts, Uriel tries his mother’s religion and converts to Judaism. He gets circumcised and then leaves Portugal to live in the Amsterdam Jewish community with his mother. But reason whispers things altogether contrary to this faith,

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673 This “time” has been called the “Enlightenment” by historians. Jonathan Israel uses historian Paul Hazard’s expression “Crisis of the European Mind” to “denote the unprecedented intellectual turmoil which commenced in the mid-seventeenth century, with the rise of Cartesianism and the subsequent spread of ‘mechanical philosophy’ or the ‘mechanistic world-view’, an upheaval which heralded the onset of the Enlightenment proper in the closing years of the century. Admittedly, new philosophical and scientific ideas such as Cartesianism cannot claim all the credit for engineering the resulting revolutionary transformation in European culture. New kinds of theological controversy often contributed both to the weakening the internal cohesion of the main confessional blocs [including within the Jewish community] and, as has been shown in the case of the decline of belief in Hell and eternal torment for the damned, to driving some of the most characteristic changes in attitude regarding traditional beliefs during this most decisive of all periods of cultural change” (Israel, *Radical Enlightenment*, 14). We see this at work in the theological controversies caused by Uriel da Costa and others (ex. Juan de Prado) within the Jewish community. To get a better understanding of the affects of the Enlightenment on Judaism, see Joseph Blau’s *Modern Varieties of Judaism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1966), especially chapters one and two.
too. At first he criticizes what he takes to be an excessive amount of “Pharisaism” in the rabbinic traditions of the Oral Law, which is the Talmud. At around this time he becomes bothered also by doubts about the immortality of the soul and of the hereafter or eternal life. Eventually he “rejected the rite of circumcision and mocked the usage of various articles of Jewish ritual, including tefillin (phylacteries), tallitot (prayer shawls), and mezuzot.”

Da Costa’s studies eventually lead him to argue that the human soul is mortal and does not survive the death of the body... it is not created by God separately and then placed in the body... Thus, it is necessarily as mortal and perishable as the human (or any) body. It follows that there is no afterlife, and no eternal reward or punishment.” As a result of these heresies, he is placed under a ban by the Hamburg and then the Amsterdam Jewish communities. He was also arrested and put in jail, and his book was burned.

Da Costa came to doubt the central claim of Judaism: “I came to the conclusion that the Law did not come from Moses, but is only a human invention, just like many other such inventions in the world... God, the author of the law of nature, could not contradict himself, which he must have done if he ordered man to fulfill commandments which are contrary to

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674 Nadler biography 68.
675 Nadler, op. cit., 69. Note: this gives us some documented visuals to add to our understanding of the orthodoxy of the Judaism of the time. Rembrandt’s “The Jews in the Synagogue” (1648) and the two drawings of the external and internal appearance of the Amsterdam Portuguese Synagogue (see Nadler’s biography of Spinoza plates 3, 4, and 5) don’t do justice to the far more biblical character that they possessed. If an artist depicted the goings-on in the temple during worship, a far more religious scene would be shown. The ark is the focal point of all Jewish worship. In it lay the Law of God. They used these physical, visible religious items in obedience to God’s commands to do so in the Torah in order to make sure that His people never forget Him, leave Him, or take Him for granted. For the meaning of “mezuzot” see http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mezuzah. The biblical sources for some of these religious practices are Exodus 13:9, Deuteronomy 6:4-9; 11:13-21; Numbers 15:38 and Deuteronomy 22:12 – “You shall put these words of mine on your heart and on your soul; and you shall tie them for a sign upon your arm, and they shall be as totafot between your eyes” (Deuteronomy 11:18). Note also, once again, how seriously and literally the Jews took the Scriptures. For the centrality of the ark (and the Law in it) in Jewish worship, see Ex. 25:10-16, 22; Lam. 2:1; Numbers 4:5-6; 10:33-36, 35:5; Josh. 4:5, 6:4-20; 1 Sam. 3:3; 2 Chron. 6:41.
676 Ibid. 69.
677 Ibid. 70.
a nature of which we know the author.” 678 Da Costa’s argument here is two-fold: the first is theoretical and the second is moral.

A cherem was pronounced against him, but (for whatever reasons) he consented to atone for his wickedness “by submitting to flagellation” of thirty-nine stripes in a horrible public scene in the Amsterdam synagogue (see his horrific description of this in Nadler’s Spinoza: A Life, pp. 71-2). This humiliation was more than he could bear. A few days later he committed suicide.

Though Spinoza was only eight years old when Da Costa killed himself,

Nonetheless, Da Costa’s views on the immortality of the soul, the status of the Torah – whether it had been written by Moses communicating the word of God or was simply an ‘invention’ by a number of people at some later time – and the superstitious nature of organized religion were widely discussed and long remembered within the community, and without question had an impact on Spinoza’s intellectual development. 679

To end this section on the Jewish influences which probably assisted Spinoza’s loss of faith, I wish to underscore a point implied by Yirmiyahu Yovel. Yovel implies that Spinoza would never have come to the philosophical positions he came to (in ethics, metaphysics, philosophy of mind, and more) had he not first achieved his in-depth analysis of biblical religion. In this sense, some central aspects of his philosophy stem from his experience of and searching critique of religion even before learning the new sciences, the new philosophy, and Descartes. 680 If the accounts are true that Spinoza’s early education at

678 Ibid. 71.
679 Nadler biography 72-73. Nadler seems confident in his account in many places in his biography; but then, at the same time, he cautions us that much of his account may not ultimately be true because we simply don’t have enough proof or certainty from the documented evidence available. Six pages after he writes the above, he says: “But nothing is known about Bento’s activities during these years (the early 40s), aside from whatever ordinary assumptions one can legitimately make about the life of a young man in an orthodox Jewish community in Amsterdam” (79). Still, a lot of credible assumptions and inferences can legitimately be made about the ordinary life of a young man in an orthodox Jewish community in Amsterdam, even if, at the same time, they cannot be perfectly proven.
680 While I accept this claim in one sense, I’m afraid I don’t in the expanded sense in which Yovel means it. For Yovel, as for Nadler, the Jewish community was more enlightened than has usually been depicted. But for Yovel, he thinks that it was so cultured and enlightened that Spinoza derived
Talmud Torah was almost exclusively religious, and that he had questions and doubts about religion as early as 14 or 15, then it is indeed the case that Spinoza was questioning, doubting, and testing religion even before he learned much about the new sciences, philosophies, and Descartes.

Doubts to unbelief to “mental crisis”: his non-Jewish studies in the classics, philosophy, and the sciences, early to mid-1650s.

At this point, we’re getting a better idea of the many forces at work against Spinoza’s faith.

After years of mostly Jewish and biblical studies, Spinoza begins to tire of his entire Jewish education. Nadler says:

Within just a few years, Spinoza must have been feeling a sufficient lack of contentment with the education he had acquired, and having some rather serious doubts about Judaism, both its dogma and its practices, was ready to seek enlightenment elsewhere. By the time Baruch was twenty-two, he may in fact have been undergoing a kind of spiritual and intellectual crisis similar to that experienced by Uriel da Costa over thirty-five years earlier.681

R. H. M. Elwes makes a stronger claim that Spinoza may have suffered a “mental crisis” somewhere in this period:

Meanwhile the brilliant Jewish student was overtaken by that mental crisis, which has come over so many lesser men before and since. The creed of his fathers was found unequal to the strain of his own wider knowledge and changed spiritual needs. The Hebrew faith with its immemorial antiquity, its unbroken traditions, its myriads of martyrs, could appeal to an authority which no other religion has

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all of his religious critique from his religious community and not from outside it: “He developed his reflections and criticisms of religion solely from within the world of contemporary Judaism.” He claims that Spinoza was able to accomplish this before having read any philosophy or science (Yovel, 5-6). At this point in my research on this matter, I take it that Nadler has the more up to date information on the level of culture of the Jewish community and of the dating of when and where Spinoza obtained the bulk of his secular learning in the classics, philosophy, and science – that is, that he derived these mostly from outside the Jewish community.

681 Ibid. 101, my emphasis. I checked with Nadler on this claim of “a kind of spiritual and intellectual crisis”, and, once again, he adds a strong skeptical caveat to his account of Spinoza’s loss of faith. In a personal communication to me he wrote: “the chronology of his loss of faith and how he felt about his herem – my best guess is found in my description of his gradual loss of faith in my biography. Sure, I’m certain he found it painful, but we have nothing to go on whatsoever about his actual feelings, so it’s all speculative.”

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equalled, and Spinoza, as we know from a passage in one of his letters, felt the claim
to the full. We may be sure that the gentle and reserved youth was in no haste to
obtrude his altered views, but the time arrived when they could no longer be with
honesty concealed.682

Nadler hypothesizes that Spinoza may have found "the ancient learning to which he
had devoted so much time too narrow to satisfy his natural curiosity for ideas."683 His dad's
death during this period, along with his continued intellectual exchanges with all sorts of
other gentile and Christian groups – all this probably exacerbated his straying from Moses,
the Law, Judaism, the Scriptures, and faith.684 Regarding the learning of new theological and
moral principles: he may have been influenced by Collegiants and disaffected Remonstrants,
Quakers, and Mennonites that true piety consists entirely in love of God and neighbor.685

During these years (ages 15-22), Spinoza would have been exposed to a variety of
liberal theological opinions and have come across much talk of new developments in
philosophy and science, such as Descartes' recent innovations in physics and mathematics.
Spinoza may even at this time have begun attending meetings of one or another of the
groups of freethinkers that proliferated in seventeenth-century Amsterdam and
participating in their discussions of religion, philosophy, and politics.686

Nadler says that it becomes clear that "by 1654 or 1655 he was devoting his spare
time to studies of an entirely different and secular nature."687:

around this time he decided to learn Latin, and almost all biographers date this
before the excommunication, Spinoza may not have been having much to do with
the Jewish community beyond what was required for his commercial activities and
what was minimally expected of a member-in-good-standing of the congregation. It
is likely that he was no longer attending Mortera's Keter Torah by this point.688

682 Benedictus de Spinoza. *A Theologico-Political Treatise and a Political Treatise*, translated and
introduced by R. H. M. Elwes (New York: Cosimo Inc., 2005), xii.
683 Nadler, op. cited, 101.
684 Nadler op. cited, 101.
685 Ibid. 107.
686 Ibid.
687 Nadler, footnote 29 on page 363.
688 Ibid. 102.
Lucas states that at around this time “he had so little intercourse with the Jews for some time that he was obliged to associate with Christians, and he formed ties of friendship with intellectual people.” These friends urged him to study Latin to pursue his studies, but Spinoza had the problem of finding a way of how to learn Latin. At around this time, he meets, and then studies, and then lives with Franciscus van den Enden, a former Jesuit, and now free thinker and “atheist.” Lutheran pastor and Spinoza biographer John Colerus blames Van den Enden for “sowing the first seeds and foundations of atheism in his young students.” 689 This may have been true for others, but these seeds were evidently in the soil of the mind of Spinoza before he knew Van den Enden, – though Van den Enden probably was a powerful influence in watering these seeds.

Nadler says that it is uncertain when Spinoza began studying in the Van den Enden household. But based on what can reasonably be surmised about his increasing dissatisfaction with his Jewish religious studies and his growing desire to learn more about philosophy and science (particularly contemporary developments in those fields), processes that almost certainly peaked while he was still a merchant and thus in his early twenties, it is plausible that Spinoza turned to the ex-Jesuit for instruction sometime around 1654 or 1655 – that is, before his excommunication from the Jewish community. 690

Klever agrees with Lucas’s account that Spinoza’s departure from the Jewish community and entry into Van den Enden’s world occurred before 1656. Based on the testimony of reformed theologian Salomon van Til, Lucas, Colerus, Bayle, and the text of the excommunication, Klever argues that Spinoza left the Synagogue because of his reading and learning in the sciences, including Descartes. 691 In his view, Spinoza probably met Van den Enden before his excommunication – maybe sometime in 1652. Here he learned not only Latin, the new science, and philosophy, but “atheism”, too. 692

689 Ibid. 104.
690 Ibid. 106.
691 Klever 18–21.
692 Klever 17.
It was during this period that Spinoza learned more about liberal politics and theology, as well. There seems to be no doubt then that his time at the Van den Enden's was of crucial importance to his intellectual and personal development...He must, by that point, have been articulating, at least in his own mind and perhaps also to others (which may have led to his excommunication), his dismissive views of religion. He may also have begun formulating, if only in a rudimentary form, the radical political, ethical, and metaphysical principles to which he would eventually give written systematic expression.693

During his time studying at the Van den Enden's he probably picked up further learning of the great classics694 along with further knowledge of the arts and sciences; for if Spinoza studied under Van den Enden, then he would have read "the ancient classics of poetry, drama, and philosophy – the literary legacy of Greece and Rome695 – as well as neoclassical works of the Renaissance."696 Moreover, Van den Enden's students would have at least been introduced "to Platonic, Aristotelian, and Stoic philosophy; to Seneca, Cicero, and Ovid; and perhaps even to the principles of ancient skepticism. They would also have read the great epics, tragedies, comedies, and histories of antiquity."697 He even had his students act out

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693 Nadler biography of Spinoza, 107.
694 Ibid. 108. I think Nietzsche's estimation of the value of the study of the Greeks, though overstated in part, is generally accurate: "Every prerequisite for an erudite culture, all the scientific methods were already there ... the prerequisite for a cultural tradition, for a uniform science; natural science, in concert with mathematics and mechanics, was on the best possible road – the sense for facts, the last-developed and most valuable of all the senses, had its schools and its tradition already centuries old! Is this understood? Everything essential for setting to work had been devised – methods, one must repeat ten times, are the essential, as well as being the most difficult, as well as being that which has habit and laziness against it the longest. What we have won back for ourselves today with an unspeakable amount of self-constraint – for we all still have bad instincts, the Christian instincts, somewhere within us – the free view of reality, the cautious hand, patience and seriousness in the smallest things, the whole integrity of knowledge – was already there! Already more than two millennia ago!... (Friedrich Nietzsche, The Antichrist, trans. Walter Kaufmann, 182-3). As we saw in our earlier chapter on the Greeks, it was this Greek rational culture that was a threat to not only Greek religion, but also to the Hebrew and then the Christian religion, as well. And this is why all three religions set their teeth against this culture. The point I'm trying to make here is that one should not think that Spinoza's study of the great Jewish philosophers and of 17th century philosophy and science were the only major influences that assisted in extricating Spinoza from the in-bred prejudices and "the main false assumptions that prevail regarding religion" (Spinoza, TTP, trans. Shirley, 3). As Nietzsche implies, the Greeks alone could have accomplished this.

695 The study of the classics alone, according to many thinkers such as Nietzsche, is sufficient to teach the love of truth and the passion for carefulness of methodology in attaining it.
697 Ibid. 109.
and give monologues of dramatic speeches, such as those of Terence. Nadler tells us further about the education he probably received there:

In addition to the education they received in classical literature and philosophy, Van den Enden’s students were almost certainly introduced to... recent developments in natural science. It seems likely that Spinoza’s familiarity with sixteenth- and seventeenth-century thinkers began under Van den Enden’s tutelage. His teacher could have given him lessons in the ‘new science’ and had him read Bacon, Galileo, and ... Bruno. He may also have directed him to humanists such as Erasmus and Montaigne... and told him to read Machiavelli, Hobbes, Grotius, Calvin, and Thomas More.

Lucus says that after Spinoza took up with Van den Enden, he came to devote himself to Descartes' works above all others. During this time (1654-5) Spinoza probably began reading “Descartes’s work in physics, physiology, geometry, meteorology, cosmology, and, of course, metaphysics.”

We know that his friends “were devotees of Cartesian thought.” At the Van den Enden’s he may very well have been led or inspired to read Descartes’ Discourse on Method, The Meditations, and the Principles of Philosophy. Though his knowledge of Cartesianism would deepen in the late 1650s, his early biographers are agreed that he was very influenced by Descartes before the cherem. (Because of the central importance of Descartes’ influence on Spinoza’s life and philosophy, we devote a whole section to it below.)

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698 Ibid. 109-110.
699 Ibidl 111.
700 Ibid. 112.
701 Ibid.
702 Ibid. 113.
Existential elements which contributed to Spinoza's loss of faith and new philosophy

Nadler adds another essential element to the story of Spinoza's loss of faith - an existential one. He argues that the forces which led Spinoza away from faith were not only due to lack of satisfaction with the intellectual resources and apologetics of Judaism, but that

He also began to experience what historically must be one of the prime motivations behind anyone's choice of a philosophical vocation: a deep sense of the vanitas of ordinary pursuits, particularly the materialistic pursuits of an Amsterdam merchant, and a desire for 'truth' – not just empirical truths about nature but, more important, an understanding of the 'proper goods' of a human life.\(^{703}\)

Spinoza evidently did not like his life as a business man. Even while in business, he "was already distracted from these worldly matters and was devoting more and more of his energies to intellectual interests."\(^{704}\) Nadler makes it clear that during this time in which he is being distracted from his business responsibilities, he "undoubtedly [began] experiencing a serious weakening of his Jewish faith as he delved ever more deeply into the world of pagan and gentile letters."\(^{705}\) Thus, "By the early to mid 1650s, Spinoza had decided that his future lay in philosophy."\(^{706}\) Nadler argues that the probable proof of this claim can be found in his autobiographical statement in his later *Treatise on the Emendation of the Intellect*:

after experience had taught me that all the things which regularly occur in ordinary life are empty and futile, and I saw that all the things which were the cause or object of my fear had nothing of good or bad in themselves, except insofar as [my] mind was moved by them, I resolved at least to try to find out whether there was anything which would be the true good, capable of communicating itself, and which alone would affect the mind, all others being rejected – whether there was something which, once found and acquired, would continuously give me the greatest joy, to eternity.\(^{707}\)

\(^{703}\) Ibid. 101.
\(^{704}\) Nadler's *Spinoza's Ethics*, 3.
\(^{705}\) Nadler's *Spinoza's Ethics*, 4.
\(^{706}\) Ibid.
\(^{707}\) Ibid. 101-2.
Klever describes Spinoza’s autobiographical confession here as “an account of his conversion to philosophy” (by “conversion to philosophy”, I take Klever to mean away from religious thinking):

The first pages of the Treatise on the Emendation of the Intellect can only be explained as being very close to Spinoza’s personal experiences and the beginning of... his new point of view... They are, as it were, notations drawn from his private journal, from the time of his transition to a new ‘system’.708

There were other existential, painful, emotional, or traumatic experiences that occurred during this period as well, which most Spinoza biographers almost totally ignore. We must not neglect to mention, therefore, that there were a lot of serious problems going on in Spinoza’s life at this time, including family deaths: “This must have been a depressing period for Bento. He lost his father, his stepmother, and his sister all in the space of three years. By 1654, at the age of twenty-one, Spinoza was without parents ... and the family business was growing in debt.”709 It may also be at this time that someone tried to kill him. Bayle’s account of Spinoza’s life says that it was around the time that Spinoza distanced himself more and more from the synagogue that a Jewish assassin tried to kill him.710 If this is true, it may be that at this time there was “a climate of deep hostility in the Jewish community regarding apostasy, of which Spinoza was around this time showing early but unmistakable signs.”711 Taking all these events together, most human beings would be...
immensely affected. Many people are brought nearer to their religion during such times; others are led further away.

Apostasy

Why would someone try to *kill* Spinoza? He must have been a lone crazed individual, right? Most people today, I think, assume this; but this may not be the truth. We have to remember that in order to better understand the intense emotion and severity with which Spinoza’s backsliding causes in the Jewish and Christian communities, we need a better understanding of how apostasy was thought of in Spinoza’s time.\(^7\) The term “apostate”, like the term “antichrist”, has particular and clearly drawn out theological lines of thought.\(^7\) The people who will be charging Spinoza using these loaded terms will not be using them carelessly or lightly. According to the dictionary, for instance, an apostate is simply someone who leaves or forsakes his religion. But according to “God’s Word” and those who believe and follow it, this term is charged with far more sinister consequence. We cannot spend the day in explicating all the weighty theological issues involved, but we can at least suggest some so that we are clear on how his 17th century accusers, both Jew and Christian, thought about these expressions. In early Judaism, apostasy is the graviest of crimes. Nothing less than stoning to death is the punishment for it. The Torah emphatically states:

\(^7\) And not only in Spinoza’s time, of course: for example, a colleague of mine in the history of early modern philosophy not only reported to me that the church he attends practices the scriptural command of excommunicating members of their congregation who “continue to live in sin”, but supports this practice as well. Why? “Because that’s what the Scriptures demand.”

\(^7\) As professor Ariew puts it in his *Descartes and the Last Scholastics* (about Descartes’s terminology): “We need to understand the meaning those terms had in that particular culture.” One of the ways (albeit sometimes an indirect way) of learning the meaning of special terms an author uses is by investigating “its immediate reception.” This sometimes can tell us how the work “was originally intended” (2).
If thy brother, the son of thy mother, or thy son, or thy daughter, or the wife of thy bosom, or thy friend, which is as thine own soul, entice thee secretly, saying, Let us go and serve other gods, which thou hast not known, thou, nor thy fathers, of the gods of the people which are round about you, nigh unto thee, or far off from thee, from the one end of the earth even unto the other end of the earth; Thou shalt not consent unto him, nor hearken unto him; neither shall thine eye pity him, neither shalt thou spare, neither shalt thou conceal him: But thou shalt surely kill him; thine hand shall be first upon him to put him to death, and afterwards the hand of all the people. And thou shalt stone him with stones, that he die; 

*because he hath sought to thrust thee away from the LORD thy God, which brought thee out of the land of Egypt, from the house of bondage*” (Deuteronomy 13:6–10, my emphasis).

And there are many, many other passages which make clear the biblical God's feelings about apostates. And all of them are none too pretty.714 In later Judaism after the dispersion, rabbis continued to excoriate apostasy based on Holy Scripture. According to the *Jewish Encyclopedia*, the apostate is "one who has separated from the ways of the Jewish community." Once he has separated his ways from the Jewish community, "No sacrifice is accepted from the apostate", "nor have they any respite from eternal doom in Gehenna"715

With its warp and woof in Judaism, Christianity continues and exacerbates this theology (we must remember that Spinoza's *Theological Political Treatise* was not only directed against Moses and Judaism, but against the doctrines of the divinity, salvation, and eternal life in Christ, too).

> Let us hold unswervingly to the hope we profess ...Let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing ... If we deliberately keep on sinning after we have received the knowledge of the truth, no sacrifice for sins is left, but only a fearful expectation of judgment and of raging fire that will consume the enemies of God. Anyone who rejected the law of Moses died without mercy on the testimony of two or three witnesses. How much more severely do you think a man deserves to be punished who has trampled the Son of God under foot, who has treated as an unholy thing the blood of the covenant that sanctified him, and who has insulted the Spirit of grace? ... It is a dreadful thing to fall into the hands of the living God (Hebrews 10).

714 See other examples of these such as Isa. 1:2-4; Jer. 2:19; Ezek. 16 and 17.
715 From Seder ‘Olam R. iii.; R. H. 17a; Tosef, Sanh. xiii. 5, then Sifra, l.c.; Lev. R. ii.; Ḥul. 5a; er. Shek. i. 1[46b]; then R. H. 17a; see especially Sifre, Bemidbar 112 to Num. xv. 31. See http://www.jewishencyclopedia.com/view.jsp?artid=1654&letter=A&search=apostate#ixzz10AxAMHFH.
And again: “See to it that no one misses the grace of God and that no bitter root grows up to cause trouble and defile many....for our God is a consuming fire” (Hebrews 12:15 and 29).

During the course of his diligent research into the manner of Spinoza’s excommunication and the subject of the cherem, Colerus refers to the work of the “learned Dr. Lightfoot on the first Epistle to the Corinthians, Chap.5. v. 5.” This verse from St. Paul reads as follows: “hand this man over to Satan, so that his sinful nature may be destroyed and his spirit saved on the day of the Lord.” The context of this passage delineates an ecclesiology and church discipline that are rarely heard about from today’s 21st century churches, but was attended to far more by the 17th century churches. Many today excuse the Church’s more aggressive past explaining that the Church got caught up with the world’s manner of justice. But this is not accurate insofar as the Church’s behavior has been guided by and given justification from the scriptures themselves. In this same epistle Paul says things like: “For the kingdom of God is not a matter of talk but of power. What do you prefer? Shall I come to you with punishment, or in love and with a gentle spirit?” (1 Cor. 4:20-1). And: “Get rid of the old yeast that you may be a new batch without yeast”; “Are you not to judge those inside [the church]?... ‘Expel the wicked man from your number’” (1 Cor. 5:12-13; Deut. 17:7; 19:19; 22:21,24; 24:7). And again: “But if we judged ourselves, we would not come under judgment. When we are judged by the Lord, we are being disciplined so that we will not be condemned with the world” (1 Cor. 11:31-32). Thus he orders Timothy to “fight the good fight of faith ... Some have rejected these and so have shipwrecked their faith. Among them are Hymenæus and Alexander, whom I have handed over to Satan to be taught not to blaspheme” (1 Tim. 1:19-20).

There are many other scriptures and theologians that might be referred to here. St. Paul goes so far as to say, “If anyone does not love the Lord – a curse on him. Come, O Lord!”

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(1 Cor. 16: 22). In discussing the nature of Spinoza's excommunication, Colerus says that “Many are of opinion that this is the same excommunication with that mentioned in the first Epistle of Corinthians, Chap. 16. v. 22 where the Apostle calls it maranatha. These are the words: If any man love not the Lord Jesus Christ, let him be Anathema Maharam Motha, or, Maranatha; that is, let him be made Anathema, or let him be excommunicated for ever, or, as others explain it, the Lord is a coming, viz, to judge and punish that excommunicated person.”

Needless to say then: Spinoza would not have fared well under Moses or St. Paul.

One of the major justifications used for the inquisition and expulsion of the Jews from Portugal and Spain the generation or two before Spinoza’s (which is what caused the Jews to immigrate to the Netherlands in the first place), was to prevent more Christians from being Judaized from the influence of the Jews and from intermarrying. The expulsion order signed by Ferdinand and Isabella was “to prevent the Jews from influencing conversos and to purify the Christian faith.” We should also remember that Christianity from its inception saw the Jews as apostates and “blasphemers against Christ.”

Moreover, even before 1651, Christian groups such as the Calvinists were struggling for a theologically regimented state, if not a confessionally homogenous one. They were concerned about the rise of Catholicism and the increase in the number of non-

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717 John Colerus. The Life of Benedict de Spinoza, 16.
718 Nadler goes on to cite the literal expulsion order. See the primarily theological concern behind this expulsion in Nadler’s biography 3. It was certainly not for economic reasons that they were expelled.
719 This is an extremely important point, and one which most Christians don’t know. Any thorough study of the New Testament, however, will disabuse the honest student about the New Testament Christian attitude toward “the Jews.” The reason why future generations of Christians persecuted Jews was not because these Christians were not really Christians, as is sometimes explained. It is true, that one can justifiably argue that the political and judicial persecution of the Jews using the power of the state may not be the true teaching of the New Testament, but one cannot argue that the New Testament does not say many vicious things against the Jews which future generations of Christians and Muslims could easily – even if mistakenly - use to justify their oppression. Indeed, though it may seem an overly harsh judgment to many Christians, many responsible Jewish and non-Jewish historians and thinkers attribute some of the causes of the holocaust to this historic Christian bigotry. For a cursory, but by no means thorough, look at this issue, see: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Antisemitism_in_the_New_Testament.
Reformed or dissenting Reformed Protestant congregations (especially Lutherans, Mennonites, and Remonstrants). *But they saved their ire for the Jews. These 'blasphemers against Christ,' it was argued, should not be allowed to practice their religion publically anywhere in the republic.*\(^{720}\)

It was for reasons such as these that the Jewish community had to be very careful how they treated apostates and heretics in their own midst; for Jewish heretics are likely to be heretics to Christianity, too. They therefore did not want any of their own troubling the non-Jewish, Christian communities outside the Jewish quarter. Not wanting to cause any problems with their Christian neighbors when the Amsterdam Jewish community excommunicated Spinoza, they petitioned the municipal government in Amsterdam to expel him as well.\(^{721}\)

Some readers may wonder why so much ink is being spilt on Spinoza’s Jewish and Christian world. Shouldn’t we be “doing philosophy”? I answer using the words of Stephen Nadler to justify his focus on Spinoza’s Jewish and theological background:

> I aim only to place Spinoza’s thought on one particular issue within a different philosophical and religious tradition. It is a tradition that is too often neglected in philosophical scholarship on Spinoza; rare is the book written on him by a philosopher that considers with any depth his relationship to and standing within Jewish [and, I would add, Christian] philosophy. And yet, if one does not pay attention to this context, much of what he has to say cannot make any sense.\(^{722}\)

Having located the mental-spiritual environment for Spinoza’s apostasy, we should now have an enhanced sensitivity of what is at stake and therefore a more informed vantage point to continue our inquiry.

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\(^{720}\) Nadler biography 85, my emphasis.

\(^{721}\) For the details on the relations between Jews and the Christians in this period, see Nadler’s extremely important discussion of it on pages 148 to 154.

Spinoza’s loss of faith, apostasy, and excommunication: 1655-1656

His loss of faith and apostasy

Lucas tells us that “friends” of his from the synagogue tricked Spinoza into revealing his true thoughts and beliefs about God, Judaism, and the soul. Spinoza’s answers confirm to his “friends” that Spinoza does indeed hold to horrible heresies.723 We know from these answers then that by 1655 or 1656 at 23 or 24 years of age he has come to reject Judaism. We know that at this time he rejects the immortality of the soul, the God of Moses, and any and all anthropomorphic representations of God. This implies that by as early as 1656 (but probably earlier) he rejects all anthropomorphic representations of God, which is what his later TTP and Ethics will argue at length for. His zealous “friends” spread the word about Spinoza as an apostate: “the people deceived themselves in believing that this young man might become one of the pillars of the synagogue” because “it seemed more likely that he would be its destroyer, as he had nothing but hatred and contempt for the Law of Moses.”724

First, then, Spinoza is accused of having nothing but hatred and contempt for the Law of Moses, that is, the Holy Scriptures. (Note: no mention is made here of the Talmud or any rabbinical or “pharisaical” work, such as a Da Costa might argue against.) His “friends” spread this news to the Jewish community. Before the judges of the congregation, they testify that Spinoza “scoffed at the Jews as ‘superstitious people born and bred in ignorance, who do not know what God is, and who nevertheless have the audacity to speak of themselves as His People, to the disparagement of other nations.”725 Again, their criticism has to do with Spinoza’s attack against the faith, against their God, and against the teachings of Scriptures, specifically in this instance, the teachings of revelation that claim that Israel is special of God. We know that these claims are in no way out of character for Spinoza. We

723 Nadler biography 134-5.
724 Nadler, Spinoza’s Ethics, 8.
725 Ibid. 8-9.
find them said in the *Ethics*, and we find them fully and ferociously expressed in the *Theological Political Treatise*.

Spinoza is then summoned to give an account of his beliefs and behavior before the judges of the community (which included his teacher, rabbi Mortera). He evidently answers their inquiries honestly and resolutely. They try hard to change his mind. They fail to do so. And then they issue the *cherem* against him.\(^{726}\)

*The cherem and excommunication*

“They will put you out of the synagogue; in fact, a time is coming when anyone who kills you will think he is offering a service to God. They will do such things because they have not known ...” (Jn. 16:2-3)

On July 27, 1656 the Jewish community in Amsterdam pronounces the harshest *cherem* in its history against Spinoza.\(^{727}\) The following declaration was “read in Hebrew from in front of the ark\(^{728}\) of the synagogue.” This verdict epitomizes the warfare between orthodoxy and liberalism, revelation and rationalism, Scripture and philosophy, the Counter-Enlightenment and the Radical Enlightenment, the privileging of a primitive and ancient epistemology of visions, prophecies, and revelations over the new more critical,

\(^{726}\) See also *The Oldest Biography of Spinoza*, 44-50.

\(^{727}\) Let us look a little more closely at this *cherem* and excommunication. We know, reports Nadler, that Spinoza “was still, in mid-1655, an at least nominally active – if not necessarily enthusiastic – member of the congregation, keeping up appearances and willing to do his part in satisfying the basic obligations that were expected of every *yehudi*. During that year Spinoza may also have been attending synagogue on a fairly regular basis, at the very least to say *kaddish* for his father, which requires a *minyan* or quorum of Jewish males.” We know that he offered pledges even up to March 29 of 1656, but which was never paid. “While Spinoza's faith must indeed have suffered a serious decline by the end of 1655”, it is not clear why the pledge monies declined. It may be because his business finances were declining. Nadler biography 118. A word about Spinoza saying kaddish for his father: if Spinoza did indeed pray this prayer, he did so without believing it, because by this time his God is no longer the anthropomorphic God of Judaism but a “philosophical God.”

\(^{728}\) The most important thing about the ark, which made it the absolute center of Israelite culture, was that it contained the very words that God gave to Moses, the Ten Commandments and the Law. For those not familiar with “the ark” of the covenant and its central place in Jewish biblical theology, see, for instance: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ark_of_the_Covenant. Be sure to check the scripture references. The point I wish to emphasize here, once again, is the fundamental commitment of faith and practice to their Bible that this synagogue in this time and place held.
more scientific, more careful, more cautious, more patient, more rationalistic, and more scientific epistemology:

The Lords [Senhores] of the ma'amad [the congregation's lay governing board], having long known of the evil opinions and acts of Baruch de Spinoza, they have endeavored by various means and promises, to turn him from his evil ways. But having failed to make him mend his wicked ways, and, on the contrary, daily receiving more and more serious information about the abominable heresies which he practiced and taught and about his monstrous deeds, and having for this numerous trust worthy witnesses who have deposed and born witness to this effect in the presence of the said Espinoza, they became convinced of the truth of this matter; and after all of this has been investigated in the presence of the honorable chachamim ['wise men', or rabbis], they have decided, with their consent, that the said Espinoza should be excommunicated and expelled from the people of Israel. By decree of the angels and by the command of the holy men, we excommunicate, expel, curse and damn Baruch de Espinoza, with the consent of God, Blessed be He, and with the consent of the entire holy congregation, and in front of these holy scrolls with the 613 precepts which are written therein; cursing him with the excommunication with which Joshua banned Jericho and with the curse which Elisha cursed the boys and with all the castigations which are written in the Book of the Law. Cursed be he by day and cursed be he by night; cursed be he when he lies down and cursed be he when he rises up. Cursed be he when he goes out and cursed be he when he comes in. The Lord will not spare him, but the anger of the Lord and his jealousy shall smoke against that man, and all the curses that are written in this book shall lie upon him, and the Lord shall blot out his name from under heaven. And the Lord shall separate him unto evil out of all the tribes of Israel, according to all the curses of the covenant that are written in this book of the law. But you that cleave unto the Lord your God are alive every one of you this day.

From these many dire biblical curses, the decree becomes more painfully specific and concretely directed to the 23-year-old's real world: “no one should communicate with him, neither in writing, nor accord him any favor nor stay with him under the same roof nor

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729 Nadler biography 120, my emphases to make absolutely clear and distinct the Jewish community of Amsterdam treated Spinoza according to revelation. See also Spinoza's Heresy 2. When one takes the trouble to look up and to read all the curses referred to in the cherem above (the passages on Joshua's curse on Jericho, Elisha's against the boys, and “all the castigations which are written in the Book of the Law” (Deuteronomy 27 and 28), one can't help but to feel the seriousness (and even practical value) of this study of the warfare between revelation and independent reason – especially because this warfare continues to this day.

730 One reason why I emphasize the biblical here at the expense of the political is because there is a school of thought which "argues that the reasons [for the excommunication] were political and stemmed from the community's relations with the outside world ... [see rest]." Yovel doesn't buy this theory, but in this section of his book at least, he does not accentuate the theological factors (which my study emphasizes) (Yovel 10-13).
come within four cubits in his vicinity; nor shall he read any treatise composed or written
by him.”731

The first thing that must be emphatically pointed out here is that God commands the
excommunication. Excommunication is emphatically laid out in the Holy Scriptures.732 I
point this out to make it clear that despite some ignorance and confusion among the
leadership of the relatively new 40-year-old Jewish community in Amsterdam about the
correct or orthodox teachings on such things, they nevertheless at least knew that the Torah
taught that it was supposed to be done.733

The curses in this cherem then are not excrescences or additions that were derived
from the “Pharisees” or rabbis in much later centuries. No, they come right out of the Torah,
many of whose commandments are in the ark in front of which they spoke to all the people
almost word for word - “in front of these holy scrolls with the 613 precepts which are
written therein.”

All talk about the rationalism of Montera or of the enlightened thinking of other
rabbis that Nadler mentions in his biography goes out the door here. A good hard look at
this certain documentary proof of the mind-set of the Jewish leadership, and the source that
actuates their excommunication and behavior, are all here in full view. No wonder the
words and tone in many passages of his TTP (and pre-TTP Apology?) seems tinctured with
anger and fury. This cherem was no minor or petty or meaningless event.

731 Nadler biography 120-1.
732 The result of Colerus’s well-researched investigation into the matter of Spinoza’s cherem
understood that the “banishment from the synagogue attended with the dreadful curses” was “taken
most of ’em out of Deuteronomy, chap. 28.” And again, “The curses inserted into the
[excommunication] were taken from the Law of Moses” (The Life of Benedict de Spinoza, 14).
733 Out of all the works I’ve read on this cherem, Nadler’s discussion of it in his biography on page
121, best demonstrates the biblical sources. It is a brief summary of some of what these many
scriptures mean, but it does the job of at least making clear that these condemnations are derived
from the purported revelations of the Torah. The fullest treatment on this subject is given by Nadler
in his Spinoza’s Heresy. Yovel’s Spinoza and Other Heretics is also must reading for insights into the
mind-set behind the excommunication.
There’s a lot that we can learn from this document. It shows us that Spinoza’s “evil opinions” were “long known.” Some of the claims that we have surmised up to now about Spinoza’s loss of faith were unclear and unproved. Here we have proof. But what were these “abominable heresies” the document refers to which led to the most severe excommunication ever executed by the Talmud Torah congregation – even worse than Uriel da Costa’s excommunication? As far as we know, he had not even published anything.

They tried to dissuade him from his anti-biblical beliefs. Some of the “they” here were some of his former teachers – older, august, friends of his father and family, now all against him and using all their vaunted scholarly knowledge to turn him from his wicked ways. And what are they condemning? What are the beliefs Spinoza held that caused them to pronounce “all the curses that are written in this book ... according to all the curses of the covenant that are written in this book of the law”? Nadler researches this question carefully.

Some things seem clear:

Turning away from his Jewish studies – and perhaps the Keter Torah yeshiva – to seek a philosophical and scientific education elsewhere might have incited his “teachers” within the Jewish community, particularly Mortera. And the rabbis would surely not have been happy with his attending lessons at Van den Enden’s....

But others “sinned” in such ways and they were not punished so severely. Plus, according to Nadler, the rabbis weren’t that vehement against secular learning. So the severity of the cherem couldn’t have been only because he was seeking a secular education.

In the “Spinoza’s life and works” chapter of his work on Spinoza’s ethics written seven years after his biography of Spinoza, Nadler writes that none of these explanations of the severity of Spinoza’s cherem are sufficient. So then, what explains its severity? Nadler answers:

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734 Nadler biography 129.
735 Ibid. 130.
Instead, what seems really to have been the offense behind the vicious *cherem* earned by Spinoza are not actions, either religious or legal, but rather, as the proclamation reads, *mas opinioins* and *horrendas heregias*: ‘evil opinions’ and ‘abominable heresies’ – that is, ideas.736

In a word, Spinoza was condemned because he said that there was no God except in “a philosophical sense”, that Moses and the Law was not true, and that the soul was not immortal. Nadler makes the case for this argument by citing what his research determines to be “Three relatively reliable sources for the period.” He spells out much of their testimonies and then synthesizes them loudly and clearly. The *cherem* was pronounced against Spinoza because he held to three heretical positions: “God exists only philosophically,’ ‘The Law is not true,’ and ‘The soul is not immortal’”737

We do not know for certain what Spinoza’s “monstrous deeds” and “abominable heresies” were alleged to have been, but an educated guess comes quite easily. No doubt he was giving utterance to just those ideas that would soon appear in his philosophical treatises. In those works, Spinoza denies the immortality of the soul, strongly rejects the notion of a providential God—the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob; and claims that the Law was neither literally given by God nor any longer binding on Jews. For Spinoza scholars, these things explain why Spinoza was so severely condemned. Thus there is no mystery as to why one of history’s boldest and most radical thinkers was sanctioned by an orthodox Jewish community.738

Before ending this section, we should observe that the theological charges against Spinoza imputed against him by the Jewish community make him an apostate to Judaism, but they also expose him to be an “antichrist” to the Christian community: for to reject the

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736 *Spinoza’s Ethics* 7.
737 Ibid. 10.
738 Nadler’s article on Spinoza from the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy.
God of Judaism is to also reject the God of Christianity. Nadler understood this well:

“Moreover, when the parnassim issued their cherem against Spinoza, they were banning someone whose views would be considered heretical not just by Jews but by any mainstream Christians as well.”

To say that there is no God except in “a philosophical sense” for Spinoza is to reject all the anthropomorphic claims of the New Testament about Jesus (that he is the Son of God; that He created and sustains the universe; that he is the Christ prophesied from Genesis to Malachi; that his death on the cross as the sacrificial Lamb of God taketh away the sins of the world, and so on, can’t be true). To say that Moses and the Law are not true, is to reject the theological foundations of Christianity in the Jewish scriptures and the messianic prophecies included in them. And to say that the soul is not immortal entails saying that the scriptural, messianic, and eschatological claims of the New Testament and Christianity are also false. And if all these are false, then one may argue with St. Paul that, “If the dead be not raised then we are to be pitied more than all men” (1 Cor. 15:19).

This ends the principally biographical part of our study. We will still refer to biographical elements as we discuss his works, of course, but our focus will turn now to the development of his philosophy and to his writings.

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739 This is probably a good place to insert the fact that Spinoza’s Jewish community were not content to curse and excommunicate him from their midst alone. They also sought to have him expelled from Amsterdam as well. Four years after his excommunication, in 1660, “the Jewish authorities petitioned the Amsterdam municipal government to expel him from the city, giving as their reason that he was a menace to ‘all piety and morals’” (Roger Ariew and Eric Watkins. Readings in Modern Philosophy: Volume I Descartes, Spinoza, Leibniz and Associate Texts (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 2000), 126). I’m reminded of the famous passage of Scripture: “Then the whole assembly rose and led him off to Pilate. And they began to accuse him, saying, ‘We have found this man subverting our nation’” (Lk. 23:1-2). According to Lucas’s account, the rabbis told the Amsterdam magistrates that they had excommunicated Spinoza “for execrable blasphemies against Moses and against God.” But the magistrates, like Pilate, “could find nothing ‘impious in the way in which the accused had conducted himself’” (see Nadler’s Spinoza: A Life, pp. 156-158 on the pros and cons whether Lucas’s account actually took place).

740 Nadler’s Spinoza: A Life, 150.
Chapter Thirteen

The Development of an Apostate Antichrist Philosophy

“Conversion to philosophy”

1656 to 1661: the Apology, the Treatise on the Emendation of the Intellect, The Short Treatise on God, Man, and His Well-Being and his Correspondence

As opposed to some biographical accounts of Spinoza, he did not attend the horrid excommunications ceremony. In fact, Spinoza had left the Jewish quarter at least a year or two before his excommunications. Nadler and Yovel show that though he still visited the Synagogue here and there, he was not much of an active member any more. After his cherem, however, he is expelled from the Jewish community and can never come back. His whole faith community, family, friends, and work associates included, are banned from helping him, seeing him, or even reading anything written by him.

In his biography of Spinoza for the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, Nadler says: “To all appearances, Spinoza was content finally to have an excuse for departing [completely] from the community and leaving Judaism behind; his faith and religious commitment were, by this point, gone.” Klever adds to this account by mentioning the role that philosophy played in his departure: “According to the evidence of [many] documents, the [final] departure from the Synagogue was more the end point of an

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741 Klever, op. cited, 21.
742 Nadler, however, cites some probable exceptions to this rule.
743 (http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/spinoza/).
introduction into natural science than its starting point, as is usually supposed. The new physics of Descartes [for example] must have played an important role in Spinoza’s process of enlightenment.”744 Thus the development of Spinoza’s philosophy was at work years before his expulsion.

The thesis or the focus of this part of our study on Spinoza is to show some respects in the development of his philosophical thinking from around his excommunication in 1656 to 1661 in which he diverges from “the way he should go.”745 The focus is on the Radical Enlightenment elements in this development; that is, on those respects in which his thinking opposes the thinking of traditional or orthodox biblical theology (both Jewish and Christian). From the perspective of both believing Jews and Christians, this philosophical development is the development of an apostate and antichrist philosophy (hence the title of this part as “The development of an apostate antichrist philosophy”). It is thought that the development of his philosophy is a development primarily in response to and in reaction to the theological vestiges of his upbringing. But there are, of course, many other respects in which the development of his philosophy is not in response or in reaction to the religion of his upbringing and time.

Apologia and The Treatise on the Emendation of the Intellect: And On the Way in which it May Be Directed Towards a True Knowledge of Things

Recapping then to situate Spinoza at this point in our study: By 1656, he’s well-educated, he knows Latin pretty well, and he’s read various histories and the great Greek and Roman

744 Klever 20.
745 “Train up a child in the way he should go, and even when he is old, he will not depart from it” (Proverbs 22:6). “Train up a child in the way he should go, and even when he is old, he will not depart from it” (Proverbs 22:6). Spinoza somehow was able to break the hold of the ingrained prejudices inculcated in him since birth. This, to my mind, is one of the most impressive philosophical achievements of Spinoza. As most people know from talking to believers of various faiths, they believe as they do, even unto old age, simply because they were brought up that way. It is much too difficult for the average human to go against his or her deep psychological conditioning from childhood.
classics. He has imbibed and studied the new philosophy and the sciences, and has come
down on the side of the new philosophical and scientific methods for gaining knowledge as
opposed to the claims of epistemological authority in divine revelation, illumination,
inspiration, visions, etc. of the Bible believers. By 1656 at the age of 24, it is all but certain
that Spinoza’s loss of faith is complete. He has not only repudiated Judaism, he also has
derision for it. He thinks that it is out-and-out crude superstition. He feels contemptuous
toward Moses and the Law. And he thinks and feels this way because he has already
developed some foundational philosophical positions. We mentioned some of these above:
that if God exists, he does so only philosophically; that God or reality can’t be as Moses and
the Jews and Christians say; and, last but not least, that the immortal soul does not exist.

Klever believes that one can extrapolate from Jarig Jelles’s “very reliable survey of
Spinoza’s life, works, and philosophy” that Spinoza composed an “Apologia” “to render an
account of his conversion to philosophy.” Spinoza commentators say that he probably
wrote this defense of his views in response to the cherem from his old teachers. Part of
this defense will find its way as part of the TTP, which along with his earlier Treatise on the
Emendation of the Intellect, Short Treatise on God, Man and His Well-Being, and then his
Ethics are his life’s apologia for reason over faith. Klever and Nadler believe that his
Treatise on the Emendation of the Intellect is also “an account of his conversion to
philosophy.” I agree. Klever elaborates on this:

The first pages of the Treatise on the Emendation of the Intellect can only be
explained as being very close to Spinoza’s personal experiences and the beginning of
... his new point of view... They are, as it were, notations drawn from his private
journal, from the time of his transition to a new ‘system’.

746 Klever 21, my emphasis.
747 However, in a brand new work just out, Piet Steenbakkers argues that this is an error, that there
was no Apology of Spinoza, but rather that the sources for this claim mixed it up from another author
and Rosenthal, Michael (Cambridge University Press, 2010), 31-33.
748 Ibid.
In the first volume of his *The Collected Works of Spinoza*, Edwin Curley starts off with Spinoza's *Treatise on the Emendation of the Intellect*. Though it was published after his death in 1677 in his *Opera posthuma*, Curley and others such as Stephen Nadler believe that it is highly probable that a draft of it was written even before September of 1661 (5 or 6 years after his excommunication). This would mean that he worked on this before the *Short Treatise on God, Man and His Well-Being* (KV), and two years before the publication of his *The Principles of Cartesian Philosophy* (PP) in 1663. We can assume then that the *Treatise* was written if not earlier, at least around the same time as the KV.749

There is reason to believe that Spinoza conceived of the *Treatise* early on as an introduction to another work that would deal with philosophical theology, philosophy of mind, epistemology, and ethics (the KV or the *Ethics*? – the KV is more likely). Whatever the case may be on these issues, he never finished the work, though his first editors (of the *Opera Posthuma*) say he wanted to: “He always intended to finish it, but, distracted by his other occupations and taken from us by death, he did not succeed in bringing it to the desired conclusion.”750 There is reason to believe that more than this was at work here. If his April 1662 letter to Oldenburg citing “a whole short work” devoted to the matter of the first cause and also to a work “on the emendation of the intellect” refer to *The Short Treatise on God, Man, and His Well-Being* and to the *Treatise on the Intellect* (which they certainly seem to be), then his explanation for why he has not finished them should be mentioned. If I read this passage in the letter rightly, he appears to be saying that he has not finished it, and his motivation and work on it was inhibited, because of fear of being attacked by theologians. I imagine Spinoza may have meant something like the following: “Why should I be knocking myself out on this work if in the final analysis I can’t publish it anyway

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because the theologians will make my life a living hell because of it. Therefore, I don’t know what to do with this work – and it’s probably wiser (caute!) not to publish it. But if I’m not going to publish it, then why work further on it?” Here are the exact words he wrote. Let the reader decide if my paraphrase translation is accurate.

I am engaged in transcribing and emending it, but sometimes I put it to one side because I do not yet have any definite plan regarding its publication. I fear, of course, that the theologians of our time may be offended and with their usual hatred attack me, who absolutely dread quarrels.751

At any rate, the editors decided to publish the unfinished work after Spinoza’s death in 1677 because they recognized its philosophic and theological importance. In addition to the intrinsic value of the work, the Treatise is important to us because it gives us insights into Spinoza’s thought during this early period.752 It expresses personal things (which are not found in later works) that we take to be important, especially with respect to the interests of this study.

Nadler states that the Treatise is in part

an autobiographical sketch of Spinoza’s own intellectual itinerary and partly an appeal to the reader … to follow the same road and be converted to the philosophical life.

What is required for such a conversion even to begin to be contemplated is a feeling of dissatisfaction, perhaps not fully articulated, with the life one is leading. One must question the values one has adopted and that have guided one’s actions and ask after the ‘true good’ for a human being, ‘the eternal source of the greatest joy’.753

Reading the early sections of the Treatise one is struck by how much they sound like the early sections of the Book of Ecclesiastes. Both are written by a skeptical author who says

751 Collected Works, op. cited, 188. I make an issue of this here to support the argument I’m making that some of the most important aspects in both works, and certainly the aspects that many of his time were most interested in, were theological.

One can imagine from confessions like this just how many other works in the 17th century (and most of the centuries preceding it) never saw the light of day to benefit humankind because of fear “that the theologians of our time may be offended and with their usual hatred attack me.” In respects like this, the focus of evil in the early modern world, it could be argued, was not atheism; it was theology.
752 Ibid.
753 Nadler biography of Spinoza, p. 176.
things that nothing in the Torah or the prophets or Spinoza’s old rabbis could support.

Seeking the ‘true good’? And this ‘true good’ is not the God of Israel or His Law? One needs to be converted? His old rabbis would not be proud of this.

What is this ‘true good’? Is it anything that Torah or the Psalms (such as Psalm 119) would agree with? Definitely not. Spinoza says that the true good is “the knowledge of the union that the mind has with the whole of Nature.” The whole of what? The knowledge of what? Nature? One can imagine how the rabbis of Talmud Torah would respond to this anti-creationist account. One can imagine them “arguing” against this position by quoting scripture texts - of Job, for instance: “Who is this that darkens my counsel with words without knowledge? Brace yourself like a man; I will question you, and you shall answer me. ‘Where were you when I laid the earth’s foundation? Tell me, if you understand: ...Will the one who contends with the Almighty correct him? (Job 39-40:1). Or of Isaiah: “To whom will you compare me? Or who is my equal?” says the Holy One. Lift up your eyes and look to the heavens: Who created all these?... Do you not know? Have you not heard? The Lord is the everlasting God, the Creator of the ends of the earth” (Isa. 40). “This is what the Lord says - ...I am the Lord, who has made all things, who alone stretched out the heavens, who spread out the earth by myself... Woe to him who quarrels with his Maker ... Does your work say, ‘He has not hands?’” (Isa.44-45).

This is how Spinoza’s rabbis and the Christian preachers of Amsterdam and everywhere else would respond to Spinoza’s disregard of the centrality of the Creator. For them, the true good lies in knowing the Creator, not in knowing nature. In fact, since the writing of the second commandment, there has always been a strong censure towards any overly attentive or affectionate attitude toward nature:

You shall not make for yourself an idol in the form of anything in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the waters below. You shall not bow down to them or

754 Ibid. 177.
worship them; for I, the Lord your God, am a jealous God, punishing the children for the sin of the fathers to the third and fourth generation of those who hate me, but showing love to thousands who love me and keep my commandments (Ex. 20).

For Jewish theology, this issue is of the most serious kind because the God of their Bible warns them over and over again about making sure that they don’t forget or forsake what was told them from Mount Horeb:

Only be careful, and watch yourselves closely so that you do not forget ... You saw no form of any kind in the day that the Lord spoke to you at Horeb ... Therefore watch yourselves carefully, so that you do not become corrupt and make for yourselves an idol, an image of any shape, whether formed like a man or a woman, or like an animal on earth or any bird that flies in the air, or like any creature that moves along the ground or any fish in the water below. And when you look up to the sky and see the sun, the moon and the stars – all the heavenly array - do not be enticed into bowing down to them and worshipping things the Lord your God has apportioned to all the nations under heaven (Deut. 4).

Christian preachers would quote New Testament passages:

The wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness of men who suppress the truth by their wickedness ... For although they knew God, they neither glorified him as God nor gave thanks to him, but their thinking became futile and their foolish hearts were darkened. Although they claimed to be wise, they became fools and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images to look like moral man and birds and animals and reptiles.
   Therefore God gave them over to the sinful desires of their hearts ... They exchanged the truth of God for a lie, and worshipped and served created things rather than the Creator – who is forever praised. Amen...
   Furthermore, since they did not think it worthwhile to retain the knowledge of God, He gave them over to a depraved mind (Rom. 1).

Such passages of scripture are typical examples of the “proof texts” that the orthodox would preach against Spinoza’s apostate claim that the true good is “the knowledge of the union that the mind has with the whole of Nature.”

For Scripture, there is only one who is good, and He alone is the true good. But for the renegade Spinoza the true good is now become something very different. For the believing Jew, in order to know and live the true good, one must know and obey God’s commandments. As “Solomon” concludes his Ecclesiastes: “Be warned, my son, of anything
in addition to them. Of making many books there is no end, and much study wearies the body. Now all has been heard; here is the conclusion of the matter: Fear God and keep his commandments, for this is the whole duty of man” (Eccl.12:12-13).

But, for the Jew Spinoza, who lived an observant life for many years, he has come to make not only an addition to this religion, he has come to reject and replace it. “In order for the true good to be realized”, Nadler says to summarize Spinoza’s new way:

the true good requires a thorough knowledge both of Nature itself and of human nature, a clear and exhaustive understanding of the metaphysics of matter and of mind, the physics of bodies, the logic of our thoughts, and the causes of our passions…. [and] The intellect must be purified and prepared for the task of inquiring into Nature.755

Quite a change of view! “Oh, how the mighty have fallen,” his former teachers would have thought if they read Spinoza’s Treatise. Instead of the God of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and Moses, he now talks of a God of philosophy. The differences between this new God of Spinoza’s, this “idol”, this philosopher’s God, compared with the God of his fathers are so startlingly different as to require eye rubbing. For Spinoza, Nature is God and therefore eternal and infinite and perfect and blessed. For Jews and Christians, Nature is not only created by God and contingent on God, but it is also “fallen” and “under a curse” and destined to be consumed and destroyed by fire for a new heaven and earth to be created.756

How do we explain this radical new God of Spinoza’s? Several Spinoza scholars think that in the early years in which he was losing his faith that Spinoza looked for something better, something more true, something more noble, a “true good.” The Treatise on the Emendation of the Intellect and on the Way in which it may be Directed Towards a True Knowledge of Things appears to be the answer to what Spinoza took to be the better way. We get a strong hint of this in the title and subtitle itself: It is with the intellect or the

755 Nadler biography 177.
756 For a list of some of the amazingly different positions resident in Spinoza’s true good in knowing Nature, see Nadler’s biography pp. 178.
understanding that he is most concerned with now because he believes that in it alone (and not in revelation or in a transcendent God) can one come to “a true knowledge of things.”

Spinoza begins the Treatise sounding like the Solomon in the early chapters of the book of Ecclesiastes. Compare the expressions of Ecclesiastics with Spinoza. Ecclesiastes:

I, the Teacher, was king over Israel in Jerusalem. I devoted myself to study and to explore by wisdom all that is done under heaven... I have seen all the things that are done under the sun; all of them are meaningless, a chasing after the wind... I thought in my heart, ‘Come now, I will test you with pleasure to find out what is good’. But that also proved to be meaningless... And what does pleasure accomplish? I tried cheering myself with wine, and embracing folly – my mind still guiding me with wisdom. I wanted to see what was worthwhile for men to do under heaven during the few days of their lives. I undertook great projects: I built houses for myself and planted vineyards.... I amassed silver and gold for myself, and the treasure of kings and provinces. I acquired men and women singers, and a harem as well – the delights of the heart of men... I denied myself nothing my eyes desired; I refused my heart no pleasure... Yet when I surveyed all that my hands had done and what I had toiled to achieve, everything was meaningless, a chasing after the wind; nothing was gained under the sun (Eccl. 1-2, my emphases).757

Compare this Faustian striving with Spinoza's:

After experience had taught me that all things which frequently take place in ordinary life are vain and futile...I determined at last to inquire whether there might be anything which might be truly good ...I determined, I say, to inquire whether I might discover and acquire the faculty of enjoying throughout eternity continual supreme happiness.758

The texts quoted above from Ecclesiastes have been traditionally interpreted by both Jewish and Christian commentators as the classic example of the mind of the backslider or person in the world without God. “Solomon” wrote this book during his period of backsliding and rebellion against God. Thus, as in the passage cited earlier, because he “did not think it worthwhile to retain the knowledge of God, He gave [him] over to a depraved

757 The English term “meaningless” in the NIV translation I quote from above is identical with “vanity” or “vain” and “futile”, the English terms Shirley translates from Spinoza. Most other translations of these passages from Ecclesiastes use the latter terms.

It should also be noted that the author of Ecclesiastes also “applied myself to the understanding of wisdom” (1:17). But, he, unlike Spinoza, concludes that the search for knowledge and wisdom is “also madness and folly.” Moreover, contra Spinoza’s conclusion that understanding brings blessedness and contentment, the skeptical author of Ecclesiastes concludes: “For with much wisdom comes much sorrow; the more knowledge, the more grief” (1:18).

mind.” Thus his “thinking became futile and [his] foolish heart was darkened. Although [he] claimed to be wise, [he] became a fool” (Rom. 1).

As a result of his “foolishness” Spinoza, like the backsliding Solomon, seek what is truly good outside of God. Indeed, as can be seen in Spinoza autobiographical account of his search, he at first doesn’t know what is truly good. He has to inquire about it and how he may enjoy it. A Jew does not inquire about such things. A good Jew knows the answer to these things: they lie in obedience to God and his commands. End of story. If you will recall our earlier chapter on the Greeks and Judaism, this kind of thinking was labeled “pagan” by the orthodox Jews. We see then, at this early stage in Spinoza’s philosophical life that the rationalistic trumps the traditionally religious, the Greek over the Jewish, the philosophical over the theological, the intellect over Torah, and reason over blind obedience.

Spinoza continues. He says that he is on a “new quest”, that he is searching “for something new”, that he is “seeking for a fixed good.” Note how he is going about this new quest. He is seeking this new thing, this true good or supreme happiness just as Solomon did: by his own intellectual effort and not by simple, childlike obedience to the higher authority and wisdom of the Creator as revealed in Torah. We note, too, that the tone of some of his expressions in this book smacks far more of religion than his later books (though the religious terms continue even up to the last book of the Ethics): “For I saw myself in the midst of a very great peril.”

759 Ibid. 228.

760 Compare Spinoza’s autobiographical account with Descartes’ in the beginning of his Discourse on Method. There are many commonalities between the two. Indeed, so much so, that some have thought that this work might have been influenced by Descartes. Whatever the case may be on this point, one thing seems noticeably different: though Descartes clearly gives proceeds with faith and praise in reason, Spinoza does so with greater religious overtones. Observe, too, that Descartes is mostly seeking truth, whereas Spinoza seems to be mostly seeking salvation. I personally interpret Spinoza’s added interest to be due to the loss of his faith and the usually consequent need to find a substitute for this. This is speculation (because we don’t know enough for certain of their early lives), but my impression from their biographies is that Descartes’ religious experience as a child and youngster was not nearly as pervasive and existential as Spinoza’s. Plus, Descartes’ Jesuit education did not eschew “pagan” and Gentile education, or slight the intellect, as Spinoza’s education did. This
person in crisis before being resolved by a religious conversion. One thinks of Augustine’s 8th book of his *Confessions* or of Bunyan’s in *Grace Abounding*, and so on. So he has “to seek a remedy, however uncertain, with all my energy: like a sick man seized with a deadly disease, who sees death straight before him if he does not find some remedy, is forced to seek it, however uncertain, with all his remaining strength, for in that is all his hope placed.”

We see here, even at this early period in his philosophical life, that Spinoza already had the key planks of his philosophical platform in place. He already cites the greatest good as being “the knowledge of the union which the mind has with the whole of nature.” He already knows that he wants to devote his life to not only sharing this gospel, but also in hope of forming a new society in which such ends are followed. But in order to be successful in this, he rightly understands that “attention must be paid to *Moral Philosophy* and the *Theory of the Education of Children.*” I speculatively interpret this to be Spinoza’s round-about way of saying that society needs not only a new and better and truer philosophy (than the religious one it has adhered to for ages) to follow, but that this can only be established by teaching such a morality in our education system at an early age. This must be done “at the beginning, that it may with the greatest success understand things correctly.”

The top priority for all thinking is that “a method must be thought out of healing the understanding and purifying it.” And what is this method or way to attain this? Through “the Spirit of wisdom and revelation” so that “the eyes of your heart may be enlightened so that you may know”? (Eph. 1:17). No. For starters, Spinoza says, we need to “give all our

too may go a long way in accounting for the differences between the two apparently sincere autobiographical accounts.

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761 Ibid. 230-1.
762 Ibid. 231.
763 Ibid.
764 Ibid.

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attention in order to be able to direct our intellect in the right way it is necessary to live."\textsuperscript{765}

The intellect, that is, the \textit{natural} intellect, is given pride of place, not Jehovah, not the Holy Spirit’s enlightening actions on our intellects.

And how should the Spinozists get this message out? Spinoza counsels his reader who is in the know to follow three rules, the first of which seems to strongly verify at least some of Leo Strauss’s teaching on how to interpret Spinoza:

To speak in a manner comprehensible to the vulgar, and to do for them all things that do not prevent us from attaining our end. For from the multitude we may reap no little advantage, if we make as many concessions as possible to their understanding. Add to this that we shall thus prepare friendly ears to give us a good hearing when we wish to tell them what is the truth.\textsuperscript{766}

And what, pray tell, is this truth that he’s talking about? He already told us: the greatest good for man to attain to is “the knowledge of the union which the mind has with the whole of nature.” And what is the way to this union? Spinoza says that we attain “the summit of wisdom” through working on and improving our intellects and intellectual instruments just as artificial instruments have been improved from labor and perfecting.\textsuperscript{767}

Spinoza wants to know the truth. So he has to find out the best way to know the truth. And that means he has to examine those various domains of supposed knowledge to see how much truth and certainty they offer. He mentions knowledge “by hearsay” – such knowledge as the date of his birthday. The Bible’s claims must also be understood to fall under the category of hearsay - claims such as: God revealing things to Moses, of choosing the Jews, or of doing miracles, or of giving the Ten Commandments, and of God’s great commission for His people to possess the Promised Land. He concludes that compared with

\textsuperscript{765} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{766} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{767} Ibid. 236.
scientific knowledge “we can obviously conclude that all certainty which we have from
hearsay is far removed from scientific knowledge.”\textsuperscript{768}

Spinoza also examines the status of many empirical experiences, which he labels
“vague experience.” He knows the usual problems in relying on such experiences as the sun
looks smaller than it actually is. He also mentions deductive knowledge such as that gained
from mathematics, and concludes: “But the things which I have been able to know by this
knowledge so far have been very few.”\textsuperscript{769}

Spinoza wants to know the best mode of perception, the best mode of
understanding, the best ways to both improve the power of the intellect and to correct any
of the poor sources that would mislead the understanding into adopting false ideas. And
because the understanding has so many false ideas, these must corrected for – what Spinoza
expresses over and over again: “the attainment of our end.” To attain our end, we need to
rely on the best mode of perception and the right method of knowing only adequate and
true ideas. We therefore need to know the difference between true and false or fictitious
ideas.\textsuperscript{770}

Notice now how the Jewish boy from the Amsterdam synagogue is now interested
and living according to things that are not discussed in the Torah: things such as how to
distinguish between true and fictitious ideas. The only thing that I recall from all the Jewish
Bible having to do with any kind of distinguishing is that between the true God and other
gods and between the true prophet from the false prophet. But none of this has anything
epistemological about it, but rather they are primarily theological. The wise man for the
Jew is one who knows what’s right and wrong, true and false, \textit{according to Torah}. The wise
man for the developing Spinoza has to do with cultivating and strengthening and educating

\textsuperscript{768} Ibid. 235.
\textsuperscript{769} Ibid. 233.
\textsuperscript{770} Ibid. 234-5.
the intellect and rational powers, and of following rational and tested methods of reasoning. Then and then only can the mind distinguish between true and fictitious ideas. And of these fictitious ideas, most of what he believed in his early days as a believer falls.

*The Short Treatise on God, Man, and His Well-Being*

**Introduction**

Like the *Treatise on the Emendation of the Intellect: and on the way by which it is best directed to the true knowledge of things*, Spinoza’s *Short Treatise on God, Man, and His Well-Being* (abbreviated as “KV”) was also never completed or meant for publication, and thus not published during the author’s lifetime. How the *Short Treatise on God, Man and His Well-Being* (abbreviated as “KV”) got into the Spinoza corpus, Curley states, “is a scholar’s delight.”\(^771\) Others would call it more like a scholar’s nightmare.\(^772\) Not only are there a lot of unsettled questions about the text, but, amazingly, some scholars have even wondered whether there is much value to studying the KV at all?\(^773\) Happily, we can ignore most of these concerns, except in so far as they have relevance for our focus; for the fact of the matter is that for our purposes, the importance of the KV, like that of the *Treatise*, is the early theological-philosophical concerns that we find in it that are not found anywhere else in all of Spinoza’s writings. For instance, the KV devotes a short chapter (Chapter XXV in Curley) to the question of whether the Devil exists.\(^774\) Further, the KV can “help us to understand better Spinoza’s position in relation to Christianity, which in turn is useful for the proper understanding of the *Theological-Political Treatise*.\(^775\) One Spinoza scholar even

\(^{771}\) Curley op. cit., 46.
\(^{772}\) Ibid. 46-52.
\(^{773}\) Ibid. 51.
\(^{774}\) Curley 46 and 145.
\(^{775}\) Ibid. 52.
argues that "though it contains many propositions incompatible with Christian dogma, the
Short Treatise is nevertheless more open to a Christian reading than is the Ethics" which
shows "that at a certain stage of his life certain Christian ideas and sentiments ‘penetrated
his soul’."\footnote{Ibid. 52.} We see hints of these, I think, in some of the language used in Chapter VI “Of
God’s Predestination”, in Chapter XXI “Of True Knowledge, Rebirth, Etc.”, in Chapter XXIII
“Of the Immortality of the Soul”, and in “Of the Human Soul” (in Appendix II).

The KV also deals with several of the themes he takes up in more detail in the TTP. I
will cite only one here. In his chapter “Of God’s Love for Man”, he states: “one might rightly
ask how God can make himself known to man, and whether this happens, or could happen,
through spoken words, or immediately.”\footnote{Ibid. 144.} Here we see one of the central worries of the
TTP, e.g. the question of the epistemological status of purported divine revelation. But
beyond this, let there be no mistake, the bulk of this work is philosophical, as was the
Treatise. True, many of these philosophical themes have been historically generated by
many Jewish, Christian, and Scholastic theological issues, but, for the most part, Spinoza’s
treatment of them is philosophical and not historical-textual as in his TTP treatment. The
KV is also a great place to see pre-Ethics formulations, so it is simply mind-boggling to
wonder about the value of the KV when considering the context, history, and maturation of
Spinoza’s thought in his later works.

Nadler indicates that Spinoza had been working on a systematic treatise in
philosophy around the time he met Oldenburg in 1660. He was probably referring to the
Short Treatise. In this work, he would examine further philosophical and theological issues,
and in more detail than he did in his Treatise on the Emendation of the Intellect. When
Spinoza first wrote Oldenburg in 1661, the Short Treatise on God, Man and His Well-Being
was still being worked on. It was probably a work that his friends urged him to do. Nadler
notes that "Though Spinoza seems to have thought of eventually publishing the treatise, his remarks at the end of the work make it clear that it really was mainly a presentation of philosophy for his friends." 778 Because he knew the dangerousness of some of the novel thinking in this work, he asks his friends directly in the last paragraphs "to be very careful about communicating these things to others" because "of the character of the age in which we live." Spinoza knew how novel his ideas were, but also of "the certainty of their appearing too radical in the eyes of the Dutch Calvinist authorities." 779

The Short Treatise, like the Treatise on the Emendation of the Intellect, is interested in human happiness and blessedness which "consists in a knowledge of God and of how all things in nature depend on him." 780 This then leads to his conclusion that we ought to love God as our highest and truest good. But there is a wrench in the works. As Nadler puts it:

the God whose existence is demonstrated is not a God who would have been familiar to the members of the Reformed Church, or indeed of any religion. It is not God the benevolent and free creator of whom Spinoza speaks. His God is not a lawgiver and judge in any traditional sense. He is not a source of comfort or reward or punishment, nor is he a being to whom one would pray. Spinoza explicitly denies that God is omniscient, compassionate, and wise. 781

Once again, we meet Spinoza's philosophical God, only this time treated in far more detail. Indeed, the Short Treatise is a close precursor to the philosophy of God that he will chart out more fully in his 1670 TTP and even more in his Ethics. Here too he uses a lot of theological language. Nadler says that, "Despite Spinoza's theological language and what looks like concessions to orthodox sentiment ('the Love of God is our greatest blessedness'), there is no mistaking his intentions. His goal is nothing less than the complete desacrilization and naturalization of religion and its concepts." 782

778 Nadler biography 186.
779 Ibid.
780 Ibid.
781 Ibid. 187.
782 Ibid. 190.
providence, predestination, salvation, and “God’s love of man” “are all given naturalistic interpretation in terms of substance, its attributes and modes, and the laws of nature.”\textsuperscript{783}

Spinoza took this work seriously. He worked on it for at least two years. But he chose not to publish it “not so much because it was never finished – he seems, in fact, to have regarded it as a complete work by early 1662\textsuperscript{784}, even if it needed more polishing – but because he feared that ‘the theologians of our time may be offended and with their usual hatred attack me, who absolutely dread quarrels’” (191).

It was not only these theologians that worried Spinoza. He worried about many of his correspondents, as well – even those who like Oldenburg went out of their way to assure Spinoza that they could be trusted. Thus, it is clear that as a result of Spinoza’s radically heterodox positions, “he seems to have been cautious about revealing too much detail” to Oldenburg. Oldenburg recalls that “we spoke as if through a lattice.”\textsuperscript{785} Oldenburg wished for a copy of the work; Spinoza held it back, even though the former encouraged him against “the foolish theologians” and that the Dutch give “great freedom for philosophizing.” Oldenburg at this time probably “failed to grasp the deeper theological implications of Spinoza’s work.”\textsuperscript{786} Spinoza probably showed Oldenburg parts of the \textit{Short Treatise}, but was not comfortable enough to speak with complete candor. Even so, it is hard to understand how Oldenburg could have failed to grasp the deeper theological implications of Spinoza’s work, especially because Oldenburg himself was trained as a theologian. Most other readers of Spinoza divined what he was up to very quickly. Oldenburg could not have

\textsuperscript{783} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{784} He also had much of his book on Descartes done at this time – and even of the \textit{Ethics}. Nadler says that “A substantial part of the \textit{Ethics} was written by this date [1663, the year in which his book on Descartes came out].” Nadler biography, p. 374, endnote 28. By early 1662, while he was still revising some things in his \textit{Short Treatise}, “His ideas on God, nature, and human well-being were, in essential respects, well formed by then” (Ibid. 199). The appendix attached to the end of the \textit{Short Treatise} “may actually have been a part of an early draft of the \textit{Ethics}, the philosophical magnum opus in which all the most important doctrines from the \textit{Short Treatise}, along with a great deal more material, is given a complete geometrical presentation” (Ibid.).

\textsuperscript{785} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{786} Ibid. 191.
been reading or listening very carefully (either that or he was slow in getting the point). Unfortunately, we don’t know if Oldenburg read what Spinoza says about hell, the devil, and other theologically sensitive issues\(^\text{787}\) in the \textit{Short Treatise}, but if he did it would be hard to understand how he could have missed what Spinoza was up to because his treatment of these doctrines is as heterodox as they come.

\textit{Spinoza contra the doctrine of hell}

As opposed to the traditional orthodox teaching about hell, Spinoza wants to give us knowledge that will free “us from sadness, despair, envy, fright, and other evil passions, \textit{which ... are the real hell itself}.”\(^\text{788}\) Like a modern day liberal theologian, Spinoza in essence psychologizes hell from a real place in which the wicked are punished for eternity to a universal phenomenon that stems from natural human passions. It is true that in the 17\textsuperscript{th} century many wrestled with the onerous doctrine of eternal punishment; but Spinoza’s response to this dogma is among the most radical. For if hell and eternal punishment are only human passions, then why do the scriptures say so much about it as a place where God sends sinners and the unbelieving as punishment \textit{after} they die?

Then I saw a great white throne and him who was seated on it... And I saw the dead, great and small, standing before the throne, and books were opened. Another book was opened, which is the book of life. The dead were judged according to what they had done as recorded in the books... and each person was judged according to what he had done...The lake of fire is the second death. If anyone’s name was not found written in the book of life, he was thrown into the lake of fire.\(^\text{789}\)

\(^{787}\) The \textit{Short Treatise} also repudiates the doctrines of sin and salvation. Not only are there "no devils", but there is no sin and eternal peace either (Curley 146). And salvation is really a matter “of seeking our own advantage, something which is very natural in all things... we therefore prefer to be governed by our intellect” (Curley 147). As opposed to St. Paul’s “If in only this life we have hope in Christ, we are to be pitied more than all men”, Spinoza says: “So even if the power of knowledge and divine love did not bring the intellect to an eternal peace ..., but only to a temporary one, it is our duty to seek even this, since it is such that one who enjoys it would not want to exchange it for anything else in the world” (ibid).

\(^{788}\) Ibid. 128, my emphasis. Curley footnotes this passage: “Freudenthal noted that we do not get the promised later discussion of the real hell as domination by bad passions, and he cited this as evidence that our manuscript of the \textit{Short Treatise} represents an unfinished draft” (Curley p. 128).

\(^{789}\) Revelation 20:11-15.
Jesus says that this lake of fire is eternal (Mt. 25:41). And it is a place of “torment” (Lk. 6:23), of “weeping” (Mt.8:12), “wailing” (Mt. 13:42), “gnashing of teeth” (Mt. 13:50), “darkness” (Mt. 25:30), and so on. New Testament scholars teach that Jesus said more about hell and all its horrors than any other figure in the Bible. So, if the scriptures about hell are false, then why should one believe the rest of scripture? Or if the scriptures about hell should only be taken figuratively as human passions, then what theological doctrine of scripture can be taken as literal? And if no theological doctrine of scripture can be taken literally, then what is the meaning of the scriptures?

Spinoza contra the devil

And it is not only against the doctrine of hell (and the authority of the scriptures) that the Short Treatise on God, Man, and His Well-Being takes to task. Spinoza takes on the devil himself. He actually devotes a whole chapter (albeit a very short chapter) to this theological subject. Right from the very beginning of Chapter XXV, “Of Devils”, Spinoza makes clear what he’s after: “We shall now say something briefly about whether or not there are devils.”

After many months of reading and researching the works of all the major early modern philosophers, to my knowledge not one of them discusses the devil (or hell) in any direct, philosophical manner. Not Descartes. Not Leibniz (even in texts such as the Theodicy in which the devil most definitely should have been treated). And not even Pascal (in any philosophical sense). Only Spinoza to my knowledge ventures to go “where angels fear to tread.”

In the very second sentence of his chapter on the devil, Spinoza takes on the biblical-theological claims regarding this being and then makes clear his ultimate philosophical conclusion (which is completely in accord with his overall philosophy of God): “If the Devil

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790 Curley, op. cited, 145.
is a thing completely contrary to God and has nothing from God, then he agrees precisely with Nothing.” 791 Spinoza doesn’t think that such a being “could exist even a single moment.” He offers the following curious 17th century philosophical argument as his reason for this:

For all the duration of a thing arises from its perfection, and the more essence and divinity they have in them, the more constant they are... Moreover, constancy or duration in the mode of the thinking thing only arise through the union which such a mode has with God, a union produced by love. Since the exact opposite of this is posited in Devils, they cannot possibly exist. But because there is no necessity to posit Devils, why should they be posited? For we have no need, as others do, to posit Devils in order to find causes of hate, envy, and such passions. We have come to them sufficiently without the aid of such fictions. 792

This is vintage Spinoza. Short, sweet, to the point. Philosophical arguments above all others carry the day for Spinoza. If Oldenburg read this passage, my guess is that even he would have gotten the message. It’s no wonder why Spinoza told his friends “to be very careful about communicating these things to others.” He knew darn well that “the theologians of our time [would] be offended and with their usual hatred attack me.” 793 Spinoza’s arguments against hell and the devil here are extremely heretical. And they are written at least eight years before his most complete foray into biblical subjects, the Theological-Political Treatise.

The theological (and philosophical, as in Spinoza) issues of the status of hell and the devil may not seem like a big deal to those unversed in Jewish and Christian theology, but it certainly was for most believers in the 17th century. The belief in Satan and in all the things the scriptures teach about him was alive and well in the Netherlands, France, England, and

791 Ibid.
792 Ibid. My emphases. For Spinoza, all the passions (and everything else) are completely accountable by means of Nature alone. No entities beyond this Spinozistic razor need apply. I would be very curious to know how Leibniz would judge this argument and the conclusion that devils do not exist.
793 Nadler biography p. 186 and 191. Spinoza, as we know from the biography section of this study, knew quite well, and from painful experience, what happens when a man crosses a culture’s theological line.
Germany. Jonathan Israel’s *Radical Enlightenment* devotes whole chapters to the pervasiveness of this belief and the furor of the Churches and theologians against all who put this doctrine in question.\(^794\) In keeping with one of the major purposes of this dissertation let us show the radicalness of Spinoza’s position (that the devil does not exist) by delineating the Counter-Enlightenment forces (the Bible, Churches, theologians, Christian philosophers) thought about the devil.

The first thing that needs to be recognized is that the doctrine of the devil has always been central to Christianity. One needs to be clear on this essential dogma in order to fully appreciate the audacity of Spinoza to take this on and the danger it could have brought to him. First then: Who is this being according to the Bible and biblical theologians? He is entitled the “Prince of this world” (Jn.12:31), the “god of this world [who] has blinded the minds of unbelievers, so that they cannot see the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ” (2 Cor. 4:4). He is called “the father of lies” (Jn.8:44). He is that supernatural being who took the Son of God “to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendor” and then said to him: “All this I will give you, if you will bow down and worship me” (Mt. 4:8-9). He is the one who “put into the heart of Judas Iscariot to betray [Christ]” (Jn. 13:2).

Note the many great powers this being has, especially over human minds and beliefs. This is not therefore a being that a Christian philosopher can be indifferent about, or in whom one need fear no evil. On the contrary, the Lord himself demonstrates the constant vigilance his people need to have toward this being by culminating his teaching on how to pray (the “Our Father”) with the words: “and deliver us from the evil one” (Lk. 11:4).

\(^794\) See for instance Israel’s chapter “The Death of the Devil”, pages 375 to 405 in his *Radical Enlightenment*. Israel commences this chapter with the words: “During the last third of the seventeenth century, the scene was set for a vast triangular contest in Europe between intellectual conservatives, moderates, and radicals over the status of the supernatural in human life and the reality of the Devil, demons, spirits, and magic.”
Again, who is this being? This is the creature who led Eve and then Adam astray and thus brought the fall, sin, the curse, death, and condemnation upon all flesh. This is a being who has literal dominion over all the world’s minds unless some teacher can “open their eyes and turn them from darkness to light, from the power of Satan to God” (Acts 26:18). Besides leading most mortals to everlasting damnation, this being also causes untold suffering in the world and against believers. “Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour. Resist him, standing firm in the faith, because you know that your brothers throughout the world are undergoing the same kind of sufferings.” (1 Pet. 5:8-9).

The only way not to be philosophically deceived and bound in shackles by this god, is by being “strong in the Lord and in his mighty power” and by taking up the armor of God: “Put on the full armor of God so that you can take your stand against the devil’s schemes. For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places (Eph. 6:10-17). One needs to “take up the shield of faith, with which you can extinguish all the flaming arrows of the evil one,” and “Take the helmet of salvation [to protect one’s beliefs] and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God” (Eph. 6:16-7).

The teachings of the churches and universities of the seventeenth century were by-and-large not yet overly “tainted” with Enlightenment theological liberalism, so they were not shy in speaking about the devil. For instance, when the Jesuits went to “New France” to convert the Indians, they wrote over and over again about the “demonic” influences that held the Indians bound. We see this attitude also manifested in the correspondence between the brilliant795 Albert Burgh and the philosopher Spinoza in the 1670s. Burgh

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795 I say “brilliant” here to counteract what I take to be the overly bad press that Burgh has received. To my thinking, he is too often depicted as a poor wretch half out of his mind. Even Curley and
argued that Spinoza's philosophy stemmed from "deception by the devil." So we know these things were in the air. Burgh tried to persuade Spinoza that he should not rely on his own mind or reason: “You can never be confident about whether the human mind possesses the ideas of all created things naturally, or whether external objects of the suggestion of good or evil spirits produce many, if not all, of them.” In essence, Burgh asserts that Spinoza’s philosophical “proofs are inspired by the Prince of evil spirits.” Spinoza responds to Burgh’s insinuation not only with some philosophical argument, but also by simply mocking his insane “dream” of a being who can be an enemy of God, as an abject absurdity.

Just as St. Paul argued that if there is no resurrection from the dead than so is the faith and the truth claims of scripture, so also with the devil: If the devil doesn't exist, then Adam and Eve would not have eaten of the fruit of the tree of knowledge of good and evil; then they would not have been driven out of the Garden of Eden; then nature wouldn’t have been cursed; then man wouldn't have fallen; then there wouldn't have been a need for salvation or for Christ; then revelation or scripture are lies, which mean that God is a deceiver or that there is no God. If there is no devil, then all the passages that state that Christ came to deliver the world from devils and power of darkness are also false. Therefore the devil is as necessary to the truth of scripture as is salvation and heaven. If the devil is not true, than neither is Christ.

Nadler fall into this way of treating him. Though Burgh’s excess emotional tirades come off like the typical fundamentalist madness, he is a lot smarter than this seems. In fact, some of his arguments against Spinoza’s philosophy are serious; and Spinoza’s response to them weak. Yet, it seems to me on points like this that some Spinoza scholars tend to depict mostly only a good-guy-bad-guy analysis. Indeed, this study also is guilty of this. In my opinion, there is the tendency to only praise Spinoza and mute any serious criticism; and the opposite toward his opponents.


797 Ibid. 354 and 351-2. I should say here that Burgh’s letter about the devil is not the only reference to the devil in the Correspondence. There are many such references and, even more, implied comments. Indeed, how could there not be?
This is why the dogma of the devil is so central to Christianity and why Spinoza’s attack against it considered such an outrage.798

Spinoza’s Correspondence: The first letters of 1661:

In the very first letter (of August of 1661) to Spinoza in the surviving correspondence is further proof that Spinoza at this date already knew the principles of Cartesian and Baconian philosophy, issues about infinite Extension and Thought, and about the soul-body problem.799 This comes a year before the 1662 dates given for his Treatise on the Emendation of the Intellect and the Short Treatise on God, Man, and His Well Being. So Spinoza seems to have much of the major doctrines of his philosophical system in order as early as this date. We can tell from this letter that Spinoza already has a confident and strong philosophy in place. He doesn’t just refer to Descartes or other philosophers as a student or as a scholar would do. He writes what he thinks and believes on his own.

In letter 2, “Of the philosophy of Descartes and Bacon,” Spinoza says:

The first and greatest error is that they have wandered so far from knowledge of the first cause and origin of things. Second, they did not know the true nature of the human Mind. Third, they never grasped the true cause of error. Only those lacking any education or desire for knowledge will fail to see how necessary the true knowledge of these three things is.800

The first criticism he has against Descartes and Bacon is about God; more specifically, their notion of God (which is, I take it, in line with the Judaeo-Christian biblical notion of a Creator). The second criticism, like the first, is also based on metaphysical and

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798 Throughout all his works, Spinoza deals with various biblical and theological issues such as the devil and hell. We saw this in his Apologia, in his Treatise, and now in his Short Treatise. And we will see more in the TTP and the Ethics, for much of early modern philosophy revolves around and is intimately concerned with the cosmic drama of the theological tragic-comedy of the Bible.

799 From Curley’s The Collected Works of Spinoza, Volume 1, 163-4. This letter was sent from Oldenburg.

800 Ibid. 167. Note how strong his philosophical opinions are at this point. He’s 38-years-old and he is ripping into the theological-philosophical errors of the 17th century’s greatest philosophers.
religious grounds: Descartes holds that the true nature of the human mind is in some way ontologically distinct and even separate from the body. Spinoza rejects this ontological dualism. This mind-body dualism is in line with Christian theology's sharp distinction and separation of the "soul" from the body. St. Paul, for instance, talks about his wish to "depart the body to be with the Lord", and the like. The third point of criticism has to do with what he calls the true cause of error. He connects this issue with the subject of the problem of free will and what he takes to be the false bifurcation of will from intellect made by Cartesians and others.

From these letters then, and from all the evidence selectively gleaned from the *Apologia*, the *Treatise on the Emendation of the Understanding*, the *Short Treatise on God, Man, and His Well-Being*, and, finally, from his *Correspondence*, the case has been made that the development of Spinoza's "apostate antichrist philosophy" is to all extents and purposes complete and set in stone even before 1661. True, a lot more is yet to come (*TTP, Ethics, Politics*), but, in terms of philosophical foundations, these have already been laid. With this in mind, we now proceed to his *Principles of Cartesian Philosophy*, but we do so with a different interpretation of this book than is usually given.

1661-1663: Spinoza and Descartes – *The Principles of Cartesian Philosophy*

The conventional understanding of this work is that Spinoza simply aimed to explain some of the major principles of Cartesian philosophy to his friends in a clear way that would help them to better understand it. However, as some Spinoza scholars point out, there is more going on in this book than at first meets the eye. Edwin Curley, for instance, points out that "there is a good deal of thinly veiled criticism in Spinoza's exposition of [Descartes']
principles”\textsuperscript{801}. Indeed, there are several places in this text in which Spinoza puts some of Descartes’ views in question, though the language he uses may not seem to overtly point this out.

Wiep Van Bunge points out that Lodewijk Meyer’s preface to Spinoza’s \textit{Principles of Cartesian Philosophy} made a lot of people worried. He not only warned the reader that Spinoza “did not share each and every principle of Descartes’ philosophy … [but also] let it be known that his philosophy was indeed marked by a number of substantial modifications of Cartesianism.”\textsuperscript{802} As Meyer’s says, “The foundations of the sciences brought to light by Descartes, and the things he built on them, do not suffice to disentangle and solve all the very difficult problems which occur in metaphysics. Different foundations are required, if we wish our intellect to rise to that pinnacle of knowledge.”\textsuperscript{803}

Looking behind the scenes in the “thick context” of Spinoza’s world, Jonathan Israel’s essay “Spinoza as an Expounder, Critic, and ‘Reformer’, of Descartes” interprets some of Spinoza’s \textit{Principles of Cartesian Philosophy} as being purposely, though furtively, subversive of Cartesianism. Israel argues that there are some crucial philosophical points in the \textit{Principles} that can only receive a proper construal by locating the book in its historical context. Once the background of the \textit{Principles of Cartesian Philosophy} is thoroughly investigated, a different view of the book comes out than that of the interpretations of later generations. Israel points out that “by the later eighteenth century, philosophical debate had lost touch with the immediate intellectual context.” Moreover, “while modern scholars concur that Spinoza departs substantially from Descartes’ intentions in his only book to be published under his name during his life-time, it is hardly ever suggested that his might

\textsuperscript{802} Wiep Van Bunge. \textit{From Stevin to Spinoza}, op. cited, 108.
\textsuperscript{803} Ibid. 108-9.
have been a deliberate strategy or subversion of ideas, something designed to advance his own philosophical priorities covertly."^804

Though Spinoza says that he is reordering Descartes' thought in a way to make it clearer to the reader, there is evidence to doubt that this was Spinoza's only intention. For one thing, Spinoza literally told his friends that he rejected some of Descartes' most important philosophical positions. For another, as we saw in Spinoza's letter to Oldenburg quoted above in the previous section, Spinoza strongly dissented from Descartes' (and Bacon's) views on various basically theological respects. He especially disliked Descartes' defense of a first cause and along with his defense of the soul as a spiritual thinking thing ontologically distinct from the body.

Seeing how strongly Spinoza felt about these matters, it should not surprise us if in his treatment of Descartes' work he suggests and implies some of the things he dissented from. When we research the matter, we also find out that others (outside his circle and correspondents) discerned his anti-Cartesianism merely from reading his *Principles of Cartesian Philosophy*. From this alone they argued that Spinoza was up to more than merely laying out Descartes' views.

For example, we learn that Nicholas Steno interpreted Spinoza's work on Descartes as a work in which he "reformed" Descartes. By this time (1671), Steno "knows that Spinoza was a materialist whose concern was not just fundamentally to 'reform' Descartes' philosophy but, as Steno saw it, to liquidate spirituality and 'soul' in the process."^805

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^804 Jonathan Israel's version of this paper delivered in July 2006.

^805 Intellectual History Review. Vol. 17, Issue 1, March 2007, 44-45. I wish to say that I am thus far uncertain and therefore uncomfortable with accepting all Israel's thesis as stated in this essay, especially regarding his interpretation of Descartes letter to his Meyer (Letter XV in A. Wolfe). It seems to me that if Spinoza was as anti-Cartesian as Israel argues for, this letter to his friend would have given more indication of it.
strenuously denies Spinoza’s project to get rid of the theological dogma of the immortal soul. 806

Steno isn’t the only thinker of the period who recognized that Spinoza’s work on Descartes was subversive. Another critic who saw what Spinoza was really up to in the *Principles of Cartesian Philosophy* was Siegmund Jacob Baumgarten, whose lectures in the mid 1750s stated that

Spinoza had given the appearance of only wanting to rework Descartes’ theories more accurately and astutely [than Descartes had done], but, [in reality] already laid the ground for asserting his own fallacies – which specifically consisted of seeing all things as mere formations and parts of one big essence or one substance, so that God, as asserted by Spinoza, is the most integrated thing in the whole world, in that all other things are actual parts of the same.

Other critics, including arch Cartesians such as Cornelius Bontekoe, claimed the same thing, only in stronger terms. Bontekoe makes clear that Spinoza’s real purpose was to mix his diabolical concepts among those of Descartes and coax the Cartesians to accept them the more easily, and they, taking him to be a true Cartesian, often acknowledged these as being authentic Cartesian ideas when in fact they are not, being concepts which on the contrary besmirch that philosophy, obscure and destroy it and often without anyone noticing, overthrow it. One sees all this from the work’s full preface, and from the *Cogitata Metaphysica* which he appended to it. Indeed, in the preface, Spinoza has the effrontery to assert not only that he had had to deal with things in that book according to Descartes’s opinion, but that he had gained insight into still higher *principia* whereby he can provide other and better explanations of things than does Descartes.807

True, Spinoza’s manner in talking of Descartes “gives the impression of reverend adherence and loyal discipleship”, but this is “often deftly undermined by subtle differences of wording in the way arguments are developed.”808 In Spinoza’s presentation of some key planks in Descartes’ philosophical platform, such as on God, he purposely excludes Descartes’ orthodox qualifications about divine revelation and the Creator. Curley agrees,

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806 Ibid, 44.
807 See Israel’s case for this on pages 48 to 49, ibid.
808 Ibid.
for "if we conceive of God's power as being like that of a king, as Descartes did ..., we destroy the foundations of our physics."809

With respect to Spinoza's treatment of Descartes, I'm reminded of Descartes' way of dealing with scholasticism. Instead of explicitly and stridently taking scholastic theories to task, Descartes instead worked to present his system in such a way that by the time a person finished reading his work, he would only then realize that scholasticism becomes superfluous.

These are the things I want people mainly to notice. But I think I included many other things besides; and I may tell you, between ourselves, that these six Meditations contain all the foundations of my physics. But please do not tell people, for that might make it harder for supporters of Aristotle to approve them. I hope that readers will gradually get used to my principles, and recognize their truth, before they notice that they destroy the principles of Aristotle.810

Roger Ariew shows in his "Descartes among the Scholastics" that Descartes often dealt with the scholastics using their own terms and language in order to win as many as possible with the least amount of hysteria. If Israel's thesis on the clandestine manner of Spinoza's book on Descartes is true, then, we might surmise, that Spinoza does in that work what Descartes did in his works. Indeed, Spinoza actually talks like this. In his letter to his friend Meyer, he asks him to omit from his Preface those passages in which Meyer uses strident language, for

I should like all men to be able easily to persuade themselves that these are published for the good of all men, and that you, in publishing this little book, are mastered simply by a desire to spread the truth, and that you are doing all in your power to make this little work welcome to everyone, and to induce men, in a kindly and friendly way, to take up the study of true philosophy, and to pursue the good of all. This everyone will easily believe when he sees that no one is hurt, and that nothing is put down which can be even slightly offense to anyone.811

Based on such arguments, Israel feels certain that "Cartesianism, for Spinoza, was a medium by means of which he could surreptitiously and inconspicuously instill his own

809 Ibid.
811 Spinoza. The Correspondence of Spinoza, translated by A. Wolf, op. cited, p. 135, Letter XV.
philosophy into the Dutch cultural milieu, a system entirely incompatible with Descartes's premises but also with the prevailing cultural norms as well as the Dutch laws of his time.”812 Israel argues that evidence such those cited show that Spinoza looked upon his book on Cartesian philosophy as a planned and integral part of his ambition “to establish his own philosophy in society.”813 But he needed to do this in a clandestine manner because of the seriousness of the times.814

To sum up then, Spinoza’s Principles of Cartesian Philosophy is more than a simple exposition of Descartes’ philosophy. It is instead a “carefully judged mix of exposition of Descartes’s philosophy and partly concealed but fundamental revision of Descartes’s thought … [whose] evident purpose was simultaneously to build on and yet negate Descartes” in hopes of “carrying the generality of Cartesians a good part of the distance with them” … “for the good of all.”815

The years cited above in our section are not meant to imply that Spinoza’s dealings with the works of Descartes only began in the years 1661 to 1663. We only cite these years to continue our time line up to the Ethics and the TTP. Spinoza had read Descartes and had been immensely influenced by Cartesian thought before 1661. According to most Spinoza scholars, Descartes had the greatest philosophical influence in Spinoza’s life. Descartes turned his life around. Descartes was the primary cause of his “philosophical conversion. Descartes consolidated his rejection of Judaism and the old way of the synagogue and

812 “Spinoza as an Expounder, Critic, and ‘Reformer’ of Descartes”, op. cit., p. 52.
813 Ibid. 44.
814 See Israel’s excellent summation (in my view) of the “three factors” that prevented him at times from speaking his views in a transparent way on pages 46 to 48, ibid. There has been a lot of discussion (especially since Leo Strauss’s essay “How to Study Spinoza’s Theologico-Political Treatise in his Persecution and the Art of Writing) on the question of how transparent or guarded Spinoza was in his works, my thoughts on the matter from reading much of it is that he did indeed often present his views in a covert manner. We must remember that the only work that he published in his name during his lifetime was the Principles. The TTP was published during his lifetime, but without his name, and even given from a false printer. And the Ethics and Correspondence were only published after his death (and even then a lot of clandestine activity brought this publication into being).
815 Ibid. 53.
Torah. Descartes represented a new life, honesty, truth, light, and liberation. Without Descartes, there may have been no Spinoza as we know him.

It is known that Spinoza had studied Descartes probably even before his 1656 expulsion. We have said that some of Spinoza’s works and philosophy are responses to, or reactions against, his religious education. We have to say the same thing about Spinoza’s post-Talmud Torah education in Descartes. So much of what Spinoza’s philosophy – his metaphysics, philosophy of mind, epistemology, philosophy of religion, and even his ethics can be seen as responses to and development from Descartes. We now turn to what is widely regarded as Spinoza’s *magnum opus*, his great *Ethics*. 
Chapter Fourteen

Spinoza’s Ethics versus “the Word of God”
Reason versus “prejudices”

“Is it not the most pernicious atheism that ever was seen in the world?”

“whenever the opportunity arose I have striven to remove [theological] prejudices ... there still remain a considerable number of [theological] prejudices...I have thought it proper ... to bring these [theological] prejudices before the bar of reason”

Introduction

Preliminary remarks on the difficulty of the Ethics

Before pointing out areas in which Spinoza’s Ethics is a Radical Enlightenment document against biblical theology and Jewish and Christian philosophy, it will be useful to say a couple words about the difficulty of learning this work. There are several obscure and difficult passages in Spinoza’s Treatise on the Emendation of the Understanding, the Short Treatise on God, Man and His Well-Being, and his Descartes’ Principles of Philosophy, but none more so then in his Ethics. The first, second, and third impression that most readers have when perusing Spinoza’s Ethics is just how utterly foreign it is. Indeed, during the course of

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816 These are the words of one of Spinoza’s first biographies (The Life of Benedictus Spinoza) by Pastor John Colerus explicitly about the Ethics (67). “Did ever anybody hear any such abominations among Christians!” (68). Indeed, these are only a couple of the many excoriations spoken against Spinoza in an otherwise pretty well-researched and scholarly biography. I should also point out here that Colerus didn’t just research Spinoza’s life; he also studied many of his works. Lest the reader think that only clerics uttered such violent speech, think again. Bayle’s article on “Spinoza”, the longest essay in his Dictionary, is replete with the highest of denunciations. Many philosophers, as great as Arnauld and Leibniz, also had many harsh words.

817 Spinoza. Ethics (trans. Shirley), op. cited, Part I, Appendix, p. 57
my research on Spinoza, many of my colleagues in philosophy (both advanced students at the graduate level and some professors) confessed to me their frustration and despair in understanding Spinoza’s Ethics. They said that they had tried several times to enter into his thought, but each time had given up the attempt unsuccessful and dispirited. Furthermore, in almost every book I have read on the Ethics, commentators are forced to discuss the problem as to why the Ethics is so daunting. It has been translated into English from the Latin. We read the English words, most of which we understand, yet, after we finish sentence after sentence, much of it doesn’t really register. We read the words assuming that we can learn what he’s written because we know how to read, but, after reading a few lines, we realize that we are not really understanding what he is saying. So we try again. Puzzlement. Bemusement. What's going on here? Why is it not registering?

One of the great rewards of studying under Professor Roger Ariew is in learning the imperative need to read philosophy and philosophers in context. A personal confession may be apropos here. Since 1972 I have, here and there, opened the Ethics and read in it hoping to get a better understanding of it. Each time I have come up short. And now, almost 40 years later, studying under Professor Ariew, the light has finally dawn on yonder block head – you have to study such books in their historical, biographical, and social context.

For an excellent statement and example of this, see Roger Ariew’s Introduction to his Descartes and the Last Scholastics. See how he backs up this methodology throughout the essays in the work. Indeed, this methodology and book seems to have always been in the back of my mind in the writing of this dissertation, and especially in this chapter on Spinoza. I have often went over portions of Ariew’s work, such as the Introduction to the book just cited, and, to help me to apply its teachings, I would simply substitute “Spinoza” for “Descartes” and “Orthodox biblical theology” for “Scholasticism.” I found a great deal of inspiration and insight into Spinoza and his world from proceeding in this way. I believe that Wiep Van Bunge found similar inspiration from his teacher, Theo Verbeek, in works such as From Stevin to Spinoza: An Essay on Philosophy in the Seventeenth-Century Dutch Republic. In the Preface to this book, he notes that his work “draws on sources which historians of early modern philosophy as a rule tend to neglect, although a substantial part of this book picks up on recent research done by Dutch colleagues”, especially Verbeek. Van Bunge’s work does not concentrate on only the philosophy as such, “Instead I have studied philosophy as it appeared in a specific seventeenth-century culture” (ix). I follow Ariew and Van Bunge in this 17th century contextual approach, only my focus is to make clear and distinct the theological and scriptural bases of the conflict with philosophy and unassisted natural reason.
before you can understand them. You have to do more than merely read the book, for this is a book that requires the reading of other books. This is a book that requires some knowledge of the history of philosophy, especially of Aristotelian, Scholastic, and Cartesian philosophy. It is also, as we will see, a book that requires knowledge of biblical doctrine.

There’s so much in this book that is assumed and implied, but not explicitly stated. To take some examples of difficulties that readers inevitably have with the Ethics, take the fact that it is arranged like Euclid’s geometry textbook. Why doesn’t Spinoza tell us why he has chosen to write philosophy like a geometer? It’s only by doing research into the mentality of his time that you can learn anything about that. And that takes you into the 16th and 17th centuries. That takes you into the world and works of Copernicus and Galileo and the revolution in mathematics at the time – and what this revolution in mathematics meant – and what this new movement, this “New Philosophy”, was all about. But in order to appreciate this as “new” you need to learn what came before it. You then realize that you have to learn about scholastic philosophy and scholastic methodology. Once you get a hold of this, then you can finally be in a position to understand the impatience and anger that many in the seventeenth century (Bacon, Hobbes, Descartes, Spinoza, Locke, etc.) felt about scholastic philosophy – and then the attraction they felt toward this new way of mathematics and naturalistic science.

Another difficulty in understanding this book is the employment of terms which no one uses anymore (for example, the Aristotelian and scholastic term “substance”). One of

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819 This is not exactly right, for he does tell us. One can find his explanation in the Preface to Part III of his Ethics. He knew that many would “find it surprising” that he should “treat of the faults and follies of mankind in the geometric manner.” But his argument for doing this is that all of nature, including human emotions, follows universal laws which have assignable causes or reasons. Because of this, he believes that he can investigate the nature of God (or Nature), the mind, and the emotions, “just as if it were an investigation into lines, planes, or bodies” (Ethics, op. cited, Shirley, 102-3). The point I’m trying to make here is how such a method even arose and why this method came to be used over traditional and Scholastic methods of doing philosophy.

820 Indeed, one of the major reasons for not doing away with scholasticism and replacing it with Cartesianism in the universities was because it was understood that it took a great deal of time and
the causes of this is, obviously, because we are a different audience compared to his 17th century audience. Those in his audience that were philosophers and theologians knew a great deal more about scholastic philosophy and theology than we do.\textsuperscript{821} Hence they were not utterly perplexed when they came upon terms such as “substance.” They also knew a great deal more about Cartesian philosophy (at least in some regards), too. Indeed, the late 17th century world was up in arms over Descartes’ works. They put his works on the Index. People supporting Cartesian ideas lost their jobs. Others were lambasted, ridiculed, and excoriated from pulpits and from rectors of universities. Why? We no longer feel the dangers of Cartesian philosophy. Indeed, most people today still haven’t a clue as to what those dangers were perceived to be. What do we care about Cartesian philosophy? Do we get violently upset when we read it? No. Why not? If they did when they read it, why don’t we? If you don’t know, then you have failed to enter into some of the most important aspects of such works – which is historical and theological. As a rule then, a scholar who cannot explain the revulsion and horror that the greatest minds of the 17th century felt over Spinoza’s works, has failed to understand the most important issue about his works to his 17th century contemporaries. And there’s no way to understand the revulsion and horror they felt toward Spinoza unless one understands the theology that made them feel that way. The study of biblical theology then, in this case, is unavoidable.

But there are many other examples that may be cited to prove the necessity of knowing context to accurately understand Spinoza’s \textit{Ethics}. One final one will be given here.

Many commentators have been puzzled by the use of such language as “salvation” and labor to master the scholastic way of expressing things. Students then could not afford to be distracted from their scholastic studies to read novel works.\textsuperscript{821} Indeed, as was implied in the preceding footnote, one of the reasons why many opposed the new philosophy was because “once [students] have begun to rely on this so-called philosophy, they are unable to understand the technical terms used in their books of traditional authors and in the lectures and debates of their professors” (Rene Descartes quoting a portion of an edict against his work in Utrecht. See \textit{Rene Descartes: Philosophical Essays and Correspondence}, edited with Introduction by Roger Ariew, xiv).

\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{821} Indeed, as was implied in the preceding footnote, one of the reasons why many opposed the new philosophy was because “once [students] have begun to rely on this so-called philosophy, they are unable to understand the technical terms used in their books of traditional authors and in the lectures and debates of their professors” (Rene Descartes quoting a portion of an edict against his work in Utrecht. See \textit{Rene Descartes: Philosophical Essays and Correspondence}, edited with Introduction by Roger Ariew, xiv).}
“blessedness” because they are Christian expressions. Historically, Judaism has not taught that “salvation” may be found in Moses. You will never learn the answer to this question from reading the Ethics, no matter how hard and long you study it. However, if you do historical work, you will dissolve this puzzlement. Yirmiyahu Yovel did just that. In his Spinoza and Other Heretics: The Marrano of Reason, Yovel convincingly demonstrates by plenteous historical documentation that Spinoza and the Jews in the Jewish quarter of Amsterdam learned these terms by – as it were - existential osmosis from their ancestor’s experience in Spain and Portugal. Because of the generations in which they were forced to become Christians, the Jews were cut off from overt ties with Jewish religious Orthodox communities. As a result of this Christian assimilation, some of the Jewish theology in Amsterdam still showed signs of Christian influence.822

So then, let us be clear: You can’t understand or appreciate Spinoza’s Ethics, just as you can’t understand some difficult work in science, unless you have done a great deal of additional study. My problem in 1972 and for many years after in trying to fathom the Ethics was the false presupposition that if you know how to read, and you study a text real hard for a long time, then you will come to understand and master it. Wrong. Here’s the only way to truly understand and master such texts: you have to do all the background study both in the history of that philosophy and in the biography of that philosopher. And here’s where the rubber hits the road and where many readers will leave off trying. For in actuality, such a path takes a great deal of time, involves too much effort, and consumes too much of the life of most readers. Therefore most readers will never come to fully understand or appreciate the Ethics. But to “the chosen few” scholars who realize the importance of this text and devote themselves to learning it, they alone have the pleasure in

822 For the complete story on all this, see Yirmiyahu Yovel’s Spinoza and Other Heretics: The Marrano of Reason (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989). For a quick view on this point, see for example, pages 36-39 and 18-24.
understanding the text and its importance. This is one of the few rewards and pleasures we
poor, book worm scholars enjoy over non-bookworm scholars. Reading this work in 1972,
I hadn’t the foggiest idea at all of the controversy and hullabaloo that swirled around this
book in its time – let alone knowing why such hubbub should arise from it. Only after doing
the requisite historical, social, theological, and biographical reading can one really
appreciate and accurately assess this great work.

The Context of the Ethics: Reason versus the “prejudices”

“whenever the opportunity arose I have striven to remove prejudices … there still remain a considerable
number of prejudices … I have thought it proper at this point to bring these prejudices before the bar of
reason”823

This study has covered a great deal of context (biography, history and theology) already, so
we have a sizeable amount of background information on Spinoza and his world, even if not
enough on the Ethics at this point. We covered Spinoza’s intellectual-spiritual biography
from his youth up to 1656 (24-yrs old) and then said a few words about his early works in
the period from 1656 to 1661 and 1663, the date of the publication of his Principles of
Cartesian Philosophy and of his Metaphysical Thoughts. We’ve seen that at least some of the
doctrines which Spinoza was condemned and excommunicated for in 1656 were central

823 Spinoza, Ethics, Part I, Appendix, op. cited, p. 57. Note here that Spinoza confesses that throughout
the writing of his Ethics, he has made it a point to deal with biblical theological beliefs (which, in
Spinoza estimation, are predominantly “prejudices”) to “remove” them. I point this out because it
has been rarely pointed out. Most commentators approach the Ethics as so overwhelmingly
philosophical that they do not notice the pervasive biblical theological dogmas that the work takes
issue with over and over again – “whenever the opportunity arose”, for there are “a considerable
number of [these] prejudices” (my emphasis). Note also how Spinoza’s use of words (“prejudices”
instead of the more direct “faith in biblical theology”) avoids too-open or obstreperous a
confrontation. Finally, note how he formulates the conflict. My treatment of these issues has not
simplified or projected a black-and-white, reason-versus-theology bifurcation onto Spinoza. Spinoza
himself makes the bifurcation between reason versus theology (How different from Leibniz’s way of
doing philosophy of religion!). And this he does in the Ethics and not just the TTP, as many
commentators wrongly divide the supposed vastly different purposes between these two works.
teachings that would appear in the *Ethics* (such as his "philosophical God" and his repudiation of the soul and immortality). From his 1663 book on Descartes then, we know that Spinoza went forward to develop his own philosophy. According to Curley and Nadler, he actually had the bulk of the *Ethics* by as early as 1665 (though there would be additions, expansions, and structural changes to come). The gist of the *Ethics* then, was in place five years before the publication of the *TTP*. For this reason, we will examine the *Ethics* before the *TTP* in this chapter. Curley does the same in his *Collected Works of Spinoza* (Vol. 1). He justifies this order by arguing that "we know from correspondence that a substantial manuscript of the *Ethics* was in existence by the middle of 1665 ... [so] it seems best to treat the *Ethics* as coming before the *Theological-Political Treatise* and to see a shift in Spinoza’s interests in the late 1660s."\(^{824}\)

Nadler tells us that by the spring of 1662, Spinoza probably began work on the *Ethics*. His plan was "to provide a fuller, clearer, and more systematic" treatment of his *Short Treatise on God, Man, and His Well-Being*. He worked on it consistently until about 1665. At this time, he felt confident enough in what he had thus far written to share it with his friends. We do not know how much of the *Ethics* was completed at this date, but Nadler thinks that "At the time, he probably saw it as mostly complete but in need of polishing."\(^{825}\)

Spinoza stopped\(^{826}\) working on the *Ethics* because something had arisen in his town (Voorburg at this time) that he recognized would become an even graver danger to future semi-free philosophizing then had already been in the air: Reformed ministers were making

\(^{824}\) *Collected Works*, op. cited xiii. This is an interesting observation because many write as if the "shift in Spinoza’s interests" went from theological and biblical interests to philosophical. Curley shows how in this case it’s really the other way around. In reality, the two were always at work in tandem.

\(^{825}\) Nadler, op. cited, 15.

\(^{826}\) Actually, Spinoza did not literally or completely stop working on his philosophy, or the philosophy of the *Ethics*, because, as we will see, much of the *TTP* is his philosophy. More particularly, much of the *TTP* is the product of the philosophy of the *Ethics*. But even this description is misleading because it is an error to not regard the *TTP* as a work of philosophy and an error to regard the *Ethics* as only philosophy and not also biblical theological criticism.
political and social inroads in their attempt to dominate the culture. Spinoza saw this development as so alarming that he felt that he had to do whatever he could to strengthen the liberal forces of the country. He therefore left off work on the *Ethics* to write a new work (though it was one that he had already written some on in his early *Apology*) that he hoped would strengthen opposition against the Counter-Enlightenment Reformed religious-political movement. This would become a treatise explicitly on theology and politics, *The Theological-Political Treatise*. In this work, Spinoza seeks to undermine the authority of the Scriptures in order to undermine the authority of those who used the Scriptures to infringe on the freedoms of all other views. The work also makes several powerful arguments on the need for tolerance and greater freedom.\(^{827}\)

After publication of the *TTP* in 1669-1670, he moved from Voorburg to The Hague and went back to work on his *Ethics*. The years from 1670 to 1675 then were devoted to revising and completing this work for publication. During this period he read works such as Thomas Hobbes’ *Leviathan*, which would have some impact on the *Ethics*.\(^{828}\) Meanwhile, things were getting worse in the political arena. His naïve hope that his *TTP* would help strengthen the liberal forces in Dutch politics not only failed, but caused a firestorm against him. Not only did the Orthodox forces attack him, but even some of the more liberal forces, including the Cartesians.\(^{829}\) He bravely took steps to publish the *Ethics* nevertheless, but the rumors that he was hearing ultimately dissuaded him. He learned from “certain trustworthy men” that “the theologians were everywhere plotting against me.”\(^{830}\) So much

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\(^{827}\) Ibid. 18-19. He wrote to Oldenburg that he also wrote it to defend himself against those “who constantly accuse me of atheism” (Ibid. 20). This is very hard to believe considering that the work is extremely militant against all traditional theological views of God. If we are to believe scholars such as Nadler that Spinoza was an atheist, then we cannot always judge Spinoza as sincere or honest or transparent.

\(^{828}\) Ibid. 24.

\(^{829}\) Ibid. 24-7.

\(^{830}\) How strange, ironic, and hypocritical it is that a religion that suffered from plotting and persecution against them and their freedom (Mk. 14: 1-2; Jn. 11:45-57; Acts 23:12-35, etc.), and that
so that he realized he was in grave danger. In 1675 Theodore Rijckius wrote to a friend in
the government of The Hague that

there is talk among us that the author of the Tractatus Theologico-Politicus is about
to issue a book on God and the mind, one even more dangerous than the first. It will
be the responsibility of you and those who, with you, are occupied with governing
the Republic, to make sure that this book is not published. For it is incredible how
much that man, who has striven to overthrow the principles of our most holy faith,
has already harmed the Republic.831

In this same year, at a gathering of an assembly of Reformed leaders and members of the
consistory in The Hague, the following was recorded of their proceedings:

as this consistory understands that the most blasphemous opinions of Spinoza are
beginning to spread more and more, as much in this town as elsewhere, each of the
members of this body is earnestly asked to see what they can learn about this,
whether there is any other book by him that might happen to be in press, and what
danger further lies here, in order to report back about it to this gathering and then,
after a finding, to do something about it.832

The handwriting was on the wall. Spinoza was caute833 enough to transcribe its meaning.

He therefore gave up his plan to publish his great Ethics and eventually left instructions to
publish it after his death. The Ethics would not come out until his death in 1677.834 And
when it did, it too was violently attacked. In our next sections, we will delineate in specific
detail why it was attacked so viciously. This is our modus operandi because most
contemporary works on this subject simply do not supply the detailed specifics and sources
of exactly what was so horrible about Spinoza’s work. One sometimes doesn’t even learn
the sources and the specifics of the attacks against Spinoza even from the quotes of
Spinoza’s religious contemporaries above. But this is not because they didn’t know the

would proudly preach this story over and over again throughout the world, would nevertheless go on
to plot and persecute its opponents whenever it gained political power.
831 Ibid. 31.
832 Ibid, my emphasis.
833 “Caute” was the motto inscribed in the ring Spinoza wore. It means “be cautious!”
834 The most comprehensive treatment of the history of the Ethics’ text is Piet Steenbakkers’ “The
Textual History of Spinoza’s Ethics” in The Cambridge Companion to Spinoza’s Ethics, op. cited, pp. 26-41. Nadler’s biography of Spinoza also sheds a great deal of light on the genesis and probable
evolution of the work while at the same time providing far more context rich in many varying
aspects.
specifics. They did. We know that they did because a reading of all their criticism, and not just juicy quotes from their work, reveals this. Colerus, for instance, does not only issue condemnations of the *Ethics*. He not only quotes from the works of “Several learned men [who] have already sufficiently discovered the impious doctrines contained” in Spinoza’s *Ethics*, but he himself “add[s] some few things to what has been said by them.”\(^{835}\)

He begins his critique of the *Ethics* saying: “Who would not think at first, considering so fine a beginning, that he is reading a Christian philosopher?... But when we enquire more narrowly into his opinions, we find that the God of Spinoza is a meer phantom, an imaginary God ... And therefore the words of the Apostle, Tit. 1:16 concerning impious men, may be very well applied to that philosopher: ‘They profess that they know God, but in works they deny him.’” In this fashion, Colerus goes on to treat other central philosophical teachings in Spinoza’s *Ethics* which are not in line with the Word of God.

We see this same kind of treatment (implied or overtly) by Oldenburg, Bayle, and scores of others. Note, for instance, the language used in the two block quotes above. We’re told that Spinoza was going to publish a book that is “even more dangerous than the first.” This is the usual way of citing Spinoza’s heterodox views by Spinoza scholars. But in this study, we wish to make clear exactly what these dangers are. Again, in the passage above, we’re told that Spinoza’s work spread “the most blasphemous opinions.” We want to make specifically clear and distinct exactly what Spinoza’s blasphemous opinions were in the eyes of his contemporaries and from what sources they made this judgment.

We mustn’t overstate our case by exaggerating the degree to which other works don’t provide enough specifics on the sources for the attacks on Spinoza. They do make clear that several of Spinoza’s teachings were anathema to most of his contemporaries because they opposed or contradicted traditional biblical and church teachings. And these

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\(^{835}\) Colerus, op. cited, 63, 63-70.
works also even make clear and distinct what doctrines of Spinoza were considered heterodox or blasphemous – such as his views of God as Nature, of Nature as eternal, that there is no ontologically distinct soul, that all is necessitated, and that he relativizes good and evil. Most readers have a general inkling on how these opinions are not in line with traditional biblical and church teachings. It is also true that many readers even know some of the specifics on exactly how some of Spinoza’s views clash with central biblical teachings (such as the “God or Nature” conflation, and the Nature as eternal, claims). One of the principal purposes of this section is to add detail to this general understanding. I want to so zoom in on these issues so that when the reader is finished reading them, he or she will have a much better understanding of the reasons, arguments, and causes behind the attacks against Spinoza.

Purpose and plan of this chapter on the Ethics

“I am utterly amazed, utterly enchanted! I have a precursor, and what a precursor! ... Not only is his overall tendency like mine—namely to make all knowledge the most powerful affect—but in five main points of his doctrine I recognize myself; this most unusual ... thinker is closest to me precisely in these matters: he denies the freedom of the will, teleology, the moral world-order, the unegoistic, and evil.”

– Friedrich Nietzsche, the philosopher most famous for his advocacy of “God is dead”

The purpose of the present section of this study on Spinoza is to make clear and distinct how Spinoza’s philosophical doctrines in the Ethics militate against biblical doctrines which

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836 Curiously, Nietzsche does not explicitly cite in his list that Spinoza denies God (i.e. of tradition). I take it that he felt that he didn’t need to because the sum of his five denials entails the denial of God by logical necessity. Nietzsche called Spinoza a “precursor”, but Nietzsche’s knowledge of Spinoza (as far as I have been able to determine from my own research and from other Nietzsche scholars that I’ve read and corresponded with) was limited to textbooks and maybe the Ethics. One can see from the list Nietzsche cites in the epigraph above that he was referring to the Ethics. He most probably did not read Spinoza’s TTP. If he had, he most assuredly would have praised and loved Spinoza far more. At any rate, even without the TTP, if he had done the requisite study of Spinoza’s Ethics, then he still would not have called him only a precursor, for Spinoza’s Ethics cries out the death of God just as emphatically as Nietzsche’s Gay Science, albeit without the same gifted literary and rhetorical prose style.
were staunchly defended by the theologians, philosophers, and culture of his day. Spinoza’s
*Ethics* is primarily philosophy, but it does not only deal with philosophy. In fact, it is
historically impossible for philosophy to be completely abstracted from religion. On the
contrary, as we will show (both from the *Ethics* itself and from scholars on the *Ethics*), there
are a great number of doctrines in Spinoza’s *Ethics* which implicitly and explicitly treat
scriptural and theological themes. Another very important principle that must figure in our
labor to accurately interpret Spinoza’s *Ethics* is by keeping his other works and
correspondence in mind. As Curley so aptly puts it, “it remains true that the other Spinozistic
texts constitute our most important data for the interpretation of the *Ethics.*”

So then, we must not make the mistake of abstracting Spinoza’s *Ethics* from his time
and place, or from the history of philosophy, theology, and biblical criticism. And we must
not make the mistake of abstracting Spinoza’s *Ethics* from the religious world all about him,
his orthodox religious upbringing, his exclusive religious education, and all the sufferings he
endured due to religious causes (such as being rejected and expelled from his community
and family, the incredibly harsh *cherem* pronounced against him, the attempts to get the
Amsterdam authorities to expel him, the attempted assassination, the insane uproar against
the *TTP*, and so on). But we must also not make the mistake of abstracting the *Ethics* from
his earlier works (which we have briefly treated above) or from his correspondence, or
from his *TTP* (which we will treat in the next chapter). Piet Steenbakkers’ essay “The
Textual History of Spinoza’s *Ethics*” for *The Cambridge Companion to Spinoza’s Ethics* states
that “writing the *Theological-Political Treatise* had its impact on the development of the
philosophical views expounded in the *Ethics.*” To paraphrase Nadler, in a forthcoming

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837 *Collected Works*, op. cited, xi-xii.
838 See page 29 for this. Unfortunately, Steenbakkers’ paper, like Koistinen’s and Viljanen’s
Introduction, says nary a word about the theological issues or context at work.
work on the *TTP*: Those who don’t know the *TTP*, don’t know Spinoza.\textsuperscript{839} I would add to this: Those who don’t know his correspondence also don’t know Spinoza (at least as fully and accurately as he can be known). The correspondence is incredibly important in knowing *Spinoza’s* views on his works because he could not speak as forthrightly in his published works as he could in his private (and as yet) unpublished letters.

The plan of this section then is to furnish some samples to show how much *Spinoza’s* *Ethics* militates against biblical-theological-philosophical positions. We will show that the juxtaposition of these two antithetical world views is exactly how the theologians, philosophers, and scholars of his time responded to his work. In fact, this method of study was the usual focal point in the scholarship of theologians, philosophers, and thinkers of the time. We see this in Colerus’s works, all the works which he refers to, in Bayle, Steno, Burgh, Leibniz, and many of Spinoza’s correspondents. Contemporary students and scholars of philosophy may be surprised or puzzled by the large amount of biblical texts and theology that will be referred to here by me and by Spinoza’s contemporaries; but this is necessary to make clear and distinct just how antithetical the two world views are and just how much it was *this* antithesis that engaged most of the attention of the scholars of the time, in contradistinction to the overriding attention of Spinoza scholars today.\textsuperscript{840} One look at the table of contents of one of the premier publishing houses in the world on Spinoza’s *Ethics* today appears to demonstrate this point. Not one of the thirteen chapters in *The Cambridge Companion to Spinoza’s Ethics* reads anything like the treatment this work

\textsuperscript{839} The exact quote is: “But if we do not give the *Theological-Political Treatise* the attention it deserves, then we do not really know Spinoza.” From *A Book Forged in Hell*: *Spinoza Scandalous Treatise* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, to be published in Spring of 2011), 5.

\textsuperscript{840} Some contemporary scholars might protest that only the more traditional and orthodox interpretations of the Bible and biblical theology are being presented here. They can cite many other religious groups and their theologians, philosophers, and scholars who *don’t* interpret scripture, or, as a result, Spinoza, in this way. Socinians, Collegiants, liberal Anglicans and other Christian sects, for instance, are not being represented here. This is indeed true. My only response to this is what I was taught as a former high school English teacher. Having to instruct classes with students from the four levels of academic aptitude (essentials, general, honors, and gifted students), I was taught to “aim for the middle.”
received from Spinoza's contemporaries. \textsuperscript{841} Compare, for instance, Olli Koistinen and Valtteri Viljanen's 25-page Introduction to each of the five parts of the \textit{Ethics} with my samples of the five parts and vignettes below and you will find that Koistinen and Viljanen barely say a word about the \textit{Ethics}' opposition to biblical theology. It is almost completely abstracted from this context. \textsuperscript{842} They give an almost purely philosophical rendering of all five parts without any context of biography, place, 17\textsuperscript{th} century society, and so forth. We are not criticizing this assessment in itself, nor trying to insinuate that the authors don't know the full context of the work. Clearly, their work performs an excellent service for all those who want to know and focus on the purely philosophical aspects of the work. And this was no doubt the purpose which the authors decided to focus on. As a result, that is all that one will learn from their essay. One will learn nothing further about the horror, the fury, etc. in the reception of this work from his contemporaries.

There's not enough time or space to go through the whole of Spinoza's \textit{Ethics} in this study, but we don't need to do this to achieve our goal. Just as, for example, the U. S. Food and Drug Administration has officials who periodically check the cargo of ships and trucks by sampling, and from this get a reasonably correct assessment (at least ideally!) of the state of this cargo, so also will we check the cargo of the \textit{Ethics}. We will select some pieces of this work to show wherein Spinoza represents that new thing under the European sun, that is, the Radical Enlightenment philosophy of a world without the ancient God and all the many false attendant theological-philosophical offshoots thereof. We're going to show wherein God is dead for Spinoza and what consequences Spinoza draws from this death.

\textsuperscript{841} For a comparative analysis, see Roger Ariew's work on Descartes' famous \textit{cogito} and how he shows a similar complete disjunct in how Descartes' contemporaries read his work from how contemporary philosophers treat his work. See his "The \textit{Cogito} in the Seventeenth Century" in his forthcoming \textit{Descartes Among the Scholastics} (Leiden: Brill Academic Publishers, June 2011).

\textsuperscript{842} I'm reminded of a lecture by Professor Roger Ariew on contemporary philosophical assessments of Descartes, for instance, by Gilbert Ryle in his \textit{The Concept of Mind}. Ryle completely misses the contextual boat upon which the ship of Cartesianism floats.
The Ethics contra God Almighty (samples and examples)

Do we not hear anything yet of the noise of the gravediggers who are burying God? Do we not smell anything yet of God’s decomposition? – gods too decompose. God is dead.\textsuperscript{843} God remains dead. And we have killed him... That which was holiest and mightiest of all that the world has yet possessed has bled to death under our knives ... Must not we ourselves become gods simply to seem worthy of it? There has never been a greater deed – and whoever shall be born after us, for the sake of this deed he shall be part of a higher history than all history hitherto.”\textsuperscript{844}

Brief preview in samples from Parts I to V of Spinoza’s God contra the biblical God

In Part I, “Concerning God”, Spinoza goes right to the jugular from the get-go. The first several propositions he lays out are meant to demonstrate that in all that exists there is only one substance: “There cannot be two or more substances of the same nature” (IP5).\textsuperscript{845} But it’s not immediately apparent that Spinoza has just put the knife to “That which was holiest and mightiest of all that the world has yet possessed”\textsuperscript{846} (as the devout would express it). Further propositions, proofs, scholia, corollaries, and appendixes are needed to make the bleeding apparent. Proposition 5 doesn’t do it alone. But when Proposition 6 (“One substance cannot be produced by another substance”), Proposition 7 (“Existence belongs to the nature of substance”), and Proposition 8 (“Every substance is necessarily infinite”\textsuperscript{847}), are cited one after another, most astute Jewish and Christian philosophers and theologians begin to “smell something of God’s decomposition” and hear something of “the

\textsuperscript{843} As the epigraph at the beginning of this section (”I have a precursor!”), and other passages in the Nietzsche corpus demonstrate, Nietzsche considered Spinoza to be a precursor to the Radical Enlightenment or the “death of God” – to use Nietzsche’s incredibly intense expression.


\textsuperscript{845} Nadler, op. cit., 59.

\textsuperscript{846} Friedrich Nietzsche. \textit{The Gay Science}, op. cit.

\textsuperscript{847} It must be stated here that propositions such as “Every substance is necessarily infinite” and, below, “God is the immanent ... cause of all things,” suggest to some Spinoza scholars that Spinoza is here betraying a kind of theism and not an out-and-out atheist that Nadler and others argue for.
noise of the gravedigger who is burying God.”848 So, by the time Proposition 14 is pronounced (“There can be, or be conceived, no other substance but God”), the jig is up. The rest of the propositions are simply more nails in the coffin.

Let us cite one further proposition (#18) from Part I to show what Spinoza has killed. “God is the immanent, not the transitive, cause of all things.” Put in a nutshell, this proposition puts the lie to God as creator and transcendent cause of the world.849 There’s no need to juxtapose to these propositions the many famous passages from Scripture that assert that “In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth.” Everyone in the western and near eastern world knows this. It just needs to be known loud and clear that according to Spinoza’s Ethics, the biblical claim of “In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth” is false.

Moving on to Part II, no conservative theologian or philosopher would ever teach the following: “By ’body’ I understand a mode that expresses in a definite and determinate way God’s essence in so far as he is considered as an extended thing” (II, Def. 1). Bodies should in no way be thought to be part of God’s essence. God’s essence is Spirit, not body. God existed before he created bodies, that is, the universe. One of the classic New Testament statements in scripture against the notion of the corporeality of God comes from a famous passage in the Gospel of John in which Jesus announces the nature or essence of God: “God is Spirit” (Jn.4:24), he says. God is Spirit, and not physical or material or extension. His essence pertains only to his nature; and, because his nature is eternal and the world was created, nature or body cannot be his essence.

In Part III, Spinoza states that “As long as a man is affected by the image of a thing, he will regard the thing as present even though it may not exist” (III, Pr.18, Proof). Spinoza is doing depth psychology here. In this one brief sentence Spinoza enunciates a deep and

848 Ibid. in my paraphrase.
849 Shirley, op. cited, 25.
powerful psychological force, most of which works at an unconscious level. It reveals much about how the human mind works, about the psychology of imagination and fantasy, and the psychology of religion. We see also from this one short statement how this psychological associationism can hook up with the problem of error, deception, delusion, or illusion - that is, the problem of imagination versus reason and how easily our ontology can be tricked into accepting all sorts of non-existent beings. In point of fact, Spinoza enunciated this insight as early as his Treatise on the Emendation of the Intellect: and on the way by which it is best directed to the true knowledge of things: “the soul can by its unaided power create sensations or ideas which are not ideas of things”850 For Spinoza, among the ideas which are not true ideas of existing things is God Almighty.

We learn in Part IV (Preface) that in God there is no good or evil – never mind that Jesus answered this question: “Why do you ask me about what is good?’ Jesus replied, ‘There is only one who is good’” (Mt. 19:17). God is good. And by God Jesus doesn’t mean nature or reality. He means the creator of nature. But, according to this new philosopher under the sun, “by reality and perfection I mean the same thing”; our ideas of perfection and imperfection “are in reality only modes of thinking”; “As for the terms ‘good’ and ‘bad’, they likewise indicate nothing positive in things considered in themselves.” Not so according to “the Word of God.”

And finally, in Part V, “Of the Power of the Intellect, or of Human Freedom”: one can probably divine at this point from the title (and from what we’ve learned from works such as Treatise on the Emendation of the Intellect) that for Spinoza the only “God” who gives us freedom and help over our passions is that of our natural human reason. But Spinoza’s claim that our natural reason is the fount of moral goodness opposes the scriptural dogma that “There is no one righteous, not even one; there is no one who understands, no one

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who seeks God. All have turned away, they have together become worthless; there is no one who does good, not even one” (Rom. 3:10-12).851 For if our reason is as corrupt as the scriptures teach852 (at least according to those in the Pauline-Augustinian-Lutheran-Calvin tradition), then how could we, based on our own natural human reason find freedom, let alone salvation and blessedness (Vp42)?

Thus in five quick sound bite samples taken from each of the five parts of his Ethics, we quickly recognize that the Ethics is a work at odds with the God of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Jesus, Paul, Augustine, Aquinas, Pascal, and most of 17th century Europe. Now then, let us take a closer look at a few more examples and show in what respects the Ethics flies in the face of “That which was holiest and mightiest of all that the world has yet possessed.”

Examples of Spinoza’s Ethics contra God’s Word (and vice versa)

- Nature is self-caused and eternal, not created by the God of the Bible

From the very first line of his Ethics Spinoza starts the trouble: “By that which is self-caused I mean that whose essence involves existence; or that whose nature can be conceived only as existing” (Def. 1,1). His Christian and secret Jewish readers don’t know it yet, but

851 Paul quotes this passage from several passages in the Old Testament, which indicates that the doctrine of the corruption of human nature is not unique to Christian ideas, but actually stems from Judaism.

852 In the history of biblical theology there have been some differences on this issue. Some theologians (such as Thomas Aquinas) argue that our natural reason does have some goodness (albeit acknowledging that this goodness stems from God from his image in us), while others (John Calvin) argue that this image has been so subdued by darkness as to count the whole human race as dead in their transgressions and sin, lost in darkness, and therefore totally depraved.
Benedict has just unleashed a damnable heresy (We know how European civilization dealt with this doctrine as early as the 13th century when it was condemned in 1277). His readers don’t know it yet, but the writer of these lines, the former Orthodox Jew, born and bred in Orthodox Judaism, just repudiated one of the most central tenets of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam – that is, he just repudiated the doctrine that nature or the universe has been caused or created from a Self-caused, eternal, transcendent Being.853

This first definition doesn’t tell his readers yet, but he’s not referring to that Being whom they probably think Spinoza is referring to; for what or whose other existence can’t be conceived except as existing? To think that all of the universe, everything, or nature is eternally self-caused just doesn’t register for those brought up in a tradition that (in all sorts of ways, in all sorts of doctrines, stories, narratives, prophecies, sermons, music, bedtime stories, Christmas plays, etc.) teaches that the universe, everything, or nature was God-caused.

How is it that a good Jewish boy, who no doubt revered his Creator and Moses and the biblical creation account could have went from believing that the universe went from being God-caused to self-caused? We might be allowed some educated speculation here. It seems likely that for Spinoza this conclusion was the only logical inference his thinking could come to; for if the God of his Bible, of his people, and the products of the natural imagination does not exist, then that means that God did not create everything. And, if God didn’t create everything, then how is it that there is anything? How is it that Nature exists?

853 About the opening lines and pages of the Ethics, Colerus writes, “Who would not think at first, considering so fine a beginning, that he is reading a Christian Philosopher? All those definitions are fine ... But when we inquire more narrowly into his opinions, we find that the God of Spinoza is a mere phantom, an imaginary God” (Colerus, op. cited, 64). Spinoza slowly comes to write more openly about all that he means here only as the pages of the Ethics progress. But we find greater forthrightness in his correspondence. We see a greater openness or courage in his 1675 letter 73 to Oldenburg, in which he says: “But in order to open to you my mind ... I say, in the first place, that I hold an opinion about God and Nature very different from that which Modern Christians are wont to defend. For I maintain that God is, as they say, the immanent cause of all things, but not the transeunt cause.”
If all that is does not have God as their originator or cause, then how does everything exist?

Well, if everything is not God-caused, and there is no such transcendent Being, then the only thing left to conclude (after this process of divine elimination) is that everything, nature, or the universe itself, has always been here. And, if the universe has always "been here", then that means that the universe is eternal. And, if the universe or nature is eternal, than that means that it was never created (or caused), nor does (did) it need a creator (since it always is by its own nature). Therefore it itself (that is, the universe or nature) exists of itself, of its own power, by its own force (Not by God’s might, nor by God's power, nor by His Spirit, saith Benedict de Espinosa [cf. Zech.4:8]). And it continues and persists in its existence through its own force. The universe or nature than is “God”, for the universe is the originator and the sustainer of all things. The universe is the cause of my existence.

Therefore, “From Him [nature] and through Him [the universe] and to Him are all things. To Him [nature] be the glory forever! Amen.” (Rom. 11:36). Therefore also, “For in Him [nature] we live and move and have our being” (Acts 17:28). Or, as Spinoza puts it to Oldenburg, “All things, I say, are in God and move in God, and this I affirm together with Paul.”854 Thus, in a nutshell, is Spinoza’s paean to his new “God,” Nature.

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854 Spinoza Correspondence, Letter 73, Shirley translation from his Spinoza's Complete Works. I think that a couple scholarly points are in order here about Spinoza’s reference to St. Paul, especially because out of all the literature on Spinoza that I have read, not one scholar has mentioned these points, even though the literature quotes Spinoza’s quote of “St. Paul” extensively. First, Spinoza talks as if his immanent ontology were in line with St. Paul’s theology. Spinoza’s reference to Paul here appears to be from the book of Acts (17: 28). Spinoza neither quotes it verbatim (and therefore it does not appear in scare quotes), nor does he refer the reader to where in the Bible he affirms this with Paul. And for good reason because that would make it too easy for his readers to find out that he is twisting this scripture way out of context. But for anyone who took the trouble to look up the passage and its context, he would easily and immediately find out the opposite of Spinoza’s seemingly pious claim! For, right above the scripture that Spinoza alludes to, this same Paul says, “The God who made the world and everything in it is the Lord of heaven and earth ... he gives all men life and breath and everything else. From one man he made every nation of men that they should inhabit the whole earth; and he determined the times set for them and the exact places where they should live. God did this so that men would seek him and perhaps reach out for him and find him, though he is not far from each of us.” Only after saying all this does Paul then say, ”’For in him we live and move and have our being’. As some of your own poets have said, ‘We are his children’... In the past God overlooked
Spinoza’s reasoning starting from being persuaded that the God of the Bible (and all the world’s anthropomorphic imaginative religions) is false to countenancing that the world then is probably “self-caused” and eternal is understandable and logical. Indeed, it might have been the case that these were some of the logical steps that Spinoza took which led him to the conclusion that the world had to be self-caused, and then therefore might also have to be eternal. The logical trajectory that led him from belief in God to nature then might have gone like this: First, he has some early doubts about his religion and the Bible. These doubts grow through his own studies in divinity and then from his growing knowledge of the great world outside the synagogue (the world of Greek philosophy, of Bacon, of Descartes, of the great humanist literary classics, and of the sciences). If this is correct, then Spinoza came to realize that the Bible was false before his thinking could see the inevitability of the doctrine of the eternity of the world. He had to be convinced that God was dead before he could believe that the universe was eternally existent. His anthropomorphic religion had to die before his philosophical ontology could live. If it wasn’t for the Bible, and learning that its claims are false, Spinoza may not have come to the belief that the world is eternal and therefore “self-caused.” It is ironic then that it may have been his study of “the Word of God” and “divinity” that led him to the philosophy that the world is self-caused and of atheism.

In the same way – as an aside - maybe we too can recognize this reasoning as possible evidence that the universe did not have a start in the Big Bang, as many, such as such ignorance, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent. For he has set a day when he will judge the world with justice by the man he has appointed . . . .’

Not only does Spinoza take this scripture passage out of context, but he also fails to note that it wasn’t Paul who said it! In truth, the passage is a quote from a poet which his Athenian audience no doubt was familiar with. Paul quotes this not because he supports this view, but only to get a better hearing from his pagan audience (very much like what Spinoza is doing toward his Christian audience) so that he may “win as many as possible” (1 Cor. 9:19-23). I don’t know what Paul’s Athenian audience thought of this use of their poet, but I can tell you what Spinoza’s Christian audience who checked on this passage would think.
Harvard astronomer Robert Jastrow has argued. The empirical scientific evidence of course is the overriding consideration in factoring to this conclusion, but – as Spinoza knew so well – “removing prejudices” is also an essential part of the philosophical process in being able to accept new truth. In this case, new truths can only be learned after we learn that the truths we had hitherto believed are false.

- All follows from natural cause and effect, not God

In our brief samples above we cited several Propositions from Part I. Let us cite another clear, knock-down show of anti-biblical thinking: “Every individual thing, i.e. anything whatever which is finite and has a determinate existence, cannot exist or be determined to act unless it be determined to exist and to act by another cause which is also finite and has a determinate existence, and this cause again cannot exist or be determined to act unless it be determined to exist and to act by another cause which is also finite and has a determinate existence, and so ad infinitum” (Prop. 28, I). How would this proposition translate with respect to say, us? Well, humans are individual things. And they are finite with a determinate existence which cannot exist or act except by other individual, finite causes, and so on ad infinitum. Therefore we humans and our nature stem completely and ultimately from finite causes. All follows from natural cause and effect. Nothing follows from any final or transcendent causes – because there simply are no such final or transcendent causes. Therefore, there are also no special creations or special supernatural providence. Therefore humans are the product of natural and not supernatural or divine forces.

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855 See his *God and the Astronomers* on this point.
856 My citation and comments on this proposition is presents only one aspect here. In actuality, this proposition is complex and therefore meets its fullest explanation within the context of Spinoza’s overall ontology.
Mathematics makes sense of the world, not revelation from God

“truth might have evaded mankind forever had not Mathematics, which is concerned not with ends but only with the essences and properties of figures, revealed to men a different standard of truth” (Appendix I).

Just as Thomas Hobbes found the demonstrations and chain of reasoning in Euclid’s geometry to be a method or model for human beings to emulate in the formulation of what should be considered valid, or true, ideas, so did Spinoza. In the “scriptures” of his Ethics he makes this abundantly clear. After laying out 36 Propositions in Part I along with their proofs and corollaries, Spinoza inserts an Appendix evidently to speak more plainly to the reader so that they may be clear as to what he’s up to. After strenuously arguing against the methodology of the theology of anthropomorphism, providence, and final purposes, he states: “truth might have evaded mankind forever had not Mathematics, which is concerned not with ends but only with the essences and properties of figures, revealed to men a different standard of truth” (App. I).

Generally speaking, mathematics here represents dependence on natural reason, epistemic carefulness, exactitude, method, proof, and science. This is not the place to elaborate the many intricacies involved in Spinoza’s conception of mathematics and geometry and their relation to his philosophy. There is a vast literature on this subject which the reader may refer to with profit. The only point that I wish to make about Spinoza’s claim here is that he refers to this new standard of truth as something which should supersede the old standard of truth to which people followed. The old standard of truth led to absurd results including beliefs that “disasters, such as storms, earthquakes, diseases and so forth … occurred because the gods [read biblical God] were angry at the wrongs done to them by men … And although daily experience cried out against this and showed by any number of examples that blessings and disasters befall the godly and the ungodly alike without discrimination, they did not on that account abandon their ingrained
prejudice.” It is not unto revelation that men ought to seek for the standard of truth, but to mathematics or science.

- **The *Ethics* versus supernatural miracles**

As men believe that “disasters, such as storms, earthquakes, diseases and so forth ... occurred because the gods [read biblical God] were angry at the wrongs done to them by men”, so also do men believe that supernatural miracles occur in someone’s behalf when the gods are pleased. Men believe such things because they are “ignorant of the causes of things.” For Spinoza the very concept of supernatural miracles stems from the anthropomorphizing accounts of the ancients to describe things for which they had no explanation. But once one learns that all things are of Nature and its causes and effects, no phenomena can any longer be explained as a miracle. God is nature or substance. Nothing therefore transcends or violates this eternal and infinite substance. All miracles therefore are ruled out. This means that every single claim made by the Bible that violates the canon of the laws of nature is false. Hence the story that Eve was created out of the side of Adam is false. Hence the story that the earth was cursed because of Adam and Eve’s disobedience is false. Hence the Noah’s ark story that two of every species of bird, animal, and so on entered the ark and were saved by a universal flood is false. Hence the story of the burning bush before Moses whose fire would not burn out is false. Hence all the miracles that God did through Moses are false. Hence all the miracles that God was said to have done for the Israelites are false. Hence there are no true prophecies. Hence there is no true messiah. Hence there was no virgin birth. Hence there was no walking on the water, resurrection from the dead, ascension into heaven, and so on and so forth.

- **On the antinomy of ethics between Spinoza and God**
Part and parcel of Spinoza’s radical enlightenment philosophy versus the old God’s system is Spinoza’s notion of ethics. One of the primary goals of the Holy Scriptures is to teach man how to live. “And now, O Israel, what does the Lord your God ask of you but to fear the Lord your God, to walk in all his ways, to love him, to serve the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul” (Deut. 10:12). In the same way, writes Olli Koistinen and Valtteri Viljanen in *The Cambridge Companion to Spinoza’s Ethics*, “The primary goal of [Spinoza’s Ethics] ... is, as it was of the Ancients, to teach how we should live.”

For the Holy Scriptures the chief good is to “do what is right” (Gen. 4:7), but “right” means obeying God’s commandments, while for Spinoza “the only thing good in itself is understanding” and the only bad is “that which hinders us from understanding.” For Spinoza “beings endowed with a human mind should devote themselves, as much as they can, to a contemplative life” of Nature; but for Jews and Christians, beings “created in the image and likeness of God,” should contemplate only His law (Ps. 119) and Christ who “is the radiance of God’s glory and the exact representative of his being, sustaining all things by his powerful word” (Heb. 1:3; Phil.3:7-15; Col. 3:1-2; Cor. 2:18, 4:16).

This is a tale of two cities. On the one hand there is God’s way (as given by supernatural revelation set forth in the scriptures and interpreted by theologians); on the other hand, there is Spinoza’s way (as set forth by his natural reasoning and philosophizing). The two clash at just about every point, as our samples and vignettes of juxtaposing passages from Spinoza with passages from the Bible demonstrate.

- Spinoza’s freedom or salvation from bondage from bad emotions and passions versus Stoic, Cartesian, and biblical claims

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858 Ibid.
859 Ibid.
My first readings of the *Ethics* gave me the impression that Spinoza’s exaltation of the power of reason was Pollyannaish. Indeed, one might conclude this way if one concentrates one’s interpretation of Spinoza only on the fifth part of the *Ethics*, “Of the Power of the Intellect, or of Human Freedom.” But there are four other parts, and these other parts make it clear that Spinoza is not Pollyannaish about reason or about reason’s power over the passions. He is quite aware and knowledgeable about conflicting emotions and the pain that these cause us. He is also quite aware that we humans are to a large degree hapless creatures contingent upon Nature and that – using the words of Wordsworth - “the world is too much with us.” As Spinoza wonderfully puts it: “The force whereby a man persists in existing is limited, and infinitely surpassed by the power of external causes” (Pr.3, IV). In this his view is more realistic than the Stoics’ and Cartesian formulation of the power of the intellect over our passions. In the Preface to Part V, Spinoza criticizes the Stoics’ unrealistic view that “the emotions depend absolutely on our will, and that we can have absolute command over them.” The proof against the Stoics’ view on this issue has “experience crying out against them.”\(^{860}\) Similarly, in the Preface of Part III, Spinoza criticizes Descartes because “he too believed that the mind has absolute power over its actions”\(^{861}\).

Spinoza takes the theological view of human nature and conduct to task in many ways in the *Ethics*. In the Preface to Part III for example, he implicitly criticizes what I take

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\(^{860}\) I take it that Spinoza’s criticism of Stoicism on this point is an important qualification to make to remind those who aver that Spinozism is Stoicism. For the details on the differences between the two, see, for example, Jon Miller’s excellent “Spinoza and the Stoics on Substance Monism” in *The Cambridge Companion to Spinoza’s Ethics*.

\(^{861}\) Shirley, op. cit., 152. It is not certain to me, however, that this is the most accurate way to conclude Descartes’ view on this matter. For one thing, Spinoza does not mention that Descartes qualifies his claim with the words: “if sufficient industry is applied in training and guiding them” (Rene Descartes. *Philosophical Essays and Correspondence*, ed. Roger Ariew (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 2000), 315. But see also Roger Ariew’s essay on Descartes’ ethics in “Ethics in Descartes and Seventeenth Century Cartesian Textbooks.” *The Rationalists: Between Tradition and Revolution*. Montreal History of Philosophy, ed. C. Fraenkel, D. Perinetti, J. E. H. Smith, The New Synthese Historical Library, Springer.
to be at bottom the theological view of “dealing not with natural phenomena that follow from the common laws of Nature but with phenomena outside Nature.” He goes on also to criticize those who hold such views because “they assign the cause of human weakness and frailty ... to some defect in nature [sin?], which they therefore bemoan, ridicule, despise, or, as is most frequently the case, abuse.”

Note, Spinoza doesn’t explicitly state here that he has clerics, theologians or religious people in mind. But he does. I think I have found strong evidence for my claim hidden in Part IV in the Scholium for Proposition 63. The language he uses here is almost exactly the same language he uses in the Preface to Part III, only here he gives us a further clue: “The superstitious, who know how to censure vice rather than to teach virtue, and who are eager to guide men by reason but to restrain them by fear so that they may shun evil rather than love virtue, have no other object than to make others as wretched as themselves.” Now then, who could these “superstitious” people be? The uneducated masses? No, not in this passage, for look and see: the “superstitious” in this passage are people who “censure,” “teach,” and “guide men.” Okay, so they are leaders and teachers. “But,” the skeptic may continue to worry, “How do we know what teachers?” Well, the answer to that question is in the answer to this question: “What ‘teachers’ in Spinoza’s time and place censured vice and tried to inculcate virtue by fear?” Everybody knows the answer to this: it’s the guys who preach “Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God” sermons.

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862 I should point out here that Spinoza does not explicitly refer to theology or any theologians in the Preface to Part III from which I am quoting. It might very well be that he doesn’t have Christian theology consciously in mind here, but only Cartesian and maybe Platonic dualism. Nevertheless, it seems to me that some of the language used here may indicate that the theological view of human nature is at work at least in the background. But, even if this guess is wrong, this argument can still be used to refer to the theological view. Though Nadler doesn’t explicitly cite the theological background, he does so implicitly because in his explication of the Preface to Part III he notes that the view Spinoza is criticizing is that of the mind as “supernatural – implanted (by God) in a body” (Nadler, Spinoza’s Ethics: An Introduction, 191). I take it that this stems from special and not natural theology.
Last question for the skeptic to answer: “What ‘fear’ did these teachers hold up as threats to get the masses to ‘shun evil’?” I think this dissertation has noted this fear enough times even for the greatest of skeptical scholars to acknowledge. Note again, how Spinoza doesn’t spell out what he has in mind, but only suggests it. The reader has to put 2 and 2 together. Spinoza won’t spell it all out. Indeed, we have been discussing a scholium. A scholium is a note or comment to add further explanation or light on a proposition. And what is the proposition of this scholium? “He who is guided by fear, and does good so as to avoid evil, is not guided by reason.” Now do we have a better idea of what Spinoza means? Once again, we see that to understand many of the propositions, proofs, etc. of the Ethics, background and “code-breaking” is required. And we see once again that propositions (etc.) that on first readings don’t at all seem to refer to biblical theological issues, on more careful contextual analysis yields up this very truth.

If you’re still not convinced that by “superstitious” Spinoza means all traditional religion, than you will find that proof in the Preface to the TTP. Careful reading of the TTP reveals that the “superstitious” is synonymous with any and every belief in an anthropomorphic God, revelation, inspiration, the Holy Spirit, the scriptures as the Word of God, prophecy, omens, and the rest of it (e.g. Judaism and Christianity). When we fit all the clues together like pieces in a jigsaw puzzle, Spinoza is shown to be completely antagonistic to biblical ideologies.

Spinoza won’t rant and rave against vice like the clerics do. Nor does he hold up eternal threats to get the herd to shun evil. Instead, he brings “logical reasoning to bear on what they proclaim to be opposed to reason, and is vain, absurd and horrifying.” Spinoza

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863 It is due to evidence such as this that I think Spinoza did talk in code or obscurely at times. He purposely often does not name names or books. Though it is true that he was dangerously explicit at times (such as in the Appendix in Part I), I think there is good evidence to believe that he purposely muted and crafted his language so that they would not be as provocative and then bring down on his head (or the executors, editors, and printers of his work) the wrath of the superstitious.
counters their view of the "defectiveness" of Nature by the following argument. "But my argument is this: in Nature nothing happens which can be attributed to its defectiveness, for Nature is always the same; and its force and power of acting is everywhere one and the same [that is, not one way in an animal or in the body and a different way in the soul or spirit]... So our approach to the understanding of the nature of things of every kind should likewise be one and the same...Therefore the emotions [or sins] of hatred, anger, envy, etc., considered in themselves, follow from the same necessity and force of Nature as all other particular things" [e.g. there is no bifurcation in existence between nature's forces and spiritual forces (such as the devil and original sin)]. All human emotions and actions “are assignable to definite causes through which they can be understood, and have definite properties.”

Spinoza’s Ethics versus God’s New Testament on death, freedom, and the good life

“Do not fear the afterworld’s men, my brothers!”

Proposition 67, IV: “A free man thinks of death least of all things, and his wisdom is a mediation of life, not of death.” Proof: A free man, that is, he who lives solely according to the dictates of reason, is not guided by fear of death (Pr.63, IV), but directly desires the good (Cor.Pr.63 IV); that is (Pr.24,IV) to act, to live, to preserve his own being in accordance with the principle of seeking his own advantage. So he thinks of death least of all things, and his wisdom is a meditation upon life.”

Introduction

When I first decided to say a couple words on this passage as another example to demonstrate how much the Ethics has biblical theology in its cross hairs, I didn’t think it

864 The quote is an oft repeated expression from Nietzsche’s mouthpiece or protagonist Zarathustra in Thus Spake Zarathustra. Zarathustra often declared such things because he knew that he had to allay the imaginative fears of his followers in whom the shadow of God still resonated. As Nietzsche puts it elsewhere: “After Buddha was dead, his shadow was still shown for centuries in a cave - a tremendous, gruesome shadow. God is dead; but given the way of men, there may still be caves for thousands of years in which his shadow will be shown. - And we - we still have to vanquish his shadow, too” (The Gay Science, s.108). Spinoza’s ministry does the same work.
would be a big deal. I thought I’d be able to dip into it quickly and write the gist of the
difference between the two with relative ease. But, as is so often the case in the work of
research and writing, what seems to be a task of relative simplicity, often turns out to be
more involved and more difficult than one originally imagined as one works on it. Hence
the added prolixity of pages on this example.

The task of comprehending all that Spinoza means by freedom and death is, as with
most of the propositions in the geometric structure of the *Ethics*, logically connected to
several other doctrines in the Spinozistic world view. Not only is the task of understanding
Spinoza’s teachings on freedom and death demanding, but the task of understanding the
New Testament’s teachings on freedom and death are equally demanding – not to mention
the subsequent theological interpretations thereof. What I thought would take two or three
days of labor, led to many days of labor. Like the Spinozistic literature, the biblical and
theological literature on freedom and death (and their logically or theologically connected
teachings) is a complicated undertaking. Much more is involved on these subjects than
immediately meets the eye. The history of Christian theology and philosophy on these
subjects is proof of that. Some of the most significant works in the history of western
literature falls under this rubric. Think for instance of the place and importance the subject
of freedom or free will has had in Europe! One thinks of Augustine’s works, and of
Erasmus’s and Luther’s violent diatribes, and the list of important works on this subject
goes on and on.

What to do to limit this immensity? Answer: with regard to Spinoza’s views, we will
focus on only the proposition at hand and not tell the story of its logical interconnections
with other aspects of his philosophy. With regard to the biblical and theological immensity,
we will strain out the camel of scholarly secondary literature to justify our citations of
various scripture passages, and we will strain out the camel of the history of Christian
theological and philosophical differences of opinion on these subjects. We will do all this in order to swallow only the “gnat” of biblical teachings on this subject. But it should not be thought that the presentation of the biblical passages and their attendant theology are laid out without the knowledge of the “camels” we’re straining.

Once again, as in most of this study, my presentation of the biblical and theological teachings is purposely and strictly in line with how most theologians in the 17th century understood these teachings and not as contemporary trained theologians and biblical scholars view them now. Contemporary biblical scholarship and theology has become immeasurably more informed, sophisticated, and philosophical since the beginnings of serious biblical criticism spearheaded by pioneers such as Spinoza. This study however does not need to bring this scholarship into consideration beyond mentioning to the reader that it is there.

Before commencing our exposition I should say that trying to understand the biblical teachings and the theologies that stem from them is sometimes just as time-consuming, difficult, and arduous as trying to understand difficult philosophical teachings. One should not imagine that learning and explicating the teachings of a 17th century philosopher is harder than learning and explicating the teachings of several 1st century enthusiastic theologians (as revealed in the twenty-seven books of the New Testament) and their 17th century descendants. To accurately comprehend and do justice to the 66 or 73 books of the Bible, which were written from many time periods and places in the ancient world, is also a mammoth undertaking. In this respect the present dissertation is not limited to the learning and accurate explication of philosophy. This work has also demanded proficiency in an entirely different field and world – that is, of the biblical religions (Judaism and Christianity along with their changes and evolution in different times, places, and languages over the last 2500 years). One may think that since this
dissertation is primarily a history of philosophy that I did not therefore need to pay as close attention or to take as seriously the non-philosophical issues involved. This is a mistake. It is true that one could probably do a slipshod job of the scriptural and theological matters and get away with it without many outside these fields knowing any better, but this wouldn’t be right or just. The biblical expositor must not only be conversant with the scholarly literature on biblical interpretation, but also of the history of the theological use of them, especially in our case, in the late 17th century. All in all, it is a huge undertaking.

Spinoza versus God on death, freedom, and life (example: Proposition 67, IV and its Proof)

Part IV, Proposition 67: “A free man thinks of death least of all things, and his wisdom is a mediation of life, not of death.” Proof: A free man, that is, he who lives solely according to the dictates of reason, is not guided by fear of death (Pr.63, IV865), but directly desires the good (Cor.Pr.63, IV866); that is (Pr.24,IV867) to act, to live, to preserve his own being in accordance with the principle of seeking his own advantage. So he thinks of death least of all things, and his wisdom is a meditation upon life.”

865 Pr.63, IV: “He who is guided by fear, and does good so as to avoid evil, is not guided by reason.” From Genesis to Revelation, the great bulk of the moral teachings of the Bible come with threats of the most severe punishment. From “You are free to eat from any tree in the garden; but you must not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, for when you eat of it you will surely die” (Gen.2:15) to “I warn everyone who hears the words of the prophecy of this book: If anyone adds anything to them, God will add to him the plagues described in this book. And if anyone takes words away from this book of prophecy, God will take away from him his share in the tree of life and in the holy city, which are described in this book” (Rev. 22: 18-19). One is even ordered to honor and obey one’s parents “so that it may go well with you” (Eph.6:1-3; Deut. 5:16). I have to keep presenting passages of scripture to prove my claims and because it’s often hard to believe or remember just how cruel and brutal the scriptural world view is. Part of what Radical Enlightenment philosophers sought to do in their attacks against scripture was this very thing: to put an end to the ancient-primitive mindset of cruelty, insensitivity, master-slave attitudes, and the justification of this brutality by invoking God’s commands. Hence, once again, the absolute imperative to undermine, refute, shame, and criticize blind obedient faith in the “word of God.”

866 Cor.Pr.63,VI: “Through the desire that arises from reason we pursue good directly and shun evil indirectly.” This is yet another of Spinoza’s repeated criticisms against the Jewish and Christian ethical system based on punishment – that is, the scriptures and the preachers who get people to do good out of fear and threat of divine punishment and not due to pure reason. To take only one example out of thousands, one is commanded to live by faith: “‘He who is coming will come and will not be late. But my righteous one will live by faith. And if he shrinks back, I will not be pleased with him.’ But we are not of those who shrink back and are destroyed, but of those who believe and are saved” (Heb.10:37-39). And again: “See to it that you do not refuse him who speaks. If they did not escape when they refused him who warned them on earth [at Mt. Sinai, Ex. 19:12-13], how much less will we, if we turn away from him who warns us from heaven? … for our God is a consuming fire” (Heb. 12:25, 29).

867 Pr.24,IV, “To act in absolute conformity with virtue is nothing in us but to act, to live, to preserve one’s own being (these three mean the same) under the guidance of reason, on the basis of seeking one’s own advantage.” Compare or contrast this notion of virtue with that of the New Testament,
A great deal can be said about this proposition and its proof. We will mention only some of them for the purpose, once again, of making the antithesis between all things Spinoza versus all things biblical more clear and distinct to the reader - and, by doing so, thereby providing the explanation as to why the conservative religious forces were so hostile to him.

At a first glance, the above proposition seems innocuous enough. On its face it doesn’t immediately look like an anti-Christian sentiment, let alone an egregious counterpoint to it. But, upon a closer look, we learn differently. As I have had to learn again and again in this study, scripture is far more radical and other-worldly than is generally known; and Spinoza’s Ethics is far more this-worldly and anti-biblical than is generally known. But to know this, a great deal of comparing and contrasting and detective work is needed, as we hope this study has given some glimpse of.

particularly the epistles of Paul. For the apostle Paul, to act in absolute conformity with virtue is the exact opposite of Spinoza’s. To act in absolute conformity to virtue is to no longer live, but to have Christ live through us. “I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me” (Gal. 2:20). It is to no longer act or to live or to preserve one’s own being on the basis of seeking one’s own advantage, but rather to act, to live, and to preserve God’s way in us. We are to do all for the glory and advantage of God and His Kingdom, not our own glory and advantage.

Spinoza refers to Pr. 63, IV in our Proposition above. See the section immediately preceding this one on “Spinoza’s freedom or salvation from bondage from bad emotions and passions versus Stoic, Cartesian, and biblical claims” for our detective analysis that led us to the proof that this Proposition had clerical and biblical theology in mind.

I should point out that we know from Yirmiyahu Yovel’s Spinoza and Other Heretics: The Marrano of Reason that the marranos, the rabbis at Talmud Torah, and the Amsterdam congregation in which Spinoza was raised, all believed the afterlife and in heaven and in hell. The ancestors of the Jewish congregation assimilated these beliefs during their time in Spain and Portugal when they were forced to become Christians. Spinoza, then, was brought up under such teachings as surely as the James Joyce of A Portrait of an Artist was (Joyce highlights the fear and sufferings he underwent because he was brought up being taught by Catholic priests and nuns to believe in the doctrine of hell). So when the older Spinoza teaches that the free man shouldn’t think or fear death or the afterlife or anything beyond this life, he is directly contradicting what rabbi Mortera taught, who had asked him at his trial whether he feared falling in to the hands of the living god. We know that one of the things he was condemned by the judges of the congregation was his rejection of the doctrine of the immortality of the soul. See Nadler’s book on this: Spinoza’s Heresy: Immortality and the Jewish Mind.
The fear of death: Spinoza versus Christ

Spinoza writes on subjects such as death in a completely opposite way of those knowledgeable about Christian teaching. Spinoza says that you should think about death or the afterlife least of all. Yet the gospel is all about the problem of death and the afterlife, and not only about eternal life and heaven. The scriptures teach that you should think and meditate on death and the afterlife. How could the scriptures not mention death and the afterlife since this is where (according to the revelations that they believed they received from God) all humankind will be spending an eternity - either in heaven or in the fiery torments of hell. As the devout inform us, only the devil doesn’t want us to think about death and the afterlife. Even as far back as the Garden of Eden and the first man and woman, the devil has been saying, “Ye shall surely not die” (Gen. 3); for the devil wants to get your mind off death so that you will not fear God. Because if you don’t fear God then you will be much more prone to not take His pronouncement seriously - “the day that ye shall eat thereof, ye shall die.”

Throughout the scriptures, God and his prophets alert men to the fact that they are but a breath; here one day and gone the next. God wishes man to devote their lives to what most counts, e.g. God’s will and not their own will. Compare God’s will to Spinoza’s will as represented by his proposition and proof above paying close attention to his doctrine of the

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870 Thomas a Kempis’s *Imitation of Christ* chapter XXI “The Meditation of Death”: “O the hardness and insensibility of the human heart, that thinks only on present concerns, and disregards the prospects of futurity! In every thought, and every action, thou shouldst govern and possess thy spirit as if thou was to die to-day...If thou art not prepared for that awful event to-day, how wilt thou be prepared tomorrow?”

871 For those who think that the *Ethics* is only about philosophy and hardly, if ever, deals with scripture, think again. Only a few sentences after Proposition 67 and its Proof, in the Scholium to Proposition 68, Spinoza refers the reader to the Garden of Eden and to “Moses’s” “history of the first man.” This is not the place for an exposition of this purposely misleading passage. I wish only to point out here that the *Ethics* is replete with such examples. The only translation of the *Ethics* that I know of that calls attention to this significant fact is Curley’s *Collected Works* (op. cited). He even provides an “Index of Biblical and Talmudic References.” But it is by no means an exhaustive index, for the *Ethics* refers to many more explicit and especially implicit passages of scripture than his index refers to.
good (that is, the principle of seeking one’s own advantage): Spinoza: “A free man ... directly
desires the good (Cor.Pr.63 IV); that is (Pr.24 IV) to act, to live, to preserve his own being in
accordance with the principle of seeking his own advantage.” Christ:

If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and
follow me. For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life
for me and for the gospel will save it. What good is it for a man to gain the whole
world, yet forfeit his soul? Or what can a man give in exchange for his soul? (Mk.
8:34-36).872

Spinoza says that “A free man thinks of death least of all things, and his wisdom is a
mediation of life, not of death”, but the follower of Christ says, “If only for this life we have
hope in Christ, we are to be pitied more than all men” (1 Cor. 15:19). And again: “For to me,
to live is Christ and to die is gain” (Phil. 1:21). As the hymn goes: “Tis only one life, twill
soon be past, only what’s done for Christ will last.”

Contrary to Spinoza’s proposition and proof, St. Paul says, “Join with others in
following my example, brothers ...For ... many live as enemies of the cross of Christ... Their
mind is on earthly things. But our citizenship is in heaven. And we eagerly await a Savior
from there, the Lord Jesus Christ, who, by the power that enables him to bring everything
under his control, will transform our lowly bodies so that they will be like his glorious body”
(Phil. 3:18-21). “So we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen. For what is
seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal” (2 Cor. 4:17-18). “Since, then, you have
been raised with Christ, set your hearts on things above, where Christ is seated at the right
hand of God. Set your minds on things above, not on earthly things” (Col. 3:1-2).

Compare how different Christ’s view of the life of the body and the afterlife is with
Spinoza’s: “I tell you, my friends, do not be afraid of those who kill the body and after that

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872 The stronger version of Jesus’s oft-repeated demand is found in Luke (14:25-33): “Large crowds
were traveling with Jesus, and turning to them he said: ‘If anyone come to me and does not hate his
father and mother, his wife and children, his brothers and sisters – yes, even his own life – he cannot
be my disciple. And anyone who does not carry his cross and follow me cannot be my disciple ... any
of you who does not give up everything he has cannot be my disciple.”
can do no more. But I will show you whom you should fear: Fear him who, after the killing of the body, has power to throw you into hell. Yes, I tell you, fear him” (Lk. 12:4-5).

Now death in the Bible is not a natural but a theological or spiritual event. Death according to the scriptures is a spiritual power. The Bible teaches that the devil had the power of death: “Since then the children share in flesh and blood, He Himself likewise also partook of the same, so that through death He might render powerless him who had the power of death, that is, the devil; and might deliver those who through fear of death were subject to slavery all their lives” (Hebrews 2:14-15, my emphasis). The Christian answer to the fear of death depends upon the panoply of purported revelations about sin, blood sacrifice, the need of a scapegoat, expiation, etc. to turn away the holy and righteous wrath of God.

As opposed to Spinoza’s this-worldly, naturalistic standpoint, behold the theological view: “Therefore, just as sin entered the world through one man, and death through sin, and in this way death came to all men, because all sinned ... Consequently, just as the result of one trespass was condemnation for all men, so also the result of one act of righteousness was justification that brings life for all men” (Rom. 5: 12-13, 18). Since he “conquered death” by his resurrection, Christ now holds the keys of death: “I am the Living One; I was dead, and behold I am alive for ever and ever! And I hold the keys of death and Hades” (Rev. 1:18). Nevertheless, death is considered an “enemy” until “all things will be restored.” “The last enemy to be destroyed is death” (1 Cor. 15:26). At this end-time event, “Then death and Hades were thrown into the lake of fire. The lake of fire is the second death. If anyone’s name was not found written in the book of life, he was thrown into the lake of fire” (Rev. 20:14-15).

I hope the reader is able to assimilate just how incredibly different and other-worldly the ancient biblical view of life and death is compared to Spinoza’s exactly opposite
view. "A free man thinks of death least of all things, and his wisdom is a mediation of life, not of death" – especially because there is no reason to think of continued existence after death. For Spinoza, when the body dies, the "soul" dies.\footnote{Actually, this is an over-simplification. Spinoza uses language such as "that our mind is eternal" (Pr. 41, V) that are quite involved. There is therefore some controversy on this issue among some Spinoza scholars. Two essays can be recommended which will introduce the reader to the intricacies on this issue quite well. Besides Nadler’s \textit{Spinoza’s Ethics: An Introduction} (chapter 9 on Eternity and Blessedness), see also Don Garrett’s "Spinoza on the Essence of the Human Body and the Part of the Mind That is Eternal" in \textit{The Cambridge Companion to Spinoza’s Ethics}.} If you know that when you die, you die, then there’s no reason to worry about what things will be like for you after you die. For there is no continued existence of the soul; no spiritual body; no resurrection or ascension; nothing beyond nature; no God beyond nature; no Creator or Judge or Punisher or Rewarder. Death, then, is simply the end of your life. It therefore behooves you to think of life and all that you can do and get from it. There is then now no condemnation for those who are in Benedict de Espinosa. The wrath of God will never be revealed from heaven against mankind (cf.Rom.1). There is no need to fear God because God does not exist. You should therefore not take seriously him who taught that all who do not obey him will "forfeit" and "lose" their souls to be cast into outer darkness where there will be screaming and gnashing of teeth.

One of the central teachings of Spinoza’s message may be paraphrased thusly: “Fear not. For God is dead.” Spinoza’s message is like Zarathustra’s message to the tight-rope walker. The tight-rope walker (humankind struggling to make progress) falls to the ground and is dying. He cries out to Zarathustra, “I’ve known for a long time that the Devil would trip me up. Now he’s dragging me to Hell.” Zarathustra (Nietzsche) responds to him with feeling: “On my honor, friend … all you have spoken of does not exist: there is no Devil and no Hell. Your soul will be dead even before your body: therefore fear nothing any more!” In essence, Spinoza’s message for humankind is to reject all the insane theological views of an
afterlife and a human-like wrathful punisher and to accept only the view that nature is all in all. Thus his hymn, as opposed to the Christian hymn, might go something (awkwardly) like this: 'Tis only one life, 'twill soon be past, only what’s rationally done for the good of this world will last.'

On freedom and the free man: Spinoza versus Christ

Part IV, Proposition 67: "A free man thinks of death least of all things, and his wisdom is a mediation of life, not of death." Proof: A free man, that is, he who lives solely according to the dictates of reason, is not guided by fear of death (Pr.63, IV), but directly desires the good (Cor.Pr.63, IV); that is (Pr.24, IV) to act, to live, to preserve his own being in accordance with the principle of seeking his own advantage. So he thinks of death least of all things, and his wisdom is a meditation upon life."

The concept and hope of freedom in the Christian scriptures is very very different from the concept of hope and freedom in Spinoza's Ethics. Like the concept of death, a study of the Christian theology of freedom depicts a completely non-naturalistic, non-rational, and non-worldly view of things. We will not take the space to explicate the Christian theology of freedom here, as we did to some degree the Christian theology of death above. Our purpose here is to point out a couple further observations of the proposition above to make its meaning clearer and more distinct.

Who is the “free man”? And what does Spinoza mean by “free” in this context? Well, he tell us – explicitly: (1) “A free man … is he who lives solely according to the dictates of reason (2) “is not guided by fear of death” (3) “but directly desires the good (Cor.Pr.63 IV); that is (Pr.24, IV) to act, to live, to preserve his own being in accordance with the principles of seeking his own advantage” (4) “So he thinks of death least of all things, and his wisdom is a meditation upon life.”

(1) So then, now we know. The “free man” is a rationalist, not a religious enthusiast or someone given to accepting claims that can’t be substantiated by naturalistic explanations exclusively in terms of empirical causes. Spinoza often states that the world
mixes everything up when they believe things which have no foundations in the natural chain of causes that produced them. The key term that gives Spinoza away as a "rationalist" (in the sense of someone who rejects all non-rational or super-rational claims) is his use of "solely." The free man, the wise man, the best man, the good man is one who lives solely according to the dictates of reason. This "solely" is important. It separates the men from the boys, the radical enlighteners from the moderate enlighteners, the atheists from the theists.

Leibniz praises reason and a life in accordance with reason, but he did not subscribe to Spinoza's notion of "solely" as necessitating the preclusion and exclusion of the divine. For Leibniz reason and his theistic God were in harmony. Not so for Benedict. The free man who lives solely according to the dictates of reason does not live according to any other dictate or authority: not tradition, not enthusiasm, not imagination, and not religion, but only reason. And for Spinoza reason stems only from nature and is not "the candle of the Lord" or made "in the image and likeness of God."

(2) Because the free man rejects all superstition about the afterworld and divine punishment, he “is not guided by fear of death.” For him, death is the way of nature. Nothing happens after death, that is, there is complete personal extinction. Since this is so, the wise man naturally concentrates and focuses all his attention and love on this world. He is completely this-worldly. His only meditation is upon this life. Therefore he thinks of death least of all things. For his citizenship is on earth, not in heaven (cf. Phil. 3:20). I’m reminded of Karl Marx’s many powerful criticisms against the other-worldliness of religion: "The struggle against religion is ... the fight against the other world." 874 Indeed, to a large degree, Spinoza’s philosophical labors were exactly in line with the famous Marxian maxim that "The criticism of religion is the premise of all criticism" - long before Marx was born. 875

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875 Marx scholars tell us that he was immensely influenced by Spinoza’s writings.
(3) Because the free man is free from the fear of hell and the afterlife and from the dictates of God's commandments to serve God, the free man is then free “to act, to live, [and] to preserve his own being in accordance with the principles of seeking his own advantage. Because there is no God to take care of him or to look to for help, the man freed from all the illusions of spiritual help (through prayer, faith, sacrifice, etc.) must rely on his own powers to survive, to advance, and to enjoy this life. No longer is the good to deny oneself and carry the cross and follow Christ and obey God’s commandments. No, now man will follow himself and the commands and guidance he receives from the light of his own natural reason. Instead of following the slave’s “Not my will, but thy will be done”, he lives “in accordance with the principles of seeking his own advantage.”

(4) The slave or the man in bondage believes that his wisdom is in fearing and obeying God: “The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom.” But for the man who is free from all the illusions, errors, and superstitions of Judaism and Christianity, he meditates, acts, and lives with his mind set not “on things above where Christ is seated at the right hand of God”, but on the only world that exists, the world of nature, that is, this life.

• Spinoza contra the Word of God on pleasure

In many passages of the Ethics Spinoza opposes the devoutly religious and the Bible on the subjects of fun, merriment, theater, sports, or, in general, “worldly pleasure.” For instance, he says right out: “Pleasure is not in itself bad, but good. On the other hand, pain is itself bad” (Pr. 41, IV). And again: “Cheerfulness (hilaritas) cannot be excessive; it is always good. On the other hand, melancholy is always bad” (Pr. 42, IV). Such statements go against the grain of the tenor of scriptures that turn a worldly understanding of such behavior upside down. Poverty, weeping, insults, and hunger are often treated as goods by Scripture. And wealth, laughter, and comfort are sometimes derided. The scriptures demand strict sobriety, an ever vigilant seriousness, the embrace of and even the love of suffering. There’s
not enough time or space to cite the hundreds or thousands of passages of scripture to back this claim up. We will therefore only pick a couple willy-nilly from the New Testament alone. Jesus exclaims,

Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God. Blessed are you who hunger now, for you will be satisfied. Blessed are you who weep now, for you will laugh. Blessed are you when men hate you, when they exclude you and insult you and reject your name as evil, because of the Son of Man. Rejoice in that day and leap for joy, because great is your reward in heaven... But woe to you who are rich, for you have already received your comfort. Woe to you who are well fed now, for you will go hungry. Woe to you who laugh now, for you will mourn and weep (Luke 6:20-25).876

Or take the attitude of St. Paul, for instance. He looked on weaknesses and sufferings as a wonderful thing. He taught that sufferings are sent from God in order to test or to purify us. In one famous passage in which he has just finished telling about all the many visions and revelations from God that he received when he “was caught up to Paradise”, he says “there was given me a thorn in my flesh, a messenger of Satan, to torment me.” His theological explanation for this torment was “To keep me from becoming conceited because of these surpassingly great revelations.” He begged God to take the torment away, but God told him, “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.” Like Leibniz’s theodicy, Paul sees everything that happens to him as the best of all possible worlds, no matter how great the suffering. For he has a theological justification for everything: “for Christ’s sake, I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong” (1 Cor. 12:1-10). Or again: “we rejoice in our sufferings because we know that suffering produces

876 For expository purposes I am of course presenting only one interpretation of this famous passage. There are others. I wish you to note though how poverty, hunger, weeping, laughing, and wealth are explained. They are not treated as things that naturally happen in this world, as Spinoza explains them. They are all treated as part and parcel of a huge, dramatic, supernatural tragic-comedy. But Spinoza says that the “doctrine of Final Causes turns Nature completely upside down” for “Nature has no fixed goal and all final causes are but figments of the human imagination.” Spinoza rails against those who “display their [theological] talent in assigning purpose to things” (Ethics, Appendix, Part I). See this Appendix also for another very telling example on how theology interprets even such things as a stone falling from a roof on someone’s head.
perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope” (Rom. 5:3). And: “My son, do not make light of the Lord’s discipline, and do not lose heart when he rebukes you, because the Lord disciplines those whom he loves, and he punishes everyone he accepts as a son” (Heb. 12: 5).

Despite the strenuous arguments of believers in recent times that the depiction of Judaism and Christianity as morose and fun-killing is a gross caricature, there is no doubt whatsoever that in most of the New Testament, nary anything is said to promote or encourage or to bless what the devout call “worldly pleasure.” By and large, the scriptures are clear: God wants his people to have joy, but in Him and not separate from Him. As a result, all the divine guidelines for how one should live are directed with a view to religious activity. The general principle followed throughout is: “So whether you eat or drink or whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God” (1 Cor. 10:31). Hence, there are no instructions about playing, no encouragements for sports, joking, dressing up, secular music or entertainment, or how to have fun. But there are many many passages against dressing up, frivolity, seeking beauty, and so on. The pleasure that the devout are called to enjoy is joy in the Lord and His ways and not in the enjoyments of worldly or “fleshly” living.

Biblical Judaism and Christianity are by and large ascetic religions. Spinoza opposes these restrictions on pleasure as unnatural. In a long passage in the Ethics (Pr. 45, Schol. IV), one can almost feel Spinoza’s personal experience on this subject. We’ll give Benedict the last word on this subject.

For laughter, and likewise merriment, are pure pleasure, and so, provided that they are not excessive, they are good in themselves (Pr.41,IV). Certainly nothing but grim and gloomy superstition forbids enjoyment. Why is it less fitting to drive away melancholy than to dispel hunger and thirst? The principle that guides me and shapes my attitude to life is this: no deity, nor anyone else but the envious, takes pleasure in my weakness and my misfortune, nor does he take to be a virtue our tears, sobs, fearfulness and other such things that are a mark of a weak spirit. On the contrary, the more we are affected with pleasure, the more we pass to a state of greater perfection; that is, the more we necessarily participate in the divine nature. Therefore it is the part of a wise man to make use of things and to take pleasure in
them as far as he can (but not to the point of satiety, for that is not taking pleasure). It is, I repeat, the part of a wise man to refresh and invigorate himself in moderation with good food and drink, as also with perfumes, with the beauty of blossoming plants, with dress, music, sporting activities, theatres and the like, in which every man can indulge without harm to another. For the human body is composed of many parts of various kinds which are continually in need of fresh and varied nourishment so that the entire body may be equally capable of all the functions that follow from its own nature, and consequently that the mind may be equally capable of simultaneously understanding many things. So this manner of life is in closest agreement both with our principles and with common practice. Therefore, of all ways of life, this is the best and is to be commended on all accounts. There is no need for me to deal more clearly or at greater length with this subject (Pr.45.Schol).

• Spinoza’s God versus the emotional God of the Bible

“God is without passive emotions, and he is not affected with any emotion of pleasure or pain” (Pr. 17, V). While some (or much) of Spinoza’s philosophical argumentation throughout the Ethics (especially in places such as the Appendix at the end of Part I) that God cannot be an emotional being may have struck the pious reader as having some weight – after all, it certainly does seem (at least prima facie) that a being who is absolutely perfect, shouldn’t be affected by emotional issues. Still, it doesn’t matter. The scriptures are clear, God is an emotional being. He loves some, hates others, gets angry at some, calls some friends, calls others his enemies, and so on. As early as the correspondence between Blyenbergh and Spinoza shows, those who follow the two rules of both reason and revelation will not allow the greater (revelation, “God’s Word”) to capitulate to the lesser (man’s word, natural reason, philosophy or science). Consequently, even if Spinoza’s philosophical argumentation of the nature and perfection of God seems to repudiate the biblical representation of the nature of God, it does not matter. God’s Word trumps man’s word. Therefore, Christian philosophers did not give up their cherished belief that God is a being who does indeed actually have something of which we may legitimately identify as “emotions.” “For God so loved the world that He gave ...”, etc.
Spinoza had grasped this proposition and principle years before he wrote the *Ethics*. He even sought to persuade his auditors *through biblical argumentation* (which he does not do here) that God cannot possibly have or experience or act out of emotions. In his *Metaphysical Thoughts*, appended to his *Principles of Cartesian Philosophy*, Spinoza says, "It is improper to say that God hates some things and loves other things." And then he goes on to refer to Scripture to buttress his argument for his readers: "But from Scripture itself it can be sufficiently inferred that God is not angry with anyone, and that he does not love things in the way that is commonly believed." He then goes on to quote from Isaiah and Romans to make his case.\textsuperscript{877} I refer the interested reader to these passages.

- Spinoza’s wise and ignorant man contra God’s wise and ignorant man

One of the chief aims of Spinoza’s *Ethics* is to show “how much to be preferred is the life of the wise man to the life of the ignorant man” (Preface, V). Spinoza’s notion of the wise man and the ignorant man is not the biblical notion of the wise man and ignorant man. The scriptures almost always judge wisdom and ignorance according to how much a man is “wise” or “ignorant” of *God* - that is, the God of the Bible. The wise man according to the Bible is the one whose “delight is in the law of the Lord, and on his law he meditates day and night. He is like a tree planted by streams of water, which yields its fruit in due season and whose leaf does not wither. Whatever he does prospers. Not so the wicked!” (Ps. 1:2-4).

Not so with Herr de Espinosa. For Spinoza, the wise man’s delight and meditation is on reality, the real world, reason, and truth, and not in the false imaginations or revelations of an Other Greater World. His wise man is a man of the world, that is, this world, that is, the only world. His wise man is one who seeks his own advantage. His wise man even in some degree conflates himself with God: “He who clearly and distinctly understands himself and

\textsuperscript{877} Spinoza, *Principles of Cartesian Philosophy*, translated Shirley, op. cited, 125.
his emotions loves God, and the more so the more he understands himself and his emotions” (Prop. 15).

- To the very final proposition, proof, and scholium, Spinoza’s *Ethics* goes down swinging against biblical theology.

We come now to the very last Proposition of his *Ethics* and we see that he’s still at it (Pr. 42, V). He’s still working on attacking and replacing the biblical world view. Biblical theology teaches that blessedness is the reward of virtue; but Spinoza says point blank that “Blessedness is not the reward of virtue.” In the proof for this last Proposition he says that the only power man has over his lusts lay “solely in the intellect” – e.g. not in praying and believing God through Christ and the Holy Spirit to give one the victory over the flesh. And then, finally, the scholium, the last passage of this great anti-Christ work: here he preaches something that unless readers are versed in his historical and social milieu they will completely fail to appreciate just how radical his sermon is. For, if you look closely at this scholium, he is preaching a gospel of salvation through works and not of faith through grace. This may not mean much to us in the year 2011 in the United States of America. But for his time and place the cataclysmic Protestant Revolution against the Roman Catholic Church over salvation by works was still a live issue. So to say that salvation cometh only through works (and that through the work of naturalistic reason) is tantamount to insuring the wrath of his Protestant countrymen. It makes Spinoza sound like a Roman Catholic – albeit an atheistic one.

Here he reminds us, once again, of the power of each and every person’s mind (and not of some transcendent God or Holy Spirit or prayer or faith) over bad emotions. It is this which constitutes the “wise man” for Spinoza, as opposed to the scriptures’ claim that the wise man is the one who obeys the commandments of the God of the Bible. For Spinoza, the road that he has pointed out that leads to salvation and enlightenment is “very difficult, yet
it can be found ... For if salvation were ready to hand and could be discovered without great toil, how could it be that it is almost universally neglected? All things are as difficult as they are rare.” Spinoza’s gospel then is a gospel of works, of effort, of intellectual application, of self-reliance, of radical enlightenment rejection of all authority over reason, and of whole hearted active rational labor for constant spiritual-rational growth. Anyone with any experience of the Lutheran tradition, or indeed, most of the Protestant traditions, will know that this gospel flies in the face of the very foundations of Pauline soteriological teaching. In plain words, St. Paul to Luther to Calvin and to the Lutherans and Calvinists in Spinoza’s world (and still in our world today) all say the opposite of what Spinoza just said. They all argue strenuously that salvation is a free gift through grace alone. That it comes not through adult, rational, intellectual, active labor, but again, from the opposite: from humble, un-self-dependent, child-like, wise-less, reason-less, faith. They preach that salvation can only be had by faith through grace and not by works.

Much of the New Testament, especially the epistles of St. Paul, is devoted to this doctrine of salvation. Much of the books of Romans, Galatians, Ephesians, Colossians, and Hebrews strenuously argue at length for this doctrine. Paul repeats it over and over again to make it clear that he means it to be “the gospel.” Indeed, he must because his greatest enemy is the Judaism of the time which preached salvation by works. Most people are at least partially familiar with the story of Luther and what led to his conversion experience. Every European historian must deal with this central biographical fact that changed the course of the world. Most people, especially in the 17th century, learned about Luther’s enthusiastic experience of realizing that all that is needed for salvation is simple, child-like faith and that this is what led to the great Protestant Revolution. Europe was abuzz with debate and warfare over this central issue of salvation. To imagine that these passages don’t have any reference to the world outside Spinoza’s study, and yet to use the same
theological language as the world outside his study, is to read Spinoza with analytic blinders on.

Spinoza preaches a gospel of salvation by works in largely Lutheran, Calvinist, Protestant lands. Writing on such things, and concluding one’s book on such a note, is not likely to win much applause when one’s audience is so situated. Let us quote it again: salvation, according to Spinoza, is “very difficult, yet it can be found... For if salvation were ready to hand and could be discovered without great toil, how could it be that it is almost universally neglected? All things are as difficult as they are rare.”

But the revelation that St. Paul believes that God gave him says, “I tell you, now is the time of God’s favor, now is the day of salvation” (2 Cor. 6:2), and “For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith – and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God – not by works, so that no one can boast” (Eph.2:8-9).

I think the overwhelming weight of the historical, social, and biographical context strongly argues that passages such as these, which are sprinkled throughout the Ethics, have biblical texts and the Jewish and Christian teachers and authorities that flow from them, as their foil. The foil for all of the Ethics then is not pure philosophy devoid of central biblical theological teachings, but to a degree far more than any commentator I have read on this matter, biblical theological – against the Lutherans, Calvinists, preachers, enthusiasts, etc.

I know of no better interpretation. If the aim of the study of the Ethics is to obtain its full and accurate meaning, the mindless, un-contextual, 20th century, analytic, readings of this text, is simply deficient. Some may think that I am perhaps forcing these biblical interpretations on the texts, however. Could it be that Spinoza wrote these passages with no knowledge of these contentious Europe-rending theological issues in mind, but with only some pure philosophers in mind? I don’t think so. I think that passages such as these, once again, prove the necessity of knowing historical and social context in order to accurately
understand and interpret the author one studies. And what is it that one finds when one studies the context of Spinoza’s life – his biography, his time, his place? Well, look and see! If you want to know if this interpretation is correct, then see how the vast majority of Spinoza’s contemporaries read him. See also Spinoza’s correspondence. For all those who have read these passages of Spinoza many times before, but without the contextual knowledge that we have adumbrated, I hope that this study has enriched and improved their understanding of the *Ethics.*

The Ethics as Spinoza’s philosophical-religious replacement or substitute of the biblical God

"Choose you this day whom you will serve" (Josh. 24:15)

Spinoza’s *Ethics* doesn’t only criticize biblical theological dogmas and philosophies, it also provides a replacement! Moses is replaced. The Law is replaced. The Ten Commandments are replaced. The prophets replaced. The New Testament is replaced. Christ, the Way, the Truth, and the Life, is replaced. A new God is in town. And he’s very different from the old God. Very different indeed.

Despite the in-depth analysis he gives to ontology and philosophy of mind throughout his book, the ultimate goal of the *Ethics* was to show the way to “salvation”, “blessedness”, and happiness. In a word, “Spinoza’s ultimate goal in the *Ethics* is to

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878 I suspect that some of my language above might be overdone, that is, with respect to how pervasive these biblical themes are at work in and as the foil for the *Ethics*. I say this because I shouldn’t leave the wrong impression about this. For much of Parts I, II, III, IV, and V do not deal with biblical themes – certainly not in an explicit way in which one could tell that Spinoza has some such themes in mind. On the other hand, Spinoza’s whole non-religious, non-biblical, philosophical, naturalistic, rationalistic way of doing everything – each and every one of his propositions, etc. can be taken to task from that perspective.

In this study, I have found it necessary over and over again to make clear exactly what the scriptures teach. I have thought it necessary because I believe that many readers (even those who know the scriptures well) simply forget how radically different it is from any and all ordinary ways. I have felt that unless I explicitly point out exactly what the Scriptures teach, my reader won’t remember and then know just how radical Spinoza’s works were viewed.
demonstrate the way to human happiness in a deterministic world filled with obstacles to our well-being, obstacles to which we are naturally prone to react in not entirely beneficial ways.”879

Of course, Judaism and Christianity have argued that they have the way and the light and the truth for humankind’s salvation, blessedness, and happiness, but instead of urging man to reason his way to greater enlightenment against all the natural obstacles that come our way in life, they argue that the way to salvation, blessedness, and happiness is by overcoming “sin”, “the devil”, and “the world”, all theological notions that Spinoza utterly rejects. For Spinoza the world or reality is perfect; for Christians the world is fallen, cursed, under the control of the evil one, and that the only way to happiness is by utterly rejecting the devil and the world.

Do not love the world or anything in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. For everything in the world – the cravings of sinful man, the lust of his eyes and his pride in possessions – comes not from the Father but from the world. The world and its desires pass away, but the man who does the will of God lives forever (1 Jn. 2:15-17).

For Bible believers the world was created, cursed, and will eventually be destroyed by fire and a new heaven and earth created. For Spinoza the world is God! It was never created, it is not “fallen” or “corrupt” or temporal or finite. And there is nothing that is “outside” it. The world is everything that is the case. There are no purposes in nature or the world or God. No plans. No reason for it or its laws or its future.

In Spinoza’s “replacement religion” there is no condemnation, no Judgment Day, no punishment for our sins, no eternal lake of fire for unbelievers, no devil infested world, no divine mandate to preach the gospel to all nations and then the end will come. In the religion of Spinoza, Christ is not all in all, nor should He be worshipped. Christ is not the

Son of God, is not the Lamb of God, is not the Way, the Truth and the Life. One should not think or live like St. Paul who confessed:

But whatever was to my profit I now consider loss for the sake of Christ. What is more, I consider everything a loss compared to the surpassing greatness of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things. I consider them rubbish, that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ – the righteousness that comes from God and is by faith. I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the fellowship of sharing in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, and so, to attain to the resurrection from the dead... All of us who are mature should take such a view of things... Join with others in following my example, brothers...For as I have often told you before and now say again with tears, many live as enemies of the cross of Christ. Their destiny is destruction, their god is their stomach, and their glory is in their shame. Their mind is on earthly things. But our citizenship is in heaven. And we eagerly await a Savior from there, the Lord Jesus Christ, who by the power that enables him to bring everything under his control, will transform our lowly bodies so that they will be like his glorious body. Therefore, my brother, you whom I love and long for, my joy and crown, that is how you should stand firm in the Lord, dear friends (Phil. 3: 7-4:1).

It is necessary to quote passages from the Bible in order to prove and to make clear and distinct just how radically other worldly the Bible’s world view is compared to Spinoza’s. Once this is made plain, then one can better understand why the very religious 17th century western world was up in arms against him.

The longer I work on this subject the more I realize that the Bible is not really known or taken seriously even by the vast majority of believers. There’s no way to fully appreciate my juxtaposition of Spinoza with Christ unless one truly grasps the way of Christ. “Since then you have been raised with Christ, set your hearts on things above, where Christ is seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things above, not on earthly things” (Col. 2:1-2). St. Paul says that we are to “fix out eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen. For what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal” (2 Cor. 4:18).

For Spinoza, things are the opposite. We are to fix our eyes not on things purportedly “outside” the world, but on the world itself. Blessedness, for the religion of Spinoza, consists in this very thing: to know and love the world and the world only. All else
is but fantasy, false images, false concepts, false beliefs. Contrary to Jesus’s disciples’ claims of the highest form of knowledge and life, the highest form of knowledge and life in the “religion of Spinoza” according to Spinoza’s disciples is to know and get clearer on the teachings of the *Ethics*, so that “under your guidance we may be able to defend the truth against those who are superstitiously religious and Christian, and to stand against the attacks of the whole.”880 And this truth, which is contrary to the superstitious religious and Christian,

is a thorough understanding of Nature and its ways and an intellectual intuition of how the essence of anything follows from Nature’s most universal elements – or, since God and Nature are one and the same, how the essence of anything relates to God… Spinoza takes on the issue of immortality, and demonstrates how the true rewards of virtue lie not in some otherworldly recompense but in the happiness, well-being, and blessedness that understanding confers upon us in this life.881

The *Ethics’* (unethical) reception - a couple examples 882

“Blessed are you when men hate you, when they exclude you and insult you and reject your name as evil” (Lk.6:22)

“By their fruits ye shall know them” (Mt. 7:16)

After the *Ethics* had been published in Spinoza’s posthumous works, Spinoza’s biographer, Pastor Colerus, writes the following conclusion about Spinoza’s work: “Several learned men have already sufficiently discovered the impious doctrines contained in those posthumous works [especially the *Ethics*], and have given notice to everybody to beware of them.”883

Note how Colerus and many of the learned men of the 17th century went about their study

880 Nadler, op. cited, 12.
881 Nadler, op. cited, x.
882 Some may wonder what the reception of a work of philosophy has to do with doing philosophy. Van Bunge replies: “nowadays an increasing number of experts prefer to regard research into the history of philosophy as an autonomous exercise, which needs no philosophical justification” – that is, research into the history of philosophy is also doing philosophy (Van Bunge, op. cited, x).
of books. They're like inquisitors; they go through all things, books, theater, art, etc. with an eye to make sure that they are in line with holy writ and orthodox teaching. But in our day, scholars don’t do this. They have different interests.

My interest in this section, however, is to read Spinoza’s works with the eyes of most or many of his contemporaries, that is, with the eyes of suspicion to guard the flock. To take one specific example of this, let us take Colerus’s reading of the *Ethics*. He starts out by noting that Spinoza’s *Ethics* begins with definitions and descriptions of God that appear to be fine and sound: “Who would not think at first, considering so fine a beginning, that he is reading a Christian Philosopher?” Colerus goes on: “But when we enquire more narrowly into his opinions,” we find something quite different. Then he cites a scripture verse, Titus 1:16.

When someone quotes a passage of “God’s Word” after making an allegation, then you know that things are getting serious. But, like so many in his time, Colerus only cites the scripture verse but does not write out the full passage (though later he does quote from some of the verse). Most readers today, I fear, read the cited book name and number of the verse and then go on. But this is a mistake. If you want to know the subject of your study, and how he thinks, then you have to track down the passages and the books that he cites as an authority for his claims. Here’s the text: “They claim to know God, but by their actions they deny him. They are detestable, disobedient and unfit for doing anything good.” Note the incredibly strong language.

Now we’re getting a better insight into how many interpreted Spinoza’s works and of him as a person. This is not only strong language; it’s strong language because of the strong theological implications in it. For the New Testament world view is one in which

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884 As a result of this, Edwin Curley mentions that it was “not until he had been taken up by leading figures of the German Enlightenment – by Lessing, Goethe, and Herder among others – did his work receive much sympathetic attention” (Spinoza, *Collected Works*, ed. Curley, op. cited, 401).

885 Ibid. 64.
things are theologically black or white. Long before President Bush announced "You’re either for us or against us", the Jesus of the New Testament emphatically stated: “He who is not with me is against me, and he who does not gather with me, scatters” (Lk. 11:23). By citing this verse, Colerus is, in essence, theologically type-casting Spinoza into the role of the most horrid human being there can be: one who opposes God. He is thus “detestable, disobedient, and unfit for doing anything good.”

We can go further than this. Indeed, we should go further than this to make sure we fully get what is going on here; for, merely looking up one scripture verse that is within a whole book, doesn’t do justice to the context of that sentence or the context of the book in which it is embedded. So we should look further into this. It would be a good idea here to elaborate on this quote and why Colerus cites it in order to better understand his mindset and of all those like him (e.g. the Counter-Enlightenment). The best way of doing this is for the reader to read the whole letter to Titus, to note its teachings, its context, and its commands. For these teachings and commands, according to the faithful, are not only for Titus but to all of God’s people, especially those in leadership capacities like Pastor Colerus and the many theologians.

A few lines above the one Colerus quotes are claims about “the knowledge of the truth” that was entrusted by “God, who does not lie” “to me by the command of God our Savior” (that is, St. Paul here is claiming that he received this knowledge of the truth by revelation from God). Because of this, God’s people “must hold firmly to the trustworthy message as it has been taught” and “refute those who oppose it.” This is indeed exactly what Colerus and the theological and philosophical works he refers to are doing. Indeed, they must. They look to the scriptures to guide and inform everything in their lives – their language, how they should think, talk, and write about others, what they should care about, what is true and false, right and wrong, wonderful and horrible. They don’t think for
themselves. They put on the mind of Christ. They want only to die to self in order to let Christ live. And Christ’s ways are not our ways.

Now listen to how this revelation, the context of the verse Colerus cited, judges those who reject their view: “For there are many rebellious people, mere talkers and deceivers … They must be silenced, because they are ruining whole households by teaching things they ought not to teach … Therefore rebuke them sharply, so that they will be sound in the faith and will pay no attention to … those who reject the truth” (that is, what Paul says is the truth and what everyone else says is the truth who believe Paul). Of these people who reject Christian revelation, Paul says, “In fact, both their minds and consciences are corrupted.” Colerus makes it plain that he means to refer the letter to Titus to Spinoza: “And therefore the words of the Apostle, Tit. 1:16 concerning impious men, may be very well applied to that philosopher: They profess that they know God, but in works they deny him.”

He then quotes another scripture (for one quotes scripture as literal proofs because they believe that these scriptures are literally from God): The fool says in his heart, ‘There is no God’ (Ps.14:1). But how can Colerus say this of Spinoza’s Ethics which talks about and praises God and His ways throughout its pages? Answer: Because Colerus is able to discern what Spinoza is really up to, which is not the propagation of the faith, he can say, “This is the true opinion of Spinoza, whatever he might say.” Colerus had Spinoza exactly right: “He takes the liberty to use the word God, and to take it in a sense unknown to all Christians.”

Notice again how Colerus does his Spinoza scholarship. He doesn’t just argue his point against Spinoza’s God from his Ethics, he also finds proof to support his claim against Spinoza by citing from Spinoza’s correspondence. Colerus has read these letters. Thus he quotes Spinoza from the 21st letter to Oldenburg: “I acknowledge, says he, that I have a

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886 Ibid. 63.
notion of God and Nature, very different from that of the modern Christians. I believe that
God is immanent, and not the transient cause of all things.” Colerus goes on to mock, by
implication, Spinoza’s use of scripture passages to back up his impious doctrine. Colerus
sees through Spinoza’s protestations that he does not deny God. He sees right through him
and recognizes the true God of Spinoza: “The God of Spinoza is therefore nothing else but
Nature ... corporeal and material.”

While Colerus was highly educated and did a passable job of critiquing the Ethics
(even if only from an orthodox theological perspective), the critique the Ethics offered by
some other theologians and philosophers, such as Oldenburg and Bayle show greater
philosophical acumen. Yet, despite their philosophical professionalism, their central
controlling concern was biblical theological orthodoxy.

Let us briefly take another couple examples of how the religious concern overrides
or constrains philosophical critique. Henry Oldenburg writes Spinoza in December of 1675
to tell him what in Spinoza’s writings cause “the most distress” in his readers (Letter
LXXIV). Oldenburg then tells Spinoza what it is. He doesn’t refer to Spinoza’s views about
the Holy Spirit, or about Christ, or about revelation, prophecy, the Scriptures, Moses,
contradictions in the Scripture, and the like. No, instead he complains about Spinoza’s
philosophical conclusions about necessity. But then note how his complaint about Spinoza’s
philosophy is due to his biblical theological concerns.

887 Ibid. 64-65.
888 Ibid. 65.
889 Still, it is true that the reactions against Spinoza (and Descartes for that matter) were by amateurs.
Van Bunge notes that “Descartes and Spinoza became the subject of hundreds of books and
pamphlets...”, but “It should be added that the overwhelming majority of the participants of these
debates were complete amateurs. Only a handful of the protagonists of this study were professional
philosophers” (ix). Part of the value of Bunge’s work is that he does not restrict his “context” to only
professional philosophers, but also pulls back the curtain so that we may see the wider context of the
culture at large as well.
890 I say “biblical theological concerns” because the language in this passage stems from biblical
theological teachings. The subjects of “rewards and punishments” and of things being “inexcusable in
the sight of God” stem from biblical passages and thus most probably stem from Oldenburg’s
You seem to assert the fatalistic necessity of all things and actions: and they say that if this is admitted and affirmed, then the nerves of all laws, of all virtue and religion, are cut through, and all rewards and punishments are empty. They think that whatever compels, or involves necessity, also excuses; and so, they think, no one would be inexcusable in the sight of God. For if we are driven by fate, and all things, turned by a strong hand, follow a definite and inevitable course, then they cannot see what place there is for blame or punishments.\footnote{The Correspondence of Spinoza, Wolf, op. cited, 345.}

You see, on the one hand, the concern looks to be primarily philosophical.

Oldenburg is concerned about Spinoza’s philosophical position on necessity or free will.

But, when we look more closely, we find out what about Spinoza’s philosophical position bothers Oldenburg. He worries that if people start believing in this stuff, then people will lose their faith in, and fear of, the Christian theological teachings about the receiving of rewards of punishments by God at the Last Judgment.

We see this same kind of thing in Bayle. Bayle’s article on Spinoza in his \textit{Historical and Critical Dictionary} offers many excellent (and terribly weak) philosophical assessments of Spinoza’s philosophy. But as we read on, we notice how over and over again Bayle situates the philosophical issues to orthodox theological concerns.\footnote{Pierre Bayle. \textit{Historical and Critical Dictionary: Selections}, translated and edited by Richard H. Popkin (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1991), 288-338. Bayle’s Spinoza entry is the largest entry in his entire \textit{Dictionary}. Another point I’d like to make on this entry. If one restricted one’s judgment on the question as to whether Bayle was a genuine Christian (at least around-the-ball-park orthodox in theological thinking) to this article, one might very well conclude that he certainly sounds like a devout and orthodox Christian.}

Our next and last chapter on Spinoza is on his \textit{TTP}. What do the \textit{TTP} and the \textit{Ethics} have in common? Answer: both are philosophy and both attack biblical theology. What \textit{Ethics}’ stuff is in the \textit{TTP} and what \textit{TTP} stuff is in the \textit{Ethics}? Answer: Surprisingly, there’s a mix of the two. What philosophical arguments are in the \textit{TTP}? Answer: Some of the central philosophical positions of the \textit{Ethics}.  

Christian theological education. He had been trained and educated, after all, as a Christian theologian. If this is not enough evidence, then a reading of the rest of the letter will prove the case because Oldenburg goes on to ask Spinoza more question about angels, the Son of God, and so on.
Chapter Fifteen

The Antichrist’s Book

“my most urgent task [in the Theological-Political Treatise] has been to indicate the main false assumptions that prevail regarding religion, that is, the relics of man’s ancient bondage” – Spinoza

“The chief aim of the Treatise is to refute the claims which had been raised on behalf of revelation throughout the ages” – Leo Strauss

“If [the TTP’s arguments against the scriptures are] true, Good Lord? What respect could we have for the Scripture! How could we maintain that it is divinely inspired? That it is a sure and firm prophecy; that the holy men who are the authors of it, spoke and wrote by God’s order, and by the inspiration of the Holy Spirit that the same Scripture is most certainly true, and that it gives a testimony most certainly true” – Colerus

“One may very well doubt, whether, amongst the many men the Devil has hired to overthrow humane and divine right, any of them has been more busy about it, than that imposture, who was born to the great mischief of Church and State”

“That abominable treatise”

“the Treatise [the TTP] ought to be buried forever in an eternal oblivion”

“The learning and inquiries whereof must needs have been fetched from hell”

"The Lord confound thee, Satan, and stop they mouth"

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894 Leo Stauss, *Persecution and the Art of Writing*, op. cited, 142.
896 Ibid. 74.
897 Ibid. 46.
898 Ibid. 59.
899 Ibid. 60.
900 Ibid. 59.
First approaches to understanding the *TTP*

The *TTP* is a work of the antichrist inspired by Satan

We are now finally come to the antichrist's most diabolical production, Satan's *magnum opus*, the *Theological Political Treatise* of Benedict de Espinosa. Not since the serpent told Eve that God's Word was false (his "Ye shall surely not die" to His "The day that you eat thereof, ye shall die" (Gen. xxx) has the devil so inspired a creature to speak his dark word. As Spinoza's early biographer put it: "One may very well doubt, whether, amongst the many men the Devil has hired to overthrow humane and divine right, any of them has been more busy about it, than that imposture, who was born to the great mischief of Church and State."  

As a pastor of the Lord's flock, Colerus cannot help himself. Along with his careful, even scholarly rendition of the facts of Spinoza's life that he gathered through industrious labor, Colerus can't help but to sprinkle throughout his book theological denunciations of Spinoza and his *TTP*: "the Learning and Inquiries whereof must needs have been fetched from hell";  

"that abominable treatise";  

"that wicked book";  

"the Treatise [TTP] ought to be buried for ever in an eternal oblivion";  

"The most impious atheist that ever lived upon the face of the earth";  

"The Lord confound thee, Satan, and stop thy mouth!"

The reader may ask, "Why are we discussing the antichrist? Isn't that only crack-pot theology which only a very small minority or fringe believe in? What does that have to do with Spinoza and philosophy?" 17th century historian Christopher Hill answers these sorts

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902 Ibid. 60.
903 Ibid. 56.
904 Ibid. 60.
905 Ibid. 59.
906 Ibid. 59-60.
907 Ibid. 59.
of questions in his *Antichrist in Seventeenth-Century England*. The reason why Hill wrote a whole book on this apparently outlandish subject from the Bible is because “historians have tended to ignore” the fact that many of the greatest thinkers of the seventeenth century took this subject very seriously. The historian of philosophy’s task must not “cover up irrationalities.” Hill criticizes the attitude of historians who call all those who took such claims (the antichrist, the beast, the end of the world, etc.) seriously as “lunatics” at their peril because they tend to forget or ignore that the great luminaries of the period (examples include Henry More, John Milton, Oliver Cromwell, Henry Oldenburg, Isaac Newton, etc.) all shared this belief – and that with the appearance of the Antichrist, the end of the world was presaged.\textsuperscript{908}

In fact, for many reputable seventeenth century teachers, it was imperative to be knowledgeable about the Antichrist not only because the scriptures teach that one should be on the lookout for him so as not to be deceived by him, but also because his appearance was said to be the key sign that the end of the world is at hand. And to know when the world will end is naturally of great importance. At any rate, it occupied many of the greatest minds of Europe, including its philosophers and scientists. Their time is not our time; the large majority of philosophers and academics today do not believe these things. But the large majority of philosophers and academics in Spinoza’s world did. So we have to deal with them as they were and not as we are.

When this many great thinkers are “interested in Antichrist, it is clear that there is something important here,” says Hill. “The historian ignores at his peril a body of ideas which at one time aroused passion and controversy.”\textsuperscript{909} What seems unworthy of our


\textsuperscript{909} Ibid. 2.
attention today was “full of life and significance” for them. It had to be because, once again, they took the Bible to be literally God’s word.

As I said at some length earlier, the modern reader must not take the theological denunciations against Spinoza lightly. Colerus and most of his Christian brethren really meant them. Again, one has to try to live inside their minds to get a better understanding of what is afoot here between counter-enlightenment and radical enlightenment forces. If you’re a devout Bible believer in Amsterdam in 1670 (when the TTP was first published) and you happened to pick up a book entitled Theological-Political Treatise, you would have been aghast upon reading it. One can then understand how Pierre-Francois Moreau can say in his “Spinoza’s reception and influence” for the Cambridge Companion to Spinoza that “The publication of the Theological-Political Treatise in 1670 had the effect of a lightning bolt.”910

As opposed to Spinoza’s other philosophical works, the TTP’s arguments against revelation, inspiration, prophecy, miracles, dreams, omens, Moses, the prophets, Jesus, the apostles, etc. are direct. You can’t miss them. One can understand then why the TTP had more effect and influence on Europe in his generation than his other works: It was easier to read; there was a greater audience for the subject matter than for arcane pure philosophy, and it was more dramatic and sensational. With the TTP, king, queen, prince, Rabbi, Roman Catholic priest, Lutheran minister, Calvinist pastor, and literate laymen, Christian and Jew, could take up and read and very quickly be brought to fathom what it is promulgating.

It was largely because of the TTP’s importance in undermining the age-old theological foundations of European culture that Stephen Nadler argued that, “Without a doubt, the Theological-Political Treatise is one of the most important and influential books in the history of philosophy, in religious and political thought, and even in Bible studies. More than any other work, it laid the foundation for modern critical and historical

910 Cambridge Companion to Spinoza, op. cited, 409.
approaches to the Bible.”911 Moreover, Spinoza’s Theological-Political Treatise is “Arguably the most important – and certainly the most scandalous and vilified – work of philosophy of the seventeenth century” (even though it was later neglected).912

Difficulties in interpretation

Spinoza’s Short Treatise on God, Man, and His Well-Being, his Principles of Cartesian Philosophy and his Ethics: Proved in Geometrical Order are for most readers, difficult works to get through. In several respects on the other hand, the Theological-Political Treatise (TTP) is easier reading, clearer, more direct, more emphatic, and more dramatic. And yet most Spinoza scholars make it a point to ask and explore the question of why the TTP is so difficult to interpret. Commentators such as Leo Strauss, Theo Verbeek, and Steven Nadler, to name only some, have taken up this question. In the first sentence of the Introduction to his Spinoza’s Theologico-Political Treatise: Exploring ‘the Will of God’, Theo Verbeek states,

Every reader of Spinoza’s Theologico-political treatise (1670) will know that it is a difficult book but will also realize that its difficulties are not like those of say, the Critique of Pure Reason or the Phenomenology of the Mind. Its vocabulary is not technical at all; nor is its reasoning complicated or its logic extraordinary. If it is difficult it is not because of particular phrases, paragraphs, concepts, but because one fails to see how things combine; how particular arguments fit into the comprehensive argument ... indeed, it is not clear most of the time what it is all about even if every now and then one stumbles across something familiar and recognizable.913

This may be how Verbeek and contemporary scholars feel about the TTP feel, but (as best as I have been able to gather from the early reception of this work) it was not how

911 Upcoming “A Book forged in Hell”, op. cited, 326.
912 Ibid. 3.
913 Theo Verbeek. Spinoza’s Theologico-Political Treatise: Exploring ‘the Will of God’ (Great Britain: Ashgate, 2003), 1. See also his summary of the several motivations in Spinoza’s writing of the TTP, some of which explains its ambiguities. Because of the serious danger he was in as a Dutch citizen (10-11).
Spinoza’s contemporaries thought. *They were clear as to what it meant and what its purpose was*. The early critical reviews on the *TTP* do not complain about “how particular arguments fit into the comprehensive argument” or that “it is not clear most of the time what it is all about even if every now and then one stumbles across something familiar and recognizable.” They knew what it was all about. The more they read and considered it, the more they recognized it as the work of the counterfeit angel of light (2 Cor. 11:14). Indeed, a comparison of the critical treatment of the *TTP* then with the critical treatment of the *TTP* today is really quite revealing – and radically different.

Verbeek goes on to explain that many of the ambiguities can be accounted for because of the grave danger this book put him in. I agree, but it should be pointed out that his contemporaries interpreted many of these “ambiguities” as *cover-ups*; for they knew very well that the evil atheists and libertines of the age could not speak transparently without seriously endangering themselves. Hence, they did not puzzle too much over these so-called ambiguities as contemporary scholars do.

After being immersed in the works of Descartes, Leibniz, Locke, Newton, Arnauld, etc. for a long period of time, one gets used to the caref ulness most philosophers of the 17th century speak on biblical and theological issues. In fact, there is something like a cottage book industry trying to figure out the sincerity and authenticity of many of these philosophers with respect to their theological beliefs. The best contemporary scholars in the world, for instance, still squabble over the sincerity of Descartes, Hobbes, and Leibniz. However, on the other hand, when one comes to the *TTP*, the attitude, the language, the things being said, are so different, so unorthodox, and so radical, that you can’t miss it. It’s as if the age-old internal censoring monitor has suddenly been torn off and now for the first time in centuries we are made privy to the very bowels of the monster of unbelief. No man spake like this.
Still, in other respects, the *TTP* lacks perspicuity. He *seems* to contradict himself at times, and he certainly does contradict himself at other times. I think it is correct to argue that Spinoza *purposely* uses unclear language and arguments to cover up (at least sometimes) the extent of his radicalness. But he does not engage in this purposeful lack of clarity all the time. On the contrary. Anyone who knows scripture well and who knows how to read can easily understand with absolute clarity just how incredibly radical the *TTP* is! In fact, *to not see how clearly radical it is* demands an explanation. In this sense then, some of the problems of ambiguity as to what he’s up to are somewhat restricted to different contemporary scholarly interests; for again, Spinoza's contemporaries did *not* have difficulty in understanding what the *TTP* was all about. They knew that it was a work which purposely sought to undermine revelation or Holy Scripture. And that was almost the only thing they were most concerned about in this work.

Readers of the *TTP* today who are not devout, who don’t know scriptures well and who don’t know the long and common history of the usual (or traditional) interpretations given the Jewish and Christians scriptures, may find much that is unclear. Because of this, they also cannot be privy to the radicalness or the horror that the *TTP* elicited. Interestingly, some even in the 17th century, like Oldenburg (a Christian correspondent with Spinoza) had trouble coming to grips with just how radical the *TTP* is because (I suspect) he couldn’t take it in that anyone could seriously write a treatise wholly devoted to destroying the holy Christian religion. A final reason that we can give here for why some have difficulty understanding the *TTP* is because some of the arguments are so novel and so contrary to their conventional understanding that portions of it seem obviously wrong (we may cite some of his philosophical points about God as identical with nature and his refutations of all scriptural anthropomorphistic depictions of God).
For our focus in this section though, there is a key, a “code breaker,” if you will, that can make the *TTP* more perspicuous. Generally speaking, the key to understanding this work is to try to discover how much of what he wrote ultimately undermines biblical theological claims. The Counter-Enlightenment forces of Judaism and Christianity of the time thought the same thing. They thought they could discern this clearly because when they compared what he said with the Word of God and with biblical theology, they found that much of what he said militated against these. And for anyone like them with such a fervent faith in scriptures, it was easy to identify Spinoza as the antichrist. Indeed, according to the criteria given in scripture, their identification of the antichrist is exegetically sound. It may seem at first questionable to say so, but a good heuristic in understanding the *TTP* is to try to go native and see Spinoza as the defenders of God’s Word saw him. For Spinoza’s part, this focus was not only that some of the 17th century’s biblical-theological problems were the most pressing intellectual problems of the day, but also because Spinoza’s own life was to a large degree shaped by the biblical tradition; so much so that it seems that much of what he wrote was *in reaction* to this religious upbringing.

In order to be a convincing antichrist, one has to at least appear as an angel of light; one has to talk the talk; one has to quote scripture and do a lot of pious talk. Once this is established, one can then systematically go to work in undermining the major foundations of the enemy; as Leo Strauss puts it: “To exaggerate for purposes of clarification, we may say that each chapter of the *Treatise* serves the function of refuting one particular orthodox dogma while leaving untouched all other orthodox dogmas.”

Strauss on interpreting the difficulties in the *TTP*

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Long before Curley, Nadler, and Steenbakkers' work on the *TTP*, Leo Strauss knew the centrality of this work for 17th century Europe and afterwards. His works *Persecution and the Art of Writing*\(^{915}\) and *Spinoza’s Critique of Religion*\(^{916}\) are to this day excellent introductions to the *TTP*. Strauss gets to the heart of the most serious issues at work in the *TTP*. Unfortunately, Strauss’s works are neglected today. Over and over in the current literature on Spinoza, Strauss’s work is maligned. These Spinoza scholars refer almost only to the controversial aspects of Strauss’s hermeneutic in interpreting philosophers. This leaves readers with the impression that Strauss is not a reliable interpreter of Spinoza and therefore, because time is limited, is not someone to take seriously. This is a big mistake. Strauss’s interpretations of Spinoza and his *TTP* are in some respects superior to the new works on the *TTP*.

It might be that Strauss’s works on Spinoza’s *TTP* are so insightful because he himself (like Spinoza) was brought up in a “conservative, even Orthodox Jewish home”\(^{917}\); so he had, as it were, an inside on the key issues at stake. Strauss understood that the *TTP* is a “historical subject.” Indeed, he inquires why we should care today to read this book that was published in 1670, for he knows that “The study of the *Treatise* can be of real importance only if the issue discussed in it is still alive.”\(^{918}\) He criticizes contemporary scholarship on Spinoza on the grounds that they do usually enter into the spirit and the age of the text. Because of this deficit, “the most fundamental issue – the issue raised by the conflicting claims of philosophy and revelation – is discussed in our time (1952) on a decidedly lower level than was almost customary in former ages.”\(^{919}\)

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\(^{915}\) See especially chapter 5, “How to Study Spinoza’s *Theologico-Political Treatise*.

\(^{916}\) In Strauss’s *Spinoza’s Critique of Religion*, see especially chapter V, “The Critique of Orthodoxy” and VII, “The Critique of Calvin.”

\(^{917}\) See: [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Leo_Strauss](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Leo_Strauss). These are Strauss’s words. Strauss’s conservative or orthodox upbringing, however, may have been with more stress on ceremony than theology.

\(^{918}\) *Persecution and the Art of Writing*, op. cited. 142.

\(^{919}\) Ibid. 142-143.
In the Introduction to his *Persecution and the Art of Writing*, Leo Strauss reviews the history of the relations between the revelatory religions (Judaism, Christianity, and Islam) and philosophy and finds the religious responses all wanting. He argues that of the three religions, Judaism is by far the most antithetical to philosophy. Next is Islam. And least is Christianity, that is, the Christianity that much later “officially recognized” philosophy (this status of course was to be decried throughout its history). Of the essentially anti-philosophical spirit and history of Judaism, Strauss rightly states that:

It is difficult not to see the connection between the depreciation of the primary object of philosophy – the heavens and the heavenly bodies – in the first chapter of Genesis, the prohibition against eating of the tree of knowledge of good and evil in the second chapter, the divine name ‘I shall be what I shall be,’ the admonition that the Law is not in heaven nor beyond the sea, the saying of the prophet Micah about what the Lord requires of man, and such Talmudic utterances as these: ‘for him who reflects about four things – about what is above, what is below, what is before, what is behind – it would be better not to have come into the world,’ and ‘God owns nothing in His World except the four cubits of the Halakhah.

There is a lot here. In a nutshell, Strauss indicts just about every pivotal era of Judaism up to the Common Era. The style here seems almost glib; but it’s not. This is a carefully planned passage which compresses the origins and early development of Judaism and shows that Judaism is, in essence, antithetical to philosophy. And this anti-rationalist attitude continues throughout its history:

Jews of the philosophical competence of Halevi and Maimonides took it for granted that being a Jew and being a philosopher are mutually exclusive ... Spinoza bluntly said that the Jews despise philosophy. As late as 1765, Moses Mendelssohn felt it necessary to apologize for recommending the study of logic, and to show why the prohibition against the reading of extraneous or profane books does not apply to works on logic. The issue of traditional Judaism versus philosophy is identical with the issue of Jerusalem versus Athens.

Despite the fact that most of the scriptures that Spinoza deals with are in the Jewish Bible, Strauss argues that, “Taken as a whole, the *Theologico-political Tractate* is aimed

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920 Strauss, op. cited. 20-21.
921 Ibid.
much more directly at Christian than at Jewish orthodoxy."922 I think that there can be little doubt of this since Spinoza himself said as much. In October of 1665, Benedict writes Oldenburg:

I am now writing a Treatise about my interpretation of Scripture. This I am driven to do by the following reasons: 1. The Prejudices of the Theologians; for I know that these are among the chief obstacles which prevent men from directing their mind to philosophy; and therefore I do all I can to expose them, and to remove them from the minds of the more prudent ... 3. The freedom of philosophizing, and of saying what we think; this I desire to vindicate in every way, for here it is always suppressed through the excessive authority and impudence of the preachers.923

The preachers and theologians that Spinoza mostly has in mind then are Christians. But it is important to bear in mind what kind of Christians. Strauss (and all the commentators I’ve read) states that “The Christian orthodoxy, which Spinoza primarily attacks is in particular Calvinism.”924

Strauss got the essence of Spinoza’s TTP right: “The chief aim of the Treatise is to refute the claims which had been raised on behalf of revelation throughout the ages.925” All the claims of theology – prophecy, visions, miracles, Christ, the creation and end of the world – stem from this one putative source.

924 Spinoza’s Critique of Religion 109.
925 Leo Strauss. Persecution and the Art of Writing (Connecticut: Greenwood Press Publishers, 1952), 142. The reader should not construe my praise and support of Strauss’s interpretation on this point as praise and support of all his interpretations, however. In fact, ironically enough, Strauss’s overall interpretation of such Radical Enlightenment philosophers as Spinoza and Hobbes is in some respects the stuff of the “counter-enlightenment”; for while Strauss understood “the fundamental issue that divides ancient and modern thinkers is the relative importance of reason and revelation in human life”, he was nevertheless very critical of the exclusivist reliance on reason. So much so, that “In Strauss’ view, the modern faith in reason is at the heart of the ‘crisis of the West’.” More than that, according to Shadia Drury, Strauss thought that “what is needed is belief in a transcendent God who punishes the wicked and rewards the righteous.” While “Strauss was committed to philosophy and had no intention of denouncing it out of hand”, he nevertheless argued “that philosophy must be kept hidden or secret, not simply to permit philosophers to avoid persecution, but for the sake of the people and for the well-being of the city.” With this, of course, we do not support. See Drury’s article on Strauss in the Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy Online: http://www.rep.routledge.com/article/S092?ssid=&authstatuscode=202. There are differing interpretations of whether Strauss himself was a believer of some kind or an atheist (See: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Leo_Strauss).
Not only that, but as we mentioned above, Strauss understood that his contemporaries could not enter into the vital significance of the work because for most scholars today, the issues that the *TTP* takes up are no longer vital or live options. There aren’t many contemporary scholars who believe that the Bible is revelation from God. Thus they feel absolutely no umbrage of even anything of personal or religious relevance when they read this work. Some of the difficulty of fully appreciating this work then has to do with finding a way to make the issues of the book (such as the problem of revelation) alive. As we’ve already quoted: “The study of the *Treatise* can be of real importance only if the issue discussed in it is still alive.”

That is exactly right. Because of this lack, Strauss states that

we cannot help noticing that the most fundamental issue – the issue raised by the conflicting claims of philosophy and revelation – is discussed in our time on a decidedly lower level than was almost customary in former ages. It is with a view to these circumstances that we open the *Treatise* again ... For if we fail to do so, we are likely to substitute our folly for his wisdom.

A good example, perhaps, of this “lower level” of existential understanding of the *TTP’s* outrageous antichristian nature is the fact that not one contemporary scholarly work (to my knowledge) has pointed out (or comprehended) the questionable-ness if not outrageousness of the epigraph which Spinoza affixes to his whole work. On the very front page of the book under the title is written: “The First Epistle of John, Chapter 4, Verse 13. “*Through this means we recognize that we remain in God, and God remains in us – that He gave to us from His own Spirit.*” Anyone who knows the scriptures well would know immediately that Spinoza takes this important scriptural passage wildly out of context. The Calvinist theologians and preachers in Amsterdam certainly would have caught this.

But, to my knowledge, not one contemporary work on Spinoza’s *TTP* points this fact out. There

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926 *Persecution* 142-143.
927 Ibid.
928 In a personal communication on this point, I asked Spinoza scholar Theo Verbeek if my interpretation of this matter was correct. He agreed and wrote that it was.
are many contemporary works on the TTP that give commentary and analysis on most of the book. How strange it is then that not one of these excellent works recognized the problematic nature of Spinoza’s quotation of the 1 John passage as the epigraph for his whole book. Is it possible that no one researched it? For there is no way that one could recognize that a serious issue is being raised in the epigraph unless one knows or researches *the context of the quote*. And once one knows that, then one recognizes that from the very epigraph of the TTP that Spinoza is up to no good – in relation to Christianity, that is.

In some important respects, the primary audience of the TTP was Spinoza’s own countrymen. In fact, the circumstances that led Spinoza to break off work on his *Ethics* to write a work directly on the scriptures and biblical theology was occasioned by a religious controversy in his town. He feared that the Calvinists were gaining too much political power in his town and country, so he wrote the TTP in large part with hopes of undermining their biblical theological foundations. Most of the religious groups in the 17th century knew the scriptures very well. Indeed, for many of them, the scriptures and theology was *their only education*. So whatever they heard or read, they would judge it according to “the word of truth” (2 Tim. 2:15).

The 1 John 4:13 passage that Spinoza uses as the epigraph of this book sounds pious enough. *“Through this means we recognize that we remain in God, and God remains in us – that He gave to us from His own Spirit.”* Anyone reading this for the first time and not knowing the contents of the rest of the book might easily think that the author is a Christian. But once the devout reader goes through the book, he learns that the author must be a trickster and heretic. But what kind of heretic? Well, the best way to find out, according to the New Testament, is to find out what the author thinks about Jesus Christ. Once he learns this, then he will know how to categorize the author.
Of all the figures in the Bible, Spinoza’s *TTP* seems to treat Jesus with the most respect. Yet, though Spinoza talks about him in laudatory tones, there is something about his choice of words that would tip off the devout reader that something is not quite right. Spinoza says many glowing things about Jesus.\(^{929}\) He even sees Jesus as greater than Moses (which by entailment is a condemnation of Judaism in that Judaism rejects the Christian’s Christ). In fact, Spinoza even says some things that suggest that God truly and specially revealed His Will to him. But when one reads further and more carefully, one realizes that more is afoot. For instance, Spinoza never says the magic words: he never says that “Jesus is Lord” or that he is God’s Son come in the flesh.

Moreover, if it is true that Jesus received special revelation, according to Spinoza he nevertheless “adapts” this language to the coarse level of the people. And this “coarse” adapted language is not in the final analysis the truth of God at all – which undermines the scriptural teaching that all scripture is inspired by God and therefore “the word of truth” (Eph. 1:13; Col. 1:5). But Spinoza says that Christ is forced to teach these things “undoubtedly in concession to the frailty of the flesh … [and to adapt] his words to the character of the … carnal man.”\(^{930}\) The devout won’t buy this. Not for a second.

For readers with the wherewithal to put together all that Spinoza wrote about revelation, prophecy, imagination, the common herd, etc. from the *TTP*, these readers would know that while Spinoza said nice things about Christ, in the final analysis, he did not really believe in Him. And that would be enough for them to pronounce their solemn judgment on Spinoza; for they were taught how to identify the antichrist and, upon once identifying him, to eschew him with all one’s being.

Dear children, this is the last hour; and as you have heard that the antichrist is coming, even now many antichrists have come. This is how we know it is the last

\(^{929}\) *TTP*, Shirley, 54.

hour ... But you have an anointing from the Holy One, and all of you know the truth ...
Who is the liar? It is the man who denies that Jesus is the Christ. Such a man is the antichrist – he denies the Father and the Son. No one who denies the Son has the Father; whoever acknowledges the Son has the Father also. See that what you have heard from the beginning remains in you. If it does, you also will remain in the Son and in the Father. And this is what he promised us – even eternal life. I am writing these things to you about those who are trying to lead you astray (1 John 2).

Spinoza, to the devout mind, was definitely trying to lead the flock astray. And again:

Dear friends, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God, because many false prophets have gone out into the world. This is how you can recognize the Spirit of God: Every spirit that acknowledges that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God, but every spirit that does not acknowledge Jesus is not from God. This is the spirit of the antichrist, which you have heard is coming and even now is in the world. You, dear children, are from God and have overcome them, because the one who is in you is greater than the one who is in the world. They are from the world and therefore speak from the viewpoint of the world, and the world listens to them. We are from God, and whoever knows God listens to us; but whoever is not from God does not listen to us. This is how we recognize the Spirit of truth and the spirit of falsehood ... We know that we live in him and he in us, because he has given us of his Spirit.

This last sentence is the verse that Spinoza has the chutzpah to use as the epitaph to his TTP! The correct reading of this verse is to read it in context in accord with the sentences before and after it - which was the hermeneutics that Spinoza preached but often did not practice! And once one does this, one finds out that the point of the passage was to know how to identify the antichrist and false teachers. Spinoza fits that bill in spades!

There are many other such passages of scripture that Spinoza twists to either project what he wishes it to mean or purposely gives a false reading in hopes of deflecting the rage of the devout fanatics against him. From the orthodox perspective, this correct reading of the 1 John passage shows Spinoza to be an antichrist! Any reader who knew or

931 However, there are other ways to interpret why Spinoza used this verse as the motto for his book – though I think my criticism of his use of this verse should stand. He might have used this verse as the epigraph of his book as his way of saying that what makes someone “in God” is not so much what his or her particular denomination’s confession might be, but as he or she lives according to God’s Spirit (which for Spinoza means as a loving person. In his Spinoza’s Theologico-political Treatise: Exploring ‘the Will of God’ (which, I am told, is the only in-depth commentary of the TTP in English) Theo Verbeek also takes this position (Vermont: Ashgate Publishing Limited, 2003], 5).
looked up this verse for memory’s sake would not only identify Spinoza as an antichrist because he doesn’t believe the claims of Christ, but also because of the obvious mendaciousness of using such a verse as the epigraph to his whole book! Spinoza for obvious reasons does not mention the very next verse after the one he uses: “And we have seen and testify that the Father has sent his Son to be the Savior of the world. If anyone acknowledges that Jesus is the Son of God, God lives in him and he in God” (1 John 4). Spinoza definitely did not acknowledge that Jesus was the Son of God come in the flesh.

The Radicalness of the TTP

The question of radicalness

As we mentioned earlier in this study, the use of the term “radical” in reference to Spinoza or to the “Radical Enlightenment” is meant in respect to Christianity and the history of Christendom up that point. Many of course would argue that the true “radicals” are not those like the Spinozists, but rather the orthodox and traditionalists in religion. At any rate, for Spinoza’s time, the TTP was considered not only “radical” but “vile and blasphemous.” Stephen Nadler notes that “The Theological-Political Treatise is an astoundingly bold and radical work” that was considered “as vile and blasphemous a book as the world has ever seen.” Even the radical Hobbes was astounded by the TTP’s audaciousness. Hobbes is reported to have said that the TTP “cut through him a bar’s length, for he durst not write so boldly.”

932 Stephen Nadler. *Spinoza’s Ethics: An Introduction*, op. cited, 20. Nadler concludes that Hobbes plays it safe, and that he does not, like Spinoza, come out: “He does not adopt – or, at least, does not express – the thoroughgoing, dogmatic and more radical naturalism of Spinoza’s *Treatise*; after all, he ‘durst not write so boldly’ (Nadler’s forthcoming “A Book Forged in Hell”, op. cited, 130-131). In terms of philosophy (at least in principle) Douglas Jesseph’s “Hobbes’ Atheism” would disagree with the former claim (that is, that he does not express thoroughgoing, radical naturalism), but not the
After Spinoza’s radical arguments and claims begin to finally sink in, one comes to the realization that he is rejecting just about every sacred biblical theological and traditional teaching of the Church. One wonders how he could have had the ability, the courage, the insight, and wherewithal to come to totally reject his Jewish and Christian Europe’s most sacred paradigm. We must remember that Spinoza wrote at a time long before Diderot, Voltaire, Holbrach, Darwin, Nietzsche, Marx, higher biblical criticism, Freud, and so on. I am reminded of Richard Dawkins’ amazement (in his *The Blind Watchmaker: Why the Evidence of Evolution Reveals a Universe without Design*) that someone before Darwin could even question the teleological proof of the existence of God. Dawkins says that he feels even more wonder over the apparent design of the biological world than Bishop William Paley did. In this respect, he writes:

I feel more in common with the Reverend William Paley than I do with the distinguished modern philosopher, a well-known atheist, with whom I once discussed the matter at dinner. I said that I could not imagine being an atheist at any time before 1859, when Darwin’s *Origin of Species* was published. ‘What about Hume?’, replied the philosopher. ‘How did Hume explain the organized complexity of the living world?,’ I asked. ‘He didn’t’, said the philosopher. ‘Why does it need a special explanation?’ Paley knew that it needed a special explanation; Darwin knew it, and I suspect that in his heart of hearts my philosopher companion knew it too.

Dawkins goes on to say that what Hume did was criticize the logic of using apparent design in nature as positive evidence for the existence of God. He did not offer any alternative explanation for apparent design, but left the question open. An atheist before Darwin could have said, following Hume: ‘I have no explanation for complex biological design. All I know is that God isn’t a good explanation, so we must wait and hope that somebody comes up with a better one.’ I can’t help feeling that such a position, though logically sound, would have left one feeling pretty unsatisfied, and that although atheism might have been logically tenable before Darwin, Darwin made it possible to be an intellectually fulfilled atheist. I like to think that Hume would agree … The boy naturalist Charles Darwin could have shown him a thing or two about that.933

latter (that he durst not write as transparently or as boldly). There are many statements in Hobbes’ *Leviathan*, for instance, in which it does not appear at all that he is “playing it safe.” On the contrary, if one adds up the meaning of all such bold statements, then one is led to the conclusion that Jesseph comes to: that Hobbes expresses an atheism and thoroughgoing radical naturalism.

While we agree with Dawkins’ obvious claim that Darwin demonstrated a positive scientific non-teleological way of explaining the apparent design in the world, we don’t think that he knew Spinoza’s arguments against the anthropomorphism of nature and God and therefore the arguments against the plausibility of teleology. At any rate, not to argue this issue here, Dawkins’ point does at least give us pause to admire Spinoza’s philosophical insights, courage, and independent thought many decades before Hume, and 189 years before Darwin.

Still, though Spinoza was definitely more advanced in his thoroughgoing non-teleological naturalism, he was not the only atheist or radical. There were others, Jews and Christians, who Spinoza most probably knew, who also rejected and criticized the religion of their fathers, and who were also publically humiliated and excommunicated or even burnt to the stake. Spinoza was not the only dissenter. And he was not the only one who wrote works replete with many excellent arguments against the status quo version of God, nature, and the Bible. Nevertheless, as scholars such as Popkins, Preus, Yovel, Nadler and others have shown, Spinoza’s TTP definitely counts as a major step forward in the history of naturalism, philosophy of religion, and biblical criticism. Spinoza could have shown Hume and Darwin a thing or two had they read his TTP.

Beyond his radical non-teleological naturalism in respect to science, Spinoza went further in his arguments against Judaeo-Christian biblical theology. We will pick out only a couple of these arguments here (the repudiation of revelation on philosophical and moral grounds).

934 J. Samuel Preus’s *Spinoza and the Irrelevance of Biblical Authority* (Cambridge University Press, 2001) is the most thorough or comprehensive work on this subject in regard to its specifically biblical critical aspects that I have found during my research on this subject. He learns from Popkins’ work: *from Erasmus to Spinoza*, especially about Isaac La Peyrere, but he goes beyond that. Preus’s second chapter on Ludwig Meyer is particularly helpful in filling out gaps in our understanding of Spinoza’s influences in hermeneutics.

935 As far as I have been able to determine thus far, Hume and Darwin did not study the TTP.
Spinoza’s repudiation of revelation based on biblical critical, philosophical, and moral grounds

Strauss argues that “The chief aim of that Treatise is to refute the claims which had been raised on behalf of revelation throughout the ages.” This is most certainly one of the TTP’s principal points of attack. The chief aim of this section then will be to present some of Spinoza’s biblical critical, philosophical, and moral arguments to refute “the claims which have been made on behalf of revelation throughout the ages.”

Spinoza starts the first chapter of the Theological-Political Treatise innocently enough with the words: “Prophecy, or revelation, is the sure knowledge of some matter revealed by God to man.”936 So far so good. These words seem innocent and conventional. But then he goes on to say, “A prophet is one who interprets God’s revelation to those who cannot attain to certain knowledge of the matters revealed, and can therefore be convinced of them only by simple faith.”937

First he says that revelation or prophecy is “revealed by God to men.” Then he says in effect: “But before one can get from God to man, the prophets have to interpret God’s revelation.” So, God’s messages are not relayed to man directly or immediately, or exactly or clearly. But this added or qualified theory of prophecy and revelation seems different from the way most have learned about this subject.

Most believers are taught that God reveals x to prophet P and then prophet P simply relays that exact message to the people. Throughout the Bible, outside of a few small exceptions, we never read passages such as: “And I, Moses, was not sure of what Yahweh said, but, well, it seemed to be something like x, so I wrote that down.” No, from the book of TTP, op. cited, 9.

937 Ibid. my emphasis.
Genesis to the book of Revelation, the testimonies and the commandments and the prophecies are almost always communicated with the utmost clarity and distinction that is exactly what God told P to say or write down. Leaf through Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy and find out if this is not so. And the same goes for all the prophets from Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Daniel, Hosea, Joel, Amos, Obadiah, and so on to Malachi. Over and over in all these books the only expressions written about God are those such as: “This is what you are to say to the house of Jacob and what you are to tell the people of Israel …” (Ex.19:3); “The Lord called to Moses and spoke to him from the Tent of Meeting. He said, ‘Speak to the Israelites and say to them: …” (Lev. 1:1); “The word of the Lord came to me saying, ‘Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, before you were born I set you apart; I appointed you as a prophet to the nations … You must go to everyone I send you to and say whatever I command you … Now, I have put my words in your mouth” (Jeremiah 1:4-9); “Thus saith the Lord;” – thousands of such expressions are used like these throughout the Bible.

It is the same with the New Testament. According to Luke, God sent the angel Gabriel to talk to Zechariah and Mary. Luke tells us that Gabriel told Zechariah God’s plan for John the Baptist. Then “God sent the angel Gabriel to Nazareth” to the virgin Mary. “The angel went to her and said, ”You will be with child and give birth to a son, and you are to call his name Jesus“ (Lk.1:31). Peter testifies that he heard God say, “This is my Son.” Peter says, “We ourselves heard this voice that came from heaven when we were with him on the sacred mountain” (2 Pet.17). The apostle Paul writes in many places how the gospel he preaches “is not something that man made up. I did not receive it from any man, nor was I taught it; rather, I received it by revelation from Jesus Christ” (Gal.1:12). John says that an angel told him the following words: “Write on a scroll what you see and send it to the seven churches” (Rev.1:10); “Then the angel said to me, ‘Write: ‘Blessed are those who are invited
to the wedding supper of the Lamb!” (Rev.19:9); “I warn everyone who hears the words of
the prophecy of this book: if anyone adds anything to them, God will add to him the plagues
described in this book. And if anyone takes words away from this book of prophecy, god
will take away from him his share in the tree of life and in the holy city, which are described
in this book” (Rev.22:18).

These are all examples of the typical ways in which the authors of the Bible testify to
the revelations they received. If all these are only interpretations given according to the
contingencies of the author’s language, culture, history, etc., if these are only
“interpretations of God’s revelation to those who cannot attain to certain knowledge of the
matters revealed, and can therefore be convinced of them only by simple faith”, then all of
these interpretations are not only open to other possible interpretations, but are also open
to doubt, as well. And this is exactly what Spinoza is up to.

The believer could reply to Spinoza that if the prophet or the person to whom
something is revealed didn’t know for sure what God meant, if God didn’t reveal the matter
clearly, then one would think that there would be more indication of this fact in the wording
used. To Spinoza’s credit, he does cite many passages and instances in scripture that back
up his claim. And these offer valuable insights into our understanding of why religious
people make such claims. Nevertheless, for the believer, it is not a sufficient explanation of
why no mention is usually made of this interpretive medium between God and man.

Spinoza is aware of this objection, but he doesn’t mention it immediately. And when
he does, he explains it away in this fashion: he acknowledges that “the Jews never make
mention of intermediate or particular causes nor pay heed to them.” Why don’t they?
Spinoza answers that “they attribute everything to God to serve religion and piety or, as it is
commonly called, devoutness.”938 So then by the time we get to the sixth sentence (of the

938 Ibid. 10.
first chapter when he says: “From the definition given above, it follows that natural knowledge can be called prophecy”), the jig is up. We realize that something very different is afoot. “Natural knowledge can be called prophecy” or revelation! But, says Spinoza, “this natural knowledge ... is not so highly prized by the multitude” because they “are ever eager for what is strange and foreign to their own nature ... Therefore prophetic knowledge is usually taken to exclude natural knowledge.”939 From the beginning then, according to Spinoza, the multitude has misinterpreted what the prophets interpreted: “prophetic knowledge is usually taken to exclude natural knowledge.”940

Spinoza takes issue with this error of the crass herd because he thinks that natural knowledge “has as much right as any other kind of knowledge to be called divine, since it is dictated to us, as it were, by God’s nature insofar as we participate therein.”941 Interpreting Spinoza is tricky at times (as many Spinoza scholars attest to), but the “crass herd” was right in interpreting Spinoza as reducing the Word of God to the corrupt word of man. And this, of course, is anathema to the traditional religious mind.

So then, Spinoza contends that all revelation is really not revelation from God but the product of human, all-too-human imagination. With this argument alone the whole house of cards (of religion) collapses. On this point, as we have said above, Leo Strauss is exactly right when he states in his 1952 essay “How to Study Spinoza’s Theologico-Political Treatise that “The chief aim of the Treatise is to refute the claims which had been raised on behalf of revelation throughout the ages.”942 Spinoza spells out what this entails. If the scriptures are not really revealed from God Almighty, then Adam, Moses, the Promised Land, the Messiah, Christ, salvation or atonement through propitiary sacrifice, miracles,

939 Ibid. 9.
940 Ibid.
941 Ibid.
942 Leo Strauss. Persecution and the Art of Writing (Conn.: Greenwood Press, Publ., 1952), 142.
prophecy, and so on and so forth – are all debunked, demythologized, undermined, ridiculed, lambasted, lampooned, criticized, and condemned.

Spinoza argues that Moses didn’t perceive that his ideas were not the best of ways – or, to use Leibnizian language: Moses’ teachings and leadership were far from being the best of all possible worlds. Moses “imagined” that God is a ruler, lawgiver, king, merciful, just, and so on. But, for Spinoza, God is really not like this at all. Far from it. Moses’ depictions of Yahweh are “merely attributes of human nature, and not at all applicable to the divine nature.”

The Pentateuch teaches that God appeared to Moses in a burning bush (that would not be consumed) and gave him various orders. Later, on the top of Mount Sinai in the Negev desert, we’re told that God literally writes the Ten Commandments on stone tablets for Moses, and then reveals to him a huge corpus of laws. Most people who might be skeptical of such claims would say things like: “Why should we believe that these ancient books accurately recorded these things?” And they would be right to ask this question. Spinoza himself cites such questions.

Yet what Spinoza seems to be more adamant about against the claims of the Pentateuch is based on his rationalist-moral argument that God simply could not be that way; for any deep reflection on this subject should convince anyone that God must surpass such obviously childish, anthropomorphic depictions. Spinoza therefore opposes the Pentateuch’s accounts of such claims as the Promised Land also on moral grounds. This depiction of God can’t be true because this would make God out to be a monster. If there is a God, He couldn’t be like this. Therefore these books are false and the world should be

943 Spinoza. *TTP* (Shirley translation), op. cit. 53, my emphasis.

944 In the Preface to the English translation of his *Spinoza’s Critique of Religion*, Leo Strauss argues that “the antagonism between Spinoza and Judaism, between unbelief and belief, is ultimately not theoretical but moral” (29).
taught to know this. The world should be taught that these stories of God stem from the imaginations of vulgar or common minds and are in no wise true descriptions of the divine.

Like Socrates and Plato of old who argued against the gods of their people on moral grounds, so also does Spinoza. Spinoza opposes Judaism and the Jewish scriptures because they are beneath the dignity of a true and ethical understanding of what God might be like. Needless to say, from the perspective of Jews and Christians, such arguments were galling. To say that the God in whom you worship as the perfection of moral goodness is in actuality barbarous, vulgar, and immoral – well, this should give readers some idea of how outraged so many readers of the *TTP* were.

Spinoza versus St. Paul

Spinoza shows his Enlightenment independence of thought in the *TTP* in many ways. It’s as if he turns Jesus’ and Paul’s teachings on their head. Jesus often said to the Jews about their scriptures, “You have heard that it was said ..., but I say ...” (ex. Mt.5:27-28). The canonical gospels say that Jesus’ claims stemmed from revelation from God (“I do nothing on my own but speak just what the Father has taught me” (Jn.8:28). And St. Paul often claimed the truth and authority of his teachings also based on revelation (“I want you to know, brothers, that the gospel I preached is not something that man made up. I did not receive it from any man, nor was I taught it; rather, I received it by revelation from Jesus Christ” (Gal.1:11). But Spinoza turns them both upside down by arguing that truth cometh not by purported special revelation from a human-like God in heaven, but rather by true reasoning based only on an ontology of naturalism.

If we were to compare and contrast these two conflicting visions, we might envisage such an interplay as follows. We will pick St. Paul here because, according to many
contemporary scholars of the New Testament, St. Paul is thought to have been the chief expositor of Christianity. I ask the reader to be patient with my aesthetically clumsy rendering of the TTP’s anti-Pauline message. Though my rendering of Spinoza in the following passages is very awkward, I nevertheless think that it aptly counter-poses the essence of St. Paul’s message.

Writing to the Corinthians, St. Paul says that he’s got a message of wisdom for them, but that only the spiritually enlightened and mature among them will be able to take it in. He’s going to tell them some things that “No eye has seen, no ear has heard, no mind has conceived” about “what God has prepared for those who love him.” He’s able to do this because “God has revealed it to us by his Spirit” (1 Cor. 2: 6-10). No doubt many who read the TTP felt this - No eye ever saw, nor ear heard, nor mind conceived up until then just how many arguments there were against the scriptures and the Christian view of life. And the more one reads it, the more one realizes just how completely anti-revelation, anti-inspiration, anti-scriptural, anti-Christian, anti-Jewish, anti-traditional, anti-theological, and anti-spiritual it is. Spinoza’s work in essence turns St. Paul’s Corinthian arguments upside down.

Here is the essence of Paul’s message. He says that Christ sent me to preach the gospel – not with words of human wisdom, lest the cross of Christ be emptied of its power. For the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. For it is written: ‘I will destroy the wisdom of the wise; The intelligence of the intelligent I will frustrate.’

Where is the wise man? Where is the scholar? Where is the philosopher of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? For since in the wisdom of God the world through its wisdom did not know him, God was pleased through the foolishness of what was preached to save those who believe. Jews demand miraculous signs and Greeks look for wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified: a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, but to those whom God has called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. For the foolishness of God is wiser than man’s wisdom (1 Cor. 1: 17-25)
And now here is our rendition of the TTP's anti-Christian message (albeit in awkward form):

The message of the cross is foolishness to us who are being saved by liberating natural reason. The word of reason says: 'I will destroy the 'revelations' of the vulgar imagination; the prophecies of the prophets I will prove false'. Where then is the prophet? Where is the saint? Where is the theologian of this age? Has not natural human reason made foolish the 'wisdom' of the Jewish prophets and the Apostles? For since in the wisdom of science and accurate biblical interpretation, the world of prophets and apostles have not come to know the truth, intellectual integrity is pleased through its insights to save those who attend to reason and study these things honestly and courageously. Jews demand miraculous signs and Christians demand faith, but to those who use the eyes in their heads, to those who listen and follow their intelligence, these learn that reason (and not revelation) is the most powerful force for human beings to follow. For even though human reason is admittedly tempted by our needs, passions and imaginations, it is the only sure and tested light we have to go on.

Right after St. Paul says that God revealed to him His “secret wisdom" through the Spirit what no other eye has seen or ear heard or mind conceived, he says:

The Spirit searches all things, even the deep things of God. For who among men knows the thoughts of a man except the man’s spirit within him? In the same way no one knows the thoughts of God except the Spirit of God. We have not received the spirit of the world but the Spirit who is from God, that we may understand what God has freely given us. This is what we speak, not in words taught us by human wisdom but in words taught by the Spirit, expressing spiritual truths in spiritual words. The man without the Spirit does not accept the things that come from the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him, and he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually discerned. The spiritual man makes judgments about all things, but he himself is not subject to any man's judgment: ‘For who has known the mind of the Lord that he may instruct him?’ But we have the mind of Christ (1 Cor. 2:10-16).

The TTP’s radical enlightenment counter-version of St. Paul’s spiritualist vision might run something as follows:

Human intelligence searches out all sorts of things, even claims about God. Those who rely on one’s own thought will not slavishly submit to claims of revelation or prophecy given by all sorts of people. We should submit only to what reason and science puts forth with evidence as true. This is what we speak, not in words taught us by ‘the Spirit’ or prophecy or vision or dreams or oracles or drawing lots or trances or tongues or word of knowledge or gifts of the Spirit, but only in words and arguments and evidence that can persuade our intelligence. The man who does not follow natural reason does not accept the things of intelligence, but accepts ‘the things that come from the Spirit of God’; for the things of reason are foolishness to him because they have to be rationally discerned. The rational and learned man makes judgments about all things based on his critical intelligence, so he will not
surrender his reason to any prophets or messiahs or gods’ judgments. ‘For who knows the truth except the man who independently studies and tests it?’

St. Paul tells us that many or most of the believers he had to deal with were spiritually immature, so they could not take in the “message of wisdom” that he had received from God.

Brothers, I could not address you as spiritual but as worldly – mere infants in Christ. I gave you milk, not solid food, for you were not yet ready for it. Indeed, you are still not ready. You are still worldly…. Do not deceive yourselves. If any one of you thinks he is wise by the standards of this age, he should become a ‘fool’ so that he may become wise. For the wisdom of the world is foolishness in God’s sight. As it is written: ‘He catches the wise in their craftiness’; and again, ‘The Lord knows that the thoughts of the wise are futile’…. So then, men ought to regard us as servants of Christ and as those entrusted with the secrets of God (1 Cor. 3:1-3; 18-20 and 4:1).

In contrast to St. Paul’s claims about the wisdom of spiritual enlightenment versus ‘worldly’ wisdom, here’s how one may conjecture Spinoza’s message of wisdom:

Brothers, I could not address you as rational but as believers. I gave you milk, not solid food, for you were not ready for it. I could not speak with total clarity and frankness to you because then you’d do all that you could to kill me, and you’re too prejudiced and stupid to use your reason and intelligence and to study enough to see if the things I have written are so. You are still believers. You still deceive yourselves. If any of you thinks he is spiritually enlightened by the standards of the Jewish or Christian Bible, you should become spiritually ignorant so that you may become rationally wise. For the ‘wisdom of God’ that you speak about is really foolishness. It really is. An adult knows that children’s thinking is often foolish. And the philosopher knows that the thoughts of the unthinking, unreflecting, uncritical, unlearning herd are futile … So then, men ought to regard us truly honest philosophers as servants of truth945 and those who have come to learn the truth that faith in the ‘word of God’ is an immense blunder.

According to revelation, the Son of God alone sets us free; but according to Spinoza reason sets us free. For Christians, Jesus is the only way, truth, and life, but according to Spinoza, reason is the way, the truth, and the life. Jesus says, "If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me. For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life will save it" (Lk. 9:23-25). Spinoza says

945 My apologies to postmodern thinkers such as Nietzsche and Rorty, who have shown many of the problems and weaknesses of such an exaggerated fundamentalist rendering of reason.
that if anyone would be wise, let him follow his reason which will teach how best to preserve his life and to live in accord with his own advantage.

St. Paul says, "When I was a child, I talked like a child, I reasoned like a child. When I became a man, I put childish ways behind me" (1 Cor. 13). And yet, in the context of this claim we read of his beliefs in the most other-worldly things – the languages of angels, miraculous powers, gifts of healing, the supernatural ability to speak in other tongues and to interpret other tongues. When Spinoza was a child, he used to believe in all the many supernatural and miraculous stories from Torah. He used to follow Scripture. He used to obey the Law. But, when he became a young man, he put away these childish things and followed natural reason as best as he could instead. As a youth, he was most probably devoted to Yahweh; but, as he became an adult, he gave his life to reason and philosophy.946 The Jewish scriptures that teach “Lean not unto thine own understanding, but trust in the Lord with all thine heart” is anathema to Spinoza’s philosophy of reason. His TTP and Ethics preach the very opposite. They teach that one ought to lean unto thine own reason and not trust any revelation or prophecy or omen or dream or vision – and certainly not “with all one’s heart”!

My anti-Paul Spinoza version of course is somewhat ungainly. Worse, for those who know Spinoza well, this rendition makes Spinoza look too simplistic and too much like a narrow-minded logical positivist. Taking Spinoza’s teachings about reason all in all, he did not always apotheosize reason. There are passages in his works which show that he was

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946 As mentioned earlier, in a personal communication with Spinoza scholar Stephen Nadler, I asked him if my hunch that Spinoza was devout as a youth was true. He emailed me that: “We do not have any documentary evidence one way or another on this. But there is every reason to believe that, as a boy growing up in a family that was a part of an observant Jewish community, Spinoza took part in active Jewish life. I’m certain that his loss of faith and commitment -- which seems not to have occurred until the early 1650s -- was a major event in his life” (May 24, 2010).
keenly aware “that the road, which reason herself points out, is very steep.” Spinoza was quite aware that truly rational behavior is extremely difficult, and that few succeed at following all its dictates. Yet, as Spinoza puts it, “But all things excellent are as difficult as they are rare.”

But to those millions who know and cherish the famous passages of St. Paul cited above, my juxtaposed rendition of Spinoza may strike home. To the devout, Spinoza’s voice in the *TTP* probably strikes them like the old serpent’s voice to Eve in the Garden of Eden: “Hath God really said ...?” (Gen. 3:1). It is the voice (to them) of the anti-Christ: For whatever God hath said, this man says the opposite. Like Jesus who overturned or superseded Moses used to say, “You have heard it said .... But I tell you ...” (to take only one example, Mt. 5:27-28). In the same way, Spinoza in the *TTP* can be understood to say: “You have heard from Moses or Jesus or Isaiah or St. Paul that ...; but I tell you ....”

Like Moses, Jesus and St. Paul, Spinoza presents a new way. But his new way is built on entirely different foundations. His new way, his enlightenment, his gospel is not built on purported divine revelation or prophecy or visions or centuries-old uncritical tradition, but on critical human reason and a materialist science.

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948 This comes from the very last sentence of the *Ethics*. It should also be said *in fairness to St. Paul and Christians* (which Spinoza and this author too often fail at), one should recall that the New Testament’s writings about living by the Spirit *understands* the difficulty of doing so. Spinoza often accuses and condemns believers of Scripture of not following what they believe. But, like “living in accordance with reason” is most difficult, so also is it to live in the Spirit. On the other hand, the New Testament also annunciates what theologians call a doctrine of sanctification; that is, not only are believers said to be saved from damnation, they are also said to have the power of the Spirit at their prayerful disposal so that they may overcome the world, the flesh, and the devil and thus be overcomers. For, as they often point out, “Greater is he who is in you, then he [the devil] who is in the world” and “thanks be to God through Christ Jesus who gives us the victory.” From *this* point of view, then, Spinoza’s criticism is legitimate because Christians claim to have Christ in them and that they are the light of the world, etc., and yet, despite all these claims, the history of the church’s behavior shows much that is far from saintliness. And this appears as evidence or proof against the truth value of their claims.
Spinoza on the Holy Spirit

In the block quotes above, we juxtaposed New Testament passages with what we hypothesized to be the message of Spinoza. We juxtaposed St. Paul’s “Spirit” with Spinoza’s “reason”, for instance, but there are passages in the *TTP* in which Spinoza conflates the two. Indeed, “the main purpose” of chapter one of the *TTP* is to show readers “that in Hebrew ‘Spirit’ means both the mind and the mind’s thoughts.” In these passages Spinoza appears to be trying to get his rationalist vision of things more acceptable to his scripturally and spiritually devoted audience. If this interpretation is correct, then what he’s doing is trying to pull the wool over the eyes of his readers. Or, if he does actually believe that the New Testament’s theology of the “Spirit” falls in line with any kind of rationalism, then he either has not studied the New Testament carefully or thoroughly on this matter or he’s deceiving himself. I say this because many of his biblically learned readers would have certainly interpreted his forced conflation (e.g. misinterpretation) of the two as being purposely and therefore mendaciously done.

Before I continue on this subject, it seems important to state once again that a large portion of his readers - and this not just theologians and philosophers - knew the New Testament like Spinoza knew the “Old” Testament. In the seventeenth century there were many pastors, preachers, and lay evangelists who had no higher education, who never studied theology or philosophy or medicine or law in any university, but yet who not only knew the scriptures inside and out, but also actually changed their world far more than most theologians and philosophers (not unlike the early apostles, Act 4:13). One thinks of George Fox and John Bunyan, for example. The religious background of the seventeenth century that pervaded the mental life of early modern Europe and America was replete with

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religious groups, sects, movements, evangelists, missionaries, outdoor revival meetings, prophecies of the end of the world, and much more.

In his “The Religious Background of Seventeenth-Century Philosophy” for the first volume of *The Cambridge History of Seventeenth-Century Philosophy*, Richard Popkin cautions his philosophical colleagues to not imagine that the Enlightenment period was one of secularism or merely formal religiousness. “The philosophy of the seventeenth century has often been seen as connected with a gradual march from religious orthodoxy and oppression toward pre-Enlightenment deism, agnosticism, atheism, and toleration. In reality, though, the world of seventeenth-century religious thought is much more complicated that this simple schema would suggest.”

For at the same time the Scientific Revolution and biblical critical revolutions are taking place, there is a revival of all sorts of enthusiastic, revivalist, end-of-the-world religious movements.

Popkin goes on to cite how many of these religious movements and their theological thinking influenced or dominated much in the public square, in government, and the seminaries and universities. Popkin points out that these “widespread religious movements ... which may now look strange and distant from philosophy ... were familiar to, and were taken seriously by, all the philosophers of the period.”

This is an important study; one which is needed to understand and appreciate the first readers’ reactions to Spinoza’s *TTP*, but let us resume the thread of our argument about Spinoza’s utilization of the Spirit with his reason.

It must be granted that Spinoza’s selective exegesis of many passages of scripture that refer to the Spirit as showing a cognitive or mental or even rational component is

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951 Ibid.
952 For more on this, see works on 17th century enthusiasm. Spinoza dealt specifically with enthusiastic attitudes in his *TTP*. Hobbes, Locke, and Leibniz also deal with this movement. Each of these philosophers focused on the errors and problems enthusiasm presents to the society at hand.
correct. There are passages in which the two terms have similar meanings. And Spinoza has done well to point this out not only as a contribution to biblical scholarship, but even more because he shows how often psychological experiences were described in the purely theological language of the ancient world. “In this same sense, whatever the Jews did not understand, being at the time ignorant of its natural causes, was referred to God ... So those passages of Scripture that make mention of the Spirit of God can now be readily understood and explained.”

But there is a problem. His exegesis about the Holy Spirit is so selective that it leaves out the many passages that clearly and distinctly demonstrate the Spirit as God Himself. The Second Council of Constantinople in 381 dealt with this very heresy and rightly concluded that there were many passages of scripture that portray the Holy Spirit as God. At any rate, Spinoza’s apparent twisting of the scriptures here was not received well by his contemporaries. This was particularly aggravating to the devout because Spinoza claimed to follow a science of scriptural interpretation that would for the first time get the truth of the meaning of Scripture. One of his chief interpretive principles to this end was that Scripture verses could not be taken out of context from other Scripture passages. And yet he himself took many passages out of context!

A completely contextualist reading of the scriptures on the Holy Spirit then shows that Spinoza’s interpretation of the Holy Spirit is clearly at variance with the Bible’s depiction of the Holy Spirit. To take only St. Paul’s and St. John’s writings on this subject, their references to the Spirit show an intricately worked out conception. As opposed to Spinoza’s mentalistic reductionism of the Spirit, Paul and John show that the Spirit is God and Jesus, and that He has performs multifarious functions. He leads men to Christ. He enlightens men so that they may know that Jesus is come in the flesh and is the Son of God.

953 Spinoza’s TTP, trans. Shirley, op. cited, 16-17.
He does the supernatural healings and miracles, and so on. At any rate, we bring this issue up here to give some further examples of the outrages many of his contemporaries felt in reaction to Spinoza *Theological- Political Treatise*.

Spinoza versus the New Testament on morality and reason

How then should a man live? How do we know what is right and what is wrong? What is moral and virtuous and what isn’t? How do we live ethically? According to the Bible, the answer to these questions is by obedience to God’s revealed laws. In general, Spinoza rails against all such supposed morality and virtue based on revelation throughout the *TTP*. He rails against Moses’s “right way of life, or true living” as “bondage”, especially in that Moses “further made terrifying threats if they should transgress these commandments.”954 But according to Spinoza’s *TTP*, moral behavior is that which follows one’s natural reason and not revelation. His *Ethics* argues the same: “To act absolutely according to virtue is nothing else in us than to act under the guidance of reason” (*Ethics* Book IV, Prop. XXIV).

According to orthodox versions of Jesus, “No one is good except God alone” (Lk.18:19). Only if you are in Him as branches are in a tree can one bear true moral fruit (Jn. 15). Only by being filled with His Spirit are the fruits of the Spirit possible (Rom. 8; Gal. 5). Moral living then, according to the New Testament, is not a matter of living according to natural reason. On the contrary, “men are by nature objects of wrath” (Eph. 2:3). Without the Spirit’s work of regeneration in man, even his reason is darkened and made depraved; so much so that such people degrade themselves in homosexuality (Rom. 1). Morality is not a matter of thinking or reasoning hard, but a matter of praying and trusting Christ to give the victory of the sinful flesh.

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This subject has been of immense importance because it has powerful implications for society and government. For instance, if one believes that reason and not the Spirit of Christ ought to be the foundation of beliefs and action, then one will urge all people to follow reason. Reason then has social and political implications. This is the “Politicus” part of Spinoza’s *Theologico-Politicus Tractate.* Indeed, “The TTP was a founding document of liberal democratic theory.” If reason is foundational to morality and is common to all humans and can be improved, then it is not only for the divinely elected few (with the majority predestined to irrationality). Nature gives us the ability to reason, so we can all reason. If we can all reason, then we can all be reasoned with (so long as one doesn’t believe in a Better and more Imperative Source for knowledge and behavior).

If the basis of our moral, social, and political lives is in reason, teaches Spinoza, and not some particular revelation or Church confession, then we have hope for a universal harmony and brotherhood (thus speaks the Enlightenment of Spinoza, Kant, and many others). With the Bible only the few are enlightened and know the truth. Everyone else is consigned to darkness, foolishness, lostness, and the devil. In Spinoza, all can be enlightened, not by confessing one’s sins, not by praying and fasting in dust and ashes, and not by losing one’s life.

For Spinoza, we can all be brothers not by and in the Body of Christ by the Spirit, but by nature and reason. Reason is the hope we all have in common. Reason is the hope we have that may lead to more agreement, more understanding, and more cooperation. In his

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955 I disagree, however, with the view espoused by some Spinoza scholars such as Steven B. Smith in his *Spinoza’s Book of Life: Freedom and Redemption in the Ethics* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004) in which he seeks to make the “case for the primacy of political philosophy or the ‘theologico-political problem’ in Spinoza around which all of his later philosophical reflections tended to gravitate” (xii-xiii). The TTP, as I think I have pointed out elsewhere in this chapter, is comprised of what looks like two parts: the first part being biblical criticism. This is by far the bulk of the treatise. It is 15 chapters or 172 pages compared with the “second part” of 5 chapters and only 57 pages. There are very little arguments made in the first part that suggests that the work aims at persuading readers to a political view. It is independent or autonomous enough to stand alone.

956 Ibid.
essay "The Power of Reason in Spinoza", Martin Lin delineates Spinoza’s concept of reason in contradistinction to the emotions or affects. Reason is, as Martin Lin interprets Spinoza as teaching, is “the moral foundation of society and political alliance.”

One of Spinoza’s arguments against the moral claims of the Bible made by believers is that they don’t live out what they claim. Spinoza points out that if believers actually do possess the “Light of the world” and Christ is in them, than how is it that the world doesn’t observe this Light by their behavior? Anyone who knows the history of the Church, or who has read the works of Luther, Calvin, and the major theologians of the Roman Catholic Counter-Reformation knows that no greater denunciations, hatred, and viciousness of language is possible. And not language alone – but by the sword, war, religious persecution, censorship, and so on. Many contemporary Christian apologists acknowledge this shameful vista, but then piously proclaim that the true Church has always been a spiritual minority and that this language and these actions in nowise stem from the New Testament. But Spinoza’s analysis of the various moral teachings and behavior of believers shows that this is not correct either. In fact, the very language used by the Reformers and Counter-Reformers is literally taken from the Bible and the language of Jesus and the apostles. I am reminded of a rejoinder that Spinoza wrote in response to a vicious letter by Albert Burgh, a former friend who converted to the Roman Catholic Church. Burgh sought to save Spinoza from his sinful, arrogant philosophical ways. Spinoza writes that he has learned that Burgh not only has become Catholic, "but that you are a very keen champion of it and have already learned to curse and rage petulantly against your opponents.”

Before we end this particular discussion, it should be noted that not all Christian theologians and philosophers interpret the New Testament’s teaching on ethics in this

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957 The Cambridge Companion to Spinoza’s Ethics, op. cited, 258.
958 Spinoza, TTP, op. cited, 4.
959 Spinoza, Correspondence, Wolf, op. cited. 350.
Pauline, Augustinian, Lutheran, Calvinistic, or Reformed way. Roman Catholic thinking, especially as stemming from the scholastics, which were strongly influenced by Aristotle, argued for a little more optimistic view of nature, human nature, and human reason. According to this theology, there are two kinds of virtues or moralities: a natural kind and a supernaturally infused kind. Ultimately, God alone is good, but God’s image in man enables man in his free will to live a naturally virtuous life. Christian theologian philosophers such as St. Thomas Aquinas sought a middle way, as it were, between a totally naturalistic and rationalistic approach (which has come to be called “integral Aristotelianism”) and a totally theological view (called “rejectionism”). For him grace and nature were not two completely different domains: “grace does not destroy nature, but brings it to fulfillment.” Interestingly, as we saw earlier in this study, this change caused quite a ruckus in the thirteenth century. So much so that it led to the famous condemnations of 1277 by the Bishop of Paris. I mention this here because the struggle between the integral Aristotelians (read “radical enlightenment”) and the rejectionists (read “counter-enlightenment”) looks very much like the struggle between Spinoza and his religious detractors. Spinoza being of the “integral Aristotelian” camp and many of his religious detractors being in the “rejectionist” camp and Aquinas’s middle way camp (“moderate enlightenment”).

Note how similar some of the propositions condemned in 1277 are to Spinoza’s philosophy:

That there is no more excellent way of life than the philosophical way.
That the highest good of which the human being is capable consists in the intellectual virtues.
That the philosophers alone are the wise men of the world.⁹⁶⁰

We can know, however, that many with which Spinoza had to do, both from the Rabbis in his youth and from the many Christians he came to know later (both Protestants

and Catholics)\textsuperscript{961}, did not appear to be moderate enlighteners such as various scholastics, Thomists, Cartesians, or Leibniz. We know this both from the biographers of Spinoza and by his own works such as the TTP. Over and over again in the TTP, his criticism is directed against the conservatives. Take only his remarks on this subject from the Preface:

Reason they call blind, because it cannot reveal a sure way to the vanities that they covet, and human wisdom they call vain, while the delusions of the imagination, dreams and other childish absurdities are taken to be the oracles of God.\textsuperscript{962}

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.\textsuperscript{963}

faith has become identical with credulity and biased dogma. But what dogma! – degrading rational man to beast, completely inhibiting man's free judgment and his capacity to distinguish true from false, and apparently devised with the set purpose of utterly extinguishing the light of reason. Piety and religion – O everlasting God – take the form of ridiculous mysteries, and men who utterly despise reason, who reject and turn away from the intellect as naturally corrupt – these are the men (and this is of all things the most iniquitous) who are believed to possess the divine light!\textsuperscript{964}

the more enthusiastic their admiration for the understanding of these mysteries, the more clearly they reveal that their attitude to Scripture is one of abject servility.... And this is further evident from the fact that most of them assume as a basic principle for the understanding of Scripture and for extracting its true meaning that it is throughout truthful and divine – a conclusion which ought to be the end result of study and strict examination.... When I pondered over these facts, that the light of reason is not only despised but is condemned by many as a source of impiety, ... that credulity is looked upon as faith ... I deliberately resolved to examine Scripture afresh, conscientiously and freely.\textsuperscript{965}

\textsuperscript{961} Some think that the anti-rationalism in Christianity comes mostly from Luther or from the Reformed. But this is not so. We see the same extreme anti-rationalism amongst Roman Catholics and Anglicans as well. See Spinoza's correspondence for many examples of this. For Roman Catholics, see for instance, Albert Burgh's letters to Spinoza. Both the great Arnauld and Steno praised Burgh.
\textsuperscript{962} TTP, op. citied, 1.
\textsuperscript{963} Ibid. 3.
\textsuperscript{964} Ibid. 4.
\textsuperscript{965} Ibid. 5.
Finally, he also decries all those, even philosophers, who would subject reason to the authority of Scripture or theology. He hopes that these will not read his book because he knows that they will only make trouble.966

For without advantage to themselves they would stand in the way of others for whom a more liberal approach to philosophical questions is prevented by this one obstacle, that they believe that reason must be the handmaiden of theology (TTP 8).

Some may charge this interpretation of Spinoza that the scriptures inhibit and contradict reason to be incorrect. For example, in the same Preface that I was quoting from above, Spinoza says, "Now I found nothing expressly taught in Scripture that was not in agreement with the intellect or that contradicted it."967  And more: "So I was completely convinced that Scripture does not in any way inhibit reason."968  I take it that Spinoza is not being completely honest here. I base this primarily on the fact that he contradicts these two sentences in most other places in his work – often implicitly, but in many places, explicitly as well.

Now "reason" for Spinoza in the TTP is the rejection of all the “superstitions” and imaginary beliefs of revelations, prophecies, visions, and so on. In the final analysis, Spinoza’s reason rejects the incarnation, the Eucharist, the devil, the need for an atoning blood sacrifice, etcetera. In sum then, for Spinoza (and St. Paul) the gospel is foolishness. For Spinoza, man needs to live according to reason (which judges all the theology of the Bible to be absurd); for St. Paul, man needs to live according to the Spirit so that one may see that what is absurd to reason is truth in God.

966 Edwin Curley hypothesizes that Spinoza might have stopped work on the Ethics to write the TTP as a kind of John the Baptist to prepare the way for the TTP. This might be so for some fellow philosophers, but it certainly can’t be true for most people. Spinoza was keenly aware, even while writing the TTP, that "others", the “masses”, the “common people” and all strongly religious people even if they be philosophers, would in no way learn from or approve of his book (TTP 7-8).
967 Ibid. 6.
968 Ibid.
Theologians and Christian philosophers through the centuries since the Church Fathers have added theological-philosophical arguments to amplify the biblical notion of reason. They interpret the Genesis narrative of man being created in the image and likeness of God as referring to human reason, that is, that which they believe distinguishes man from beast. Reason is then made to take on some God-like attributes, which is then further used to justify the use of philosophy as a handmaiden to theology. But note the premises: one has to first accept that man is made in the image and likeness of God, that man has a soul, and an immortal soul to boot. Though these thinkers sometimes talked as if they subjected all their premises to rational criticism, in reality they preserved them and then built on them. Consistent with his radical enlightenment philosophy though, Spinoza, following natural reason alone, finds all such theological explanations wanting by virtue of the fact that they stem from and rely on purported revelation.

Indeed, Spinoza's *TTP* in some regards seems like a new version of the Bible. But instead of its division of believers and unbelievers, of sheep and goats, wheat and weeds, light and darkness, good and evil, God and devil, spiritually enlightened and carnal slaves, Spinoza (like Charles Murray's *Bell Curve* which divides the world up between those with high IQ's and those with low IQ's) tends to divide up his cosmos between the rational and the irrational, the wise and the ignorant, the good who put reason above all things versus the fools, the deluded, the common people, the herd, and the unlearned who only follow desire and emotion.

One can and should wonder how much Spinoza's philosophy of reason and ethics helped him to live morally. Since he is so critical of the failure of those whose calling is to "live according to the Spirit", how consistent was he in "living in accordance with reason"? It is one thing to think fine thoughts or to enjoy contemplation of the love of God in one's study as a philosopher, and quite another in the marketplace, at home with family, or at
work among one’s equals and superiors. Yet, on this question, it is almost universally attested to by all Spinoza’s biographers, including ones that saw him as the enemy, that his behavior was admirable and above reproach.

Still, one can be puzzled by many passages in Spinoza’s writings and in his letters in which he does not seem equanimous at all; on the contrary, he seems elitist, is often polemical, and is downright mean-spirited at times. The *TTP*, for instance, has numerous (in my opinion) blatant distortions and is one-sidedness in his analysis of theologians, common people, the prophets, and much more. They are simply not fair or balanced analyses of his subject. Spinoza is on a mission. He too often evinces only a one-tracked mind in his conclusions of his enemies. Too often his praises of the prophets or various believers seem half-hearted, insincere, or smacks of irony. Spinoza can dish it out too. His response letter to Albert Burgh lays out his true feelings about the Roman Catholic Church, the Eucharist, and other points of doctrine; but his tone is far from the tone one would expect judging from the many paeans offered about his character or from the author of the oracular *Ethics*.

He sees nothing of good in “the relics of man’s ancient bondage.”969 He’s not looking for it. Of course, he’s no cultural anthropologist with a functionalist’s outlook for the value and the function of various “barbarous” practices. Nor of course is he a postmodern sociologist of knowledge or Kuhnian in the historiography of ideas.

Yet it’s not as if he is being dishonest either; for he does state in the Preface of the *TTP* that the purpose of his work and “most urgent task has been to indicate the main false assumptions that prevail regarding religion.”970 In this sense, his one-tracked negative

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969 *TTP*, op. cited, 3.
970 Ibid.
analysis of religion is justified. After all, a scholar cannot cover everything. Each work calls for a different thesis.971

It seems to me that some of the most fundamental features of Spinoza’s philosophy are motivated for very much the same reasons as the religious fools he so often despises. Spinoza wants pleasure, happiness, blessedness, and “true satisfaction of the mind” as much as the “common people” who “follow desire more than reason” and who are largely unconscious of their true selves.972 Some or much of the knowledge that Spinoza seeks is “infinitely” higher than what the common people strive for – chasing after pleasure in love, sex, entertainment, and the like. His attitude, it seems to me, sometimes smacks of a “my way is better than all others” spirit, like the religious people he decries. The best life for Spinoza is, well, his life.

Spinoza, like his “evil” religious counterparts, is a salvation seeker. He wants peace, tranquility and contentment intensely. He abandoned a career in business for it. His treatment of reason gives the impression at times that it is like unto Jehovah Himself. One certainly gets this feeling upon reading his early work *Treatise on the Correction of the Understanding*. Nothing seems to matter to him, not in comparison that is, with Reason. Indeed, as Yovel and other commentators have remarked, reason and rationalism for Spinoza seems like his God and Judaism substitute. Yet other Spinoza scholars deny that Spinoza’s philosophy (either in the *TTP* or in the *Ethics*) constitutes a narrow-minded,

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971 At this point, it might be a good idea to reiterate what I mentioned in the introduction to this work, that my treatment of religion is similarly one-tracked minded, and, accordingly in the final analysis, an incomplete depiction of Greek religion, Judaism, and Christianity. There are many positive things about the scriptures and Christianity, for instance. Many. But the primary purpose of this study is to present the struggle between philosophy and theology, especially with respect to delineating the claims and arguments of the precursors of the Radical Enlightenment.

972 *TTP*, op. cited, 1.
inhumane rationalism in the strong, scientistic secular humanism version which tends to slight the humanities.  

Like the author of Ecclesiastes, Spinoza says that experience in life has “taught me that all things which frequently take place in ordinary life are vain and futile.” So he “determined at last to inquire whether there might be anything which might be truly good and able to communicate its goodness, and by which the mind might be affected to the exclusion of all other things.”  

And why does he do this? What is he out for? “I determined, I say, to inquire whether I might discover and acquire the faculty of enjoying throughout eternity continual supreme happiness” That’s a tall order. Like the saints of old, at times he seemed to be “looking forward to the city with foundations, whose architect and builder is God” (Heb. 11:10). Spinoza goes on: “For I was looking for a fixed good.”  

More:  

For I saw myself in the midst of a very great peril and obliged to seek a remedy, however uncertain, with all my energy: like a sick man seized with a deadly disease, who sees death straight before him if he does not find some remedy, is forced to seek it, however uncertain, with all his remaining strength, for in that is all hope placed.

Such an attitude could fit in William James’s chapter “On the sick soul” in his The Varieties of Religious Experience. Yet Spinoza’s teaching that “the whole of happiness or unhappiness is dependent on this alone: on the quality of the object to which we are bound by love” seems right. But this is not far from the hopes of the summum bonum of Jewish mystics, of Jesus, of St. Paul, of Augustine, of Aquinas, of Dante, and so on. Again, as in the saints of old: “People who say such things show that they are looking for a country of their

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973 Both Richard Mason (The God of Spinoza) and Steven Smith (Spinoza’s Book of Life, 1999) deny that Spinoza is a rationalist in these strong contemporary senses.
974 Treatise on the Correction of the Understanding, op. cited, 227, my emphasis.
975 Ibid. my emphasis.
976 Ibid. 228.
977 Ibid. 229.
978 Ibid. 229.
own ... they [are] looking for a better country – a heavenly one” (Heb. 11:16). Spinoza wishes for and is committed to “the greatest good” which is

the knowledge of the union which the mind has with the whole of nature. This then is the end to which I am striving, namely, to acquire such a nature and to endeavor that many also should acquire it with me. It is then part of my happiness that many others should understand as I do, and that their understanding and desire should be entirely in harmony with my understanding and desire.979

It is true that this was written by a younger Spinoza, not too far from the synagogue which excommunicated him. And it is true that his successive works, especially the TTP and Ethics, show greater sophistication and maturity. But, even so, this spirit can still be sensed in the Ethics and some places in the TTP. Nor is this opinion unique. Some of the best Spinoza scholars have given similar assessments of Spinoza’s religiousness.980

979 Ibid. 230-231.
980 A great example of a scholar who takes this position is Yirmiyahu Yovel. See his Spinoza and Other Heretics: The Marrano of Reason (especially chapter 6, “Knowledge as Alternative Salvation”).
Chapter Sixteen
The TTP as a work of philosophy and science

"I see that you are not so much philosophizing as, if I may say so, theologizing; for you are writing down your thoughts about angels, prophecy, and miracles. But perhaps you are doing this in a philosophical manner."981

Introduction

The first months in which I studied the TTP I noticed that many of its arguments were not the usual fare of theologians, biblical commentators or even of biblical critics – certainly not in the 17th century. I noted over and over again that he's not just critiquing the Bible like a Bible commentator or theologian. In actuality, the TTP critiques the origin and nature of religion, superstition, miracles, anthropomorphizing, inspiration, history, the state, freedom, just government, methodology, imagination, knowledge, doubt, science, nature, reason, and much more besides. And much of this critiquing is philosophical. These observations clash with the conventional image of the TTP as Spinoza’s non-philosophical

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981 Letter from Henry Oldenburg to Spinoza in Sept. 1665 (Benedict Spinoza. The Correspondence of Spinoza, trans. A. Wolfe, op. cit., Letter XXIX, p. 204, my emphasis). Spinoza replied to Oldenburg’s letter saying that he is working on a new book, one on how to interpret the Scripture. He’s working on this, he explains, because the “prejudices of the theologians … prevent men from directing their mind to philosophy…[and also to argue for the] freedom of philosophizing” (Ibid. p. 206). We see from this that Spinoza’s aim here is philosophical, at least in the sense of clearing away the obstacles or prejudices that cause people to think low of philosophy. Oldenburg’s hunch was right: Spinoza was dealing with biblical and theological issues, but he was doing it not only as an expert textual biblical critic, but also “in a philosophical manner”, as this section will prove. I also import what this letter can tell us because it is startling how much work on Spinoza’s philosophy of Scripture only refers to the TTP - as if because the title mentions “Theologica” that this must be the work that will tell scholars everything needed to know Spinoza’s view on the Scriptures and that it is only about the Bible and theology. Wrong!
treatise on scripture. I began to see that a case could be made that the *TTP* is a work of philosophy and not only of biblical criticism. Needless to say, I felt some gratification when in the succeeding months I read other contemporary scholars who argue the same thing.

In his essay “The Textual History of Spinoza’s Ethics” for *The Cambridge Companion to Spinoza’s Ethics*, Piet Steenbakkers makes an aside that many contemporary philosophers do not yet fully appreciate. Besides Spinoza’s *Ethics*, Steenbakkers calls the *TTP* “his other masterpiece.”982 Spinoza scholar Edwin Curley entitles two of his essays on this very subject: “Notes on a Neglected Masterpiece (I): Spinoza and the Science of Hermeneutics”, and “Notes on a Neglected Masterpiece (II): Spinoza’s *Theological-Political Treatise* as Prolegomenon to the *Ethics.*” In both essays, he not only simply argues that the *TTP* is a “masterpiece” in biblical criticism, but argues that it is also a masterpiece as a work of philosophy and science - and, as such, needs to be known if one wishes to genuinely know Spinoza. As Stephen Nadler puts it, “if we do not give the *Theological-Political Treatise* the attention that it deserves, then we do not really know Spinoza.”983

Being a masterpiece in biblical criticism and being important to learn in order to understand Spinoza better is one thing, and being a masterpiece in “philosophy” and “science” is another. You will not find the *TTP* in most early modern philosophy anthologies or as mandatory reading in courses on Spinoza.984 In fact, the *TTP* is usually treated as if it were not philosophy. Because it says so much about the Bible, it looks suspiciously as if it’s not philosophy. And a philosopher must not be caught not doing philosophy! Yet, in the seventeenth century, doing biblical exegesis with philosophical aims in mind (and Spinoza’s *TTP* certainly has philosophical purposes in mind) was considered doing philosophy.

Hobbes also did philosophy in this way. Witness his great *Leviathan*, most of which refers

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983 Nadler’s forthcoming “*A Book Forged in Hell*: Spinoza’s Scandalous Treatise”, op. cited, 5.
984 See the Introduction to Nadler’s “*A Book Forged in Hell*” for some of his reasons why the *TTP* has been neglected.

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to scripture. If the *Leviathan* is considered philosophy, why shouldn’t the *TTP* be considered as philosophy just as much? One should also remember that the whole history of philosophy from the Church Fathers up to the early modern period never left the scriptures out of philosophy. Ultimately, it was always a fundamental concern. It had to be, for, after all, they believed it to be literally The Book in which Creator of heaven and earth communicated all that He wishes mankind to know. To *not* know and study this Book then is tantamount to stupidity or gross sinfulness.

In our chapter on Spinoza’s *Ethics* we learned that the *Ethics* was far more about biblical theological issues then is usually known. In this section I want to show that the *TTP* is far more a work of philosophy than is usually known. I wish to argue that the *TTP* is not only a work of biblical criticism, but also a work of philosophy. Even if I don’t persuade the reader that it is just as deserving of the appellation of “philosophy” as, say, Hobbes’s *Leviathan*, if I can at least heighten his or her awareness to the fact that the *TTP* is pervaded with philosophy, that will have achieved my goal.985 I will first present some arguments and samples from the *TTP* that shows very clearly that philosophy is being done, and then, after this, I enlist the help of other scholars who seem to hold this same this point of view.

The *TTP* as a work of philosophy: some general arguments and the samples from the TTP

Some general arguments

The first thing that we should point out in order to make some headway on the question of the *TTP* as philosophy, is to try to get a little clearer, if we can, on what is meant by

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985 As a corollary to this, I wish to add to the growing call from recent Spinoza scholarship to add at least some study of the *TTP* with the *Ethics* in early modern and Spinoza philosophy courses – especially because of its central role in the Radical Enlightenment.
“philosophy” - particularly for Spinoza and for many of his contemporaries. The term that Spinoza uses that is translated as “philosophy” is “philosophia.” In the “Note on the text and translation” of the TTP commissioned by Cambridge University Texts in the History of Philosophy, we are told that “it is invariably difficult or impossible adequately to translate Spinoza’s term philosophia as “philosophy” as it is usually understood, because Spinoza means by it the whole of science together with all other soundly based knowledge.”

This tells us then that we’re not dealing with a narrow conception of philosophy (such as, say, the conception of philosophy that the logical empiricists circumscribed). We get a further hint or confirmation of this from Spinoza’s very subtitle: “Containing Various Disquisitions, By means of which it is shown not only that Freedom of Philosophising can be allowed in Preserving Piety and the Peace of the Republic: but also that it is not possible for such Freedom to be upheld except when accompanied by the Peace of the Republic and Piety Themselves.”

Spinoza uses the term “disquisitions” (a formal discourse or treatise in which a subject is examined and discussed; dissertation) here. Note too, the centrality that the subject of the freedom to philosophize is given in the very subtitle of the book. We know from this subtitle that philosophy is going to play a central role in this work.

Another reason why the TTP should be understood as philosophy is because from the very beginning of the book to the end, reason and philosophy (as against revelation and theologizing) are what is exalted. Throughout the TTP, Spinoza explicitly and repeatedly makes statements arguing for the superiority of reason and philosophy over the claims of revelation and theology. As opposed to Oldenburg’s oafish comment to Spinoza that it seemed to him that Spinoza was “theologizing”, in truth, Spinoza is really de-theologizing. In actuality, Spinoza is philosophizing against all theology. His arguments against the truth

of scripture are not only historical or biblical critical, but based on his philosophy.
Theological dogmas, which are the “the prejudices of the theologians” are not only subjected
to the bar of reason and philosophy, but also ultimately indicted and executed by the bar of
reason and philosophy, too! Though a couple times in the *TTP* Spinoza sounds like
Descartes when he says that he wants to keep theology separate from philosophy; in truth,
he really does not. He really does the opposite. On the other hand, one can argue
(humorously) that he *does* keep theology separate from philosophy - that is, by destroying
theology!

The *TTP* then is not a commentary on the Bible, such as in the tradition of all
commentaries on the Bible up until then. It is rather a philosophical commentary arguing
against a plethora of errors, illusions, and immoralities in the Bible which he makes
primarily based on his metaphysics, philosophy of mind, philosophy of history, ethics, logic,
and epistemology. If the *TTP* is a commentary on the Bible, it is one in the sense of other
philosophical commentaries on various philosophical subjects. Just as works on the
philosophy of law are philosophical commentaries on the law, and just as works on political
philosophy or philosophy of government are philosophical commentaries on government
(which is what the last five chapters of the *TTP* are about), so also is this work on the
philosophy of religion a philosophical commentary on (or rather against) religion. If
Hobbes’ *Leviathan* is not considered a Bible Commentary or only biblical criticism, why
should the *TTP* be considered only or mostly biblical criticism?

Long before the *Ethics* was completed and published, Spinoza made his reasons
clear for why he was going to write his philosophical views about the scriptures. He told
Oldenburg that he had to write against the prejudices of the theologians to make straight
the way of philosophy. His *Ethics* has this same purpose. In the Appendix to Part I, Spinoza
says pretty much the same thing as he told Oldenburg: “whenever the opportunity arose I
have striven to remove prejudices ... there still remain a considerable number of prejudices ... I have thought it proper at this point to bring these prejudices before the bar of reason.”

This bringing of “prejudices before the bar of reason,” as we have just mentioned, is the bringing of (theoretically and morally) questionable theological claims to be subjected to the judgment of philosophy. Reason and philosophy are on the judgment seat. Philosophy will separate the wheat from the chaff, the truth from the false, the illusory from the real, the madness from the sound. Historically though, it has been the other way around: philosophy has been subjected, subdued or indicted and imprisoned according to the Judgment Seat of revelation and theology. Now things are different. Spinoza turns all this completely around. No longer will putative revelation or the Bible be the judge of all things. Now human reason and human philosophy will be the judge of all things – including God Himself and all his alleged works.

Spinoza’s letter to Oldenburg also shows that a large part of his purpose of writing the *TTP* was philosophical. He states that the “prejudices of the theologians ... are the main obstacles which prevent men from giving their minds to philosophy.” Not only that, but because philosophy and the freedom of philosophy was being threatened by the preachers, Spinoza felt that his *TTP* had to also lay down arguments to defend the “freedom to philosophize and to say what we think.” As stated, even in this limited sense, we see that Spinoza’s purposes in writing the *TTP* is explicitly philosophical. Piet Steenbakkers affirms this philosophical purpose in that Spinoza “wants the book to play a part in current debates on religion, philosophy, and politics.”

As we have already mentioned, we also know that the *TTP* should be considered as a work of philosophy from the arguments Spinoza makes to separate the study of theology from philosophy. He says this in many places in the *TTP* (and in his *Correspondence*),

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987 From Piet Steenbakker’s “The text of Spinoza’s *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus*”, op. cited, p. 30.
especially, for instance, in chapters 7 and 15. This stated methodology is seemingly in the
tradition of Descartes, but in reality Spinoza (to my mind) is either purposely using
misleading language here (e.g. he is insincere and lying) or he consistently violates his claim
to keep the two separate (for he obviously and in many places explicitly subordinates
scripture to philosophy). The reader also ought to know that this is in the tradition (if I
might call it thus) of some Cartesian and Cartesian-like works on the interpretation of
scripture. Four years before the publication of the *TTP*, Spinoza's good friend Ludewijk
Meyer for instance wrote *Philosophia S. Scripturae Interpres*, which argued that philosophy
needs to be the chief interpreter of Scripture. What Jonathan Israel says about Spinoza's
inner circle is true: "Meyer, like Spinoza, Van den Enden, and the brothers Koerbagh,
positively gloried in the power of philosophy and science to transform the world." I take
it that Spinoza was far more influenced by Meyer and this work then people generally know.
Indeed, I speculate that if Spinoza were to tell the whole story of what got him to writing his
thinking about scripture, he would have given an account of how interested and influenced
he was by Meyer's project and the resulting uproar Meyer's book caused. Seeing this uproar
could only have shown Spinoza just how serious and important a subject this was.

One of the basic theses in Meyer's book is the same as that stated in Spinoza's *TTP,*
especially in the Preface and chapter 7 "Of the Interpretation of Scripture." And this thesis
is that because Scripture is often obscure and doubtful in meaning and because theologians'
explanations of Scripture have obviously failed judging from all the varying interpretations
and bitter disputes it has received, the answer then is to clear up all these obscurities by the

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988 J. Israel's *Radical Enlightenment*, op. cited, p. 209, agrees. "Rather [then upholding the position
that theology and philosophy are really two separate and respectable domains] he totally subverts
theology's autonomy, eliminating its role in teaching men truth and the path to salvation...In other
words, true theology is philosophy."

989 J. Israel's *Radical Enlightenment*, op. cited, 199.
light of philosophy. Meyer and Spinoza are also in philosophical accord to exclude the Holy Spirit as a helper, guide, and teacher in interpreting Scripture. Indeed, Meyers chides even the far less orthodox Collegiants and Socinians "for their unwillingness to interpret Scripture wholly in accordance with 'reason'" instead of "invoking the Holy Ghost to assist and enlighten them." As a result, "they too languish in confusion and theological strife of their own making." What they need to do, therefore, is to "follow him in making philosophy the sole and 'infallible measure' of Scripture", for Meyer "adamantly denies there is any divine inspiration, or 'inner light', distinct from the 'natural light of reason', to aid man in this quest." This position of course was one of the chief causes of the uproar against this 'godless' book.

However, Spinoza's application of the light of philosophy diverges from Meyer's on some key points. In fact, it is thought that their differences led "Spinoza into an undeclared debate with his ally [Meyer], in the Tractatus Theologico-Politicus, without anywhere mentioning him by name." For Spinoza, the Bible does not reveal philosophic truth, but for Meyer the Bible "has an inner core of meaning approximating to philosophical truth." Spinoza used philosophical arguments to fight for the separation (and rejection) of theology from philosophy.

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990 Ibid. 200-201.
991 Ibid. 201. A huge amount of literature attacking the enthronement of philosophy and the displacement of the Holy Spirit pervaded Europe in response to Meyer's and Spinoza's work on philosophy (or science) as the best and only true way to rightly understand Scripture. One example here may serve as an exact representation of all the tens of thousands of books, essays, lectures, and sermons that were given throughout Europe on this point. Israel tells relates that the Collegiant Petrus Serrarius railed "against the bid to enthrone philosophy in place of divine inspiration and the Holy Ghost." He argued that philosophy was too limited. Moreover, the Cartesian mechanistic theory of the world as the key to knowing the truth of the world was also false. "Whatever the Philosophia claims, the true meaning of Scripture, he insists, is grasped only through the 'inner light' and the guidance of the Holy Ghost. To mistake philosophy for divine wisdom, 'natural light for the divine light, what is innate in man for what is received from God', he urges, is idolatry; for whoever takes that path prefers philosophy to Christ." And that is to "bow before the new Golden Calf of reason" rather than "the Lamb of God" (205).
992 Ibid. 201-202.
Now that we’ve laid out some preliminary general arguments for considering the 
*TTP* as a work of philosophy, let us give some examples of this claim from the *TTP* itself.

Rather than exhaustively going through the whole work in chronological order pointing out each and every element of philosophy in it, we will instead pick various samples from only some of the chapters to show the reader that the *TTP* is not just a work of biblical criticism, but also one of philosophy.

Some samples

*The Preface lays out his general philosophy of religion*

Is it really true that the *TTP* is a work of philosophy? Well, as Wittgenstein used to say: “Look and see.” Let us begin then where Spinoza begins, in the Preface or introduction to his book. A study of this Preface reveals that it lays out not only some of the principles of biblical interpretation that he will follow (which are based on his philosophy of history and hermeneutics), but at the same time in more than equal amount, a general philosophy of religion. And not only does the Preface present his philosophy of religion, it also lays out the foundation of all his philosophy, that is, that the truths of reason are the only genuine authority to which human beings should rely – as against all other purported authorities. Thus he argues with vehemence against the scholastic and theological demand “that reason must be the handmaiden of theology.”

The Preface also lays out his philosophical position on individual and collective freedom.

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Philosophizing about prophecy

The discussion in the first chapter on prophecy is primarily epistemological. It discusses what should count as sure knowledge. It makes distinctions between natural knowledge and theological knowledge.\(^994\) And he examines them carefully and philosophically. He uses expressions such as “clearly and distinctly” (which, we know, stem from Descartes) indicating that he recognizes in it an important epistemological principle.\(^995\) He expostulates about causes – intermediate, mediate, and so on.\(^996\) He refers to philosophers (Maimonides) and philosophies (Aristotelianism).\(^997\) If the \textit{TTP} were only a book on the Bible than why is there so much discussion and analysis on (amongst many other things) “the imaginative faculty”?\(^998\)

When someone writes that because the Jews were “ignorant of natural causes” and that they referred anomalous natural phenomena to supernatural miracles, we’re not doing \textit{biblical} commentary any more. We’re doing philosophical commentary on the Bible. Spinoza is explaining biblical claims from the perspective of philosophy: “So it is folly to have recourse to the power of God when we do not know the natural causes of some phenomenon.”\(^999\)

So then, how do we explain revelation? Spinoza says, “I might, indeed, have followed others in saying that it happened through the power of God, but this would be mere quibbling [Silverthorne and Israel translate this clause thusly: “but then I would be saying nothing meaningful” – shades of Hobbes].\(^1000\) This is also the message repeated many times in the \textit{Ethics} (see, for instance, Appendix I).

\(^{994}\) Ibid. 9.
\(^{995}\) Ibid. 10.
\(^{996}\) Ibid. 10.
\(^{997}\) Ibid. 13.
\(^{998}\) Ibid. 14.
\(^{999}\) Ibid. 19-20.
\(^{1000}\) Ibid. 19.
The prophets felt that they were receiving revelations from God only because they were ignorant of the natural imaginative faculty: "For many more ideas can be constructed from words and images than merely from the principles and axioms on which our entire natural knowledge is based."\(^\text{1001}\) It is the imaginative faculty that expresses itself in the perceptual and corporeal teachings of parables and allegories of the prophets. Once this is understood, "We shall no longer wonder why Scripture, or the prophets, speak so strangely or obscurely ... and again why God was seen by Micaiah as seated, by Daniel as an old man clothed in white garments, by Ezekiel as fire" and so on; for "All this is in full agreement with the common imagination of God and Spirits."\(^\text{1002}\) These things can’t be gained “through assured rational principles” or “scientific knowledge.” And they cannot be explained “through [their] first causes.”\(^\text{1003}\)

Spinoza’s Philosophy in Chapter 2 “Of the Prophets”:

We learn what Spinoza honors from the get-go in this chapter as well. He's mostly interested in preserving the integrity of “the province of intellect” in hope of fitting more people "for purely intellectual activity."\(^\text{1004}\) You can’t make his philosophy clearer: “In response to the demands of our age, of philosophy, and of truth itself, I have resolved to demonstrate this point at some length, disregarding the rantings of superstition, the bitter enemy of those who are devoted to true knowledge and true morality.”\(^\text{1005}\)

One of the purposes of this chapter, like the last one, is epistemological, that is, to “first discuss the question of the certainty of the prophets.”\(^\text{1006}\) And we find out Spinoza’s

\(^{1001}\) Ibid. 20.
\(^{1002}\) Ibid. 20.
\(^{1003}\) Ibid.
\(^{1004}\) Ibid. 21.
\(^{1005}\) Ibid.
\(^{1006}\) Ibid.
answer to this soon enough: “Imagination by itself, unlike every clear and distinct idea, does
not of its own nature carry certainty with it.”1007 In other words, in Spinoza’s philosophy of
religion, prophecy is of the imagination, and the imagination is a faculty by which we can by
no means be certain (but, really, in Spinoza’s final analysis, is just plain hocus-pocus and
false).

If you don’t identify such arguments as philosophy here, then see his second
scholium in Part II, Proposition 40 of his Ethics, for only one example of the same arguments
in Spinoza’s recognized philosophical work. Here, too, in the same way, Spinoza deals with
the epistemological shortcomings and failures of imagination in relation to God (and all
theological claims). The TTP adverts to this (or is it the Ethics that adverts to the TTP’s?)
philosophical doctrine over and over again. This is philosophy, not biblical exegesis. And
just like most philosophers, as opposed to orthodox theological works on scripture, he
exalts reasoning: In order to attain the certainty of truth and knowledge that we need, we
attain it by something superior to the faculty of imagination. We attain it, “namely,
[through] reasoning.”1008

He continues his epistemological investigation of the problem of certainty with
respect to prophecy and signs. They are certainly not “a mathematical certainty – that is,
the certainty that necessarily derives from the apprehension of what is apprehended or
seen.”1009 Because of epistemic facts such as this, prophets such as Hananiah “ought to
have doubted his prophecy.”1010

As a philosopher, Spinoza finds a pattern in so called revelations and prophecies.
And this pattern bespeaks the lie behind claims of revelation and prophecy. Spinoza notes
that prophets prophesy according to their temperament. To take only one example: If one is

1007 Ibid. 21.
1008 Ibid. 22.
1009 Ibid. 23.
1010 Ibid.
“of a cheerful disposition, then victories, peace and other joyful events were revealed to him; for it is on things of this kind that the imagination of such people dwells.”\textsuperscript{1011} And the list goes on and on. “The same applies to revelation.” Curious, isn’t it, that prophets brought up in the country have visions “of oxen and cows and the like”, while others, say whose profession is something like a courtier, see royal thrones and other such employment items?\textsuperscript{1012}

The scriptures in themselves don’t spell this principle out. It’s “not biblical”, as they say. No, this pattern was discovered by a scientific or philosophical mind. Believing “hired attorney” biblical commentators don’t find or think or even look for such things. What is wonderful and exciting about this is that Spinoza the philosopher is able to do philosophy on the very source of the claims of religion.

We do not need to multiply examples of this phenomenon, I hope. As Spinoza aptly puts it, “There is no need to deal with this subject in greater detail.”\textsuperscript{1013}

Spinoza takes up other matters as well that deal directly with science and philosophy. For instance, he takes up the question of Joshua and the biblical attestation of an immobile earth.\textsuperscript{1014} First, he takes on all biblical commentators who hold that all the prophets (e.g. the scriptures) can’t err. Secondly, he takes these commentators to task because when they are confronted with facts that contradict their beloved scriptures, instead of humbly and honestly accepting the truth, “they prefer to declare that they do not understand those passages, or alternatively they strive to twist the words of Scripture to mean what they plainly do not mean. If either of these options is permissible, we can bid Scripture farewell”\textsuperscript{1015}

\textsuperscript{1011} Ibid. 23.  
\textsuperscript{1012} Ibid. 24.  
\textsuperscript{1013} Ibid. 26.  
\textsuperscript{1014} Ibid. 26-27.  
\textsuperscript{1015} Ibid. 26.
Spinoza is arguing that the scriptures that say that the earth is immobile and that the sun moves are absolutely clear. The scriptures really teach this. But since Copernicus’ theory (which argues for a stationary sun and moving earth), these scriptures are now shown to be false. Instead of admitting this, believing scholars hide behind the subterfuge of claiming that such passages are actually obscure and therefore can be given alternative explanations. To which Spinoza powerfully replies: “If that which is absolutely clear can be accounted obscure and incomprehensible or else interpreted at will, it will be vain for us to try to prove anything from Scripture.”

Sprinkled throughout his biblical analyses, Spinoza can’t help but to insert a philosophical reminder. For example, even talking about the greatest Jewish prophet, Moses, Spinoza mentions that Moses could not have taught his people “anything more than a moral code – not, indeed, as a philosopher might inculcate the morality that is engendered by freedom of spirit.” Spinoza is ever on the look out to preach his philosophic message of freedom of thought and speech.

Spinoza criticizes even Solomon for behaving “in a way unworthy of a philosopher”, because, for Spinoza, philosophers and philosophy are greater than prophets and revelation. Philosophy trumps the God of the Bible. Active natural reasoning trumps imaginative and emotional imagery. The prophets fail as philosophers, for they hold “conflicting beliefs.” “Therefore knowledge of science ... should by no means be expected of them.” They are even ignorant of matters that “concern philosophical speculation.”

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1016 This is a good example of how “full-proof-success-systems” work, as I mentioned elsewhere in this study. No matter what is said to refute their belief, they will always come up with something to save the appearances. And this, in essence, shows their non-scientific attitude (according to Karl Popper), for, from their perspective, their claims are irrefutable and thus untestable.
1017 Ibid.
1018 Ibid. 31.
1019 Ibid. 32-33.
Spinoza points out that the scriptures often imply that because human beings are made in the image and likeness of God that they then have something like an absolute free will. But the philosopher and the philosophy of the *TTP* deny this. And, of course, so does the philosopher and philosophy of the *Ethics*.

Spinoza ends this chapter putting all his cards on the table: “the points we have made concerning prophets and prophecy” in this chapter are “relevant to my purpose”, which is “the differentiation of philosophy from theology” (which, as I interpret Spinoza, means the discrediting of theology by means of philosophy).

*The philosophy of Chapter 3.*

Spinoza opens up Chapter 3 shooting. Jewish and Christian biblical particularism and exclusivism are shot down as childish, spiteful, and malicious according to his universalist philosophical argumentation.

Everyone’s true happiness and blessedness consists solely in the enjoyment of good, not in priding himself that he alone is enjoying that good to the exclusion of others. He who counts himself more blessed because he alone enjoys wellbeing not shared by others, or because he is more blessed and fortunate than others, knows not what is true happiness and blessedness, and the joy he derives therefrom, if it be not mere childishness, has its only source in spite and malice. For example, a man’s true happiness and blessedness consists solely in wisdom and knowledge of truth, and not in that he is wiser than others, or that others are without knowledge ... So he who rejoices for this reason rejoices at another misfortune, and is therefore spiteful and malicious, knowing neither true wisdom nor the peace of the true life.

Some readers may not recognize what he’s up to here, but every biblically knowledgeable Jew and Christian will. Right from the outset, Spinoza stakes his claim that the Jews (and the Christians) with all the many purported promises of the Creator to them at the exclusion of all other peoples are simply not true. Spinoza is going to try to support

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1020 Ibid. 33.
1021 Ibid. 24.
his philosophical case on scriptural and not just philosophical argumentation because he knows that arguing outside scripture and only based on philosophy won’t do the job.

I think that his argument from scripture fails and that most Jewish and Christian teachers will not be persuaded. Is he really trying to argue from the scriptures that the Jews (and by implication, Christians) are not specially blessed of God in the particularistic and exclusivistic way that Scripture portrays? If he’s going to keep within his stated hermeneutical range of only arguing the meaning of scripture from scripture, we think he fails because the scriptures clearly teach that the Jews (and Christians) are specially chosen and blessed of God. We think that Spinoza came to his universalist beliefs through philosophy and not through an honest and humble study of scripture according to more “scientific” principles, as he claims. We therefore think that either Spinoza is arbitrarily forcing his enlightened philosophical universalism on to the text of Scripture because he believes that this is the better interpretation of Scripture. Or, much more likely, he knows the truth on this matter, but has decided to try to get his message a better hearing by “becoming a Jew, to win the Jews”, as St. Paul would put it (1 Cor. 9:20).

We know that Spinoza’s universalism stems from his philosophy because his Ethics reveals it in no uncertain terms: “The highest good of those who pursue virtue is common to all, and all can equally enjoy it” (Pr.36.IV). For Spinoza, “to know God” is “a good that is common to all men and can be possessed equally by all men” (Pr. 36.Proof.IV). He will have no truck with the clear and certain biblical teaching that some are chosen unto glory and others unto destruction. He will have no truck with God opening the eyes of some and darkening the minds of others. Once again, it is upon the rock of reason that Spinoza builds his church in opposition to the religious gates of hell.

Sounding like Emmanuel Kant, Spinoza enunciates the philosophy of the Enlightenment: “In so far as men live by the guidance of reason, they are most useful to man
(Cor.1, Pr.35, IV) and so (Pr.19, IV) by the guidance of reason we shall necessarily endeavor to bring it about that men should live by the guidance of reason” (Pr.37. Proof. IV). No longer should humans live by the guidance of so-called revelation, for, as Spinoza has shown, “revelation” is in actuality imperfect imaginary capriciousness. And this has been one of the chief causes of all the confessionalism, divisions, religious hatred and bigotry.

Spinoza apparently excuses, justifies, or rationalizes God (Scripture) when He talks as if the Jews are special because of God “having regard to the immaturity of their understanding.” Spinoza goes on to show, once again, how his biblical exposition is really being led by the nose by means of his philosophy. In clear and certain terms, right out of the Ethics, he states:

I wish to explain briefly what I shall hereafter mean by God’s direction, by God’s help, external and internal, by God’s calling and, finally, by fortune. By God’s direction I mean the fixed and immutable order of Nature, or chain of natural events; for I have said above, and have already shown elsewhere, that the universal laws of Nature according to which all things happen and are determined are nothing but God’s eternal decrees, which always involve eternal truth and necessity. So it is the same thing whether we say that all things happen according to Nature’s laws or that they are regulated by God’s decree and direction ... Therefore whatever human nature can effect solely by its own power to preserve its own being can rightly be called God’s internal help and whatever falls to a man’s advantage from the power of external causes can rightly be called God’s external help.

Thus Spinoza twists scripture to fit his philosophical template. Many passages from his Ethics can be cited to show that Spinoza’s TTP philosophy is part and parcel of his Ethics’ philosophy (and vice versa). We can quote Proposition 29 from Part I: “Nothing in nature is contingent, but all things are from the necessity of the divine nature determined to exist and to act in a definite way.” Here we see God denuded of all personal (and human) attributes.

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1022 Ibid. 36.
1023 These expressions (“God’s direction, by God’s help, external and internal, by God’s calling”) are biblical beliefs. At bottom, on many points, Spinoza’s philosophy as enunciated in his TTP and his Ethics is directed against biblical beliefs and not just pure philosophical issues. To think of the Ethics, then, as only a work of philosophy speaking on only philosophical issues is an error - as is thinking that the TTP is only a work of biblical criticism (and not also of philosophy).
1024 Ibid.
The God of the Bible has given way to the Nature of Spinoza. We also see in this passage Spinoza's view that in reality it is not God or the Holy Spirit that internally helps man "for it is God who works in you to will and to act according to his good purpose" (Phil. 2:13); rather it is "solely by [human nature's] own power." God is dead. Nature is all in all (cf. 1 Cor. 15:28).

In his *Ethics* Spinoza does not doubt "that many will ridicule his view as absurd and will not give their minds to its examination, and for this reason alone, that they are in the habit of attributing to God another kind of freedom very different from that which we (Def.7) have assigned to him; that is, an absolute will" (Pr.33, Schol.2).

Once we understand his philosophy, says Spinoza, then we can "see why it is that the Hebrew nations *was said* to have been chosen by God before all others." And once we understand that we need "To know things [only] through their primary [and not imaginary] causes", then we are on our way to being able to set up a better society. Enter Spinoza's political philosophizing.

Based on his philosophizing *in the TTP! [and not from the Ethics]*, Spinoza has slowly and carefully set the stage for the second half of his *TTP* philosophy, which is the laying out of his philosophical positions on freedom, common reason, and sovereign natural right. In a footnote to this passage in chapter 3 of the *TTP*, Shirley refers the reader to *Ethics*, 4.37, especially Scholium 2, which describes much of Spinoza's limited political philosophy in the *Ethics*. But it might be the case that Spinoza's political *philosophy* was laid out in the *TTP* *before* he completed or published his more geometrical demonstration of it in the *Ethics*. Once again, therefore, I want to press the case that Spinoza's *TTP* does not get the philosophical credit due it. Seven years before the *Ethics* was published, much of Spinoza's philosophy was presented – *in the TTP*.

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1025 Ibid. 37, my emphasis.
There’s so much in this chapter that is pertinent to philosophy; but because of our limits of space in this dissertation, we must pass over these and many more in the chapters to come in hopes of accomplishing our purpose enough through a few more samples.

Chapter 4 of the TTP:

At the end of the first paragraph of the beginning of Chapter 4 “Of the Divine Law”, Spinoza enunciates one the key philosophical planks in his Ethics and philosophical platform: “all things are determined by the universal laws of Nature to exist and to act in a definite and determinate way.”1026

We need to move on. Let us skip chapter 5 and the obviously philosophical chapter 6 (on miracles) to make quicker headway. Then after pointing out only one pertinent point in chapter 7, we’ll skip over chapters 8 to 14. Chapters 8 to 10 are mostly of a strictly biblical critical nature (though behind the scenes, as always, there is the Spinozist philosophical backdrop). There is a lot of important philosophical (and biblical critical) material in chapter 11 (on the New Testament and Christ), chapter 12 (on the distinction between Scripture and the word of God), and in chapter 13 (concerning the nature of God), but we must summarize and come to an end. Consequently, we will also skip the philosophically rich chapter 14 (on the analysis of faith) and then, after treating a little of chapter 15, neglect all the last five chapters on Spinoza’s philosophy of government.

1026 Ibid. 48.
Spinoza’s philosophy of hermeneutics in Chapter 7:

In chapter 7 “Of the Interpretation of Scriptures,” Spinoza lays down the only true way to know the correct interpretation of Scripture. This “true method of Scriptural interpretation” is by studying it in the same way that scientists do nature, that is, according to Spinoza, historically.

We know Spinoza’s philosophical attitude toward Scripture and how to go about interpreting it not only from the TTP or his chapter “Of the Interpretation of Scripture.” We know it also from his correspondence. For instance, in an important letter to William de Blyenberg in 1665, Spinoza tells Blyenberg their correspondence can’t go anywhere because each of them proceed from entirely different and clashing first principles. Blyenberg is committed to submitting all things under the authority of scripture and Spinoza is committed to submitting all things under the authority of reason and science. And never the twain shall meet.

The philosophy in Chapter 15

The title of Chapter 15 is “Where it is shown that theology is not subordinate to reason nor reason to theology, and why it is we are persuaded of Holy Scripture.” Shirley interprets the second clause as, “The reason why we are convinced of the authority of Holy Scripture.”

What? Theology “is not subordinate to reason”? And “why it is that we are persuaded of Holy Scripture” or “convinced of the authority of Holy Scripture”? This sounds

1027 A. Wolf, Edwin Curley, and Stephen Nadler all treat Blienenbergh as if he were a complete nincompoop. All three call him tedious, a bore, and the like. Yet he was the author of several works, not only against the TTP, but also the Ethics, and his letters show, if not a mastery of Spinoza’s Principles of Cartesian Philosophy, they do show a mind that has read and thought long and hard on various theological and philosophical works. To my mind, Blienenbergh does not deserve the excess slights on his I.Q. given to him, even if he is of the Counter-Enlightenment party.

like a title by a conservative believer and not the anti-Christ Spinoza, doesn’t it? But then, as the reception of Spinoza’s works among the devout prove, they saw through all such superficial shows of piety as a clear sign of the devil who masquerades as an angel of light. Thus in all the “refutations” of Spinoza’s works, they pull out the armory of scripture verses to protect the faithful: “Watch out for false prophets. They come to you in sheep’s clothing” (Mt. 7:15), Jesus taught. St. Paul makes it even clearer and more specific:

I am afraid that just as Eve was deceived by the serpent’s cunning, your minds may somehow be led astray from your sincere and pure devotion to Christ. For is someone comes to you and preaches a Jesus other than the Jesus we preached ... or a different gospel from the one you accepted, you put up with it easy enough...For such men are false apostles, deceitful workmen, masquerading as apostles of Christ. And no wonder, for Satan himself masquerades as an angel of light. It is not surprising, then, if his servants masquerade as servants of righteousness. Their end will be what their actions deserve (2 Cor. 11:13-15).

Let us state what most devout believers argue for and cherish: All things should be subordinate to God and Christ. And this entails puny human reason. For most theologians, the things of God (miracles, the Trinity, the incarnation, and so on) are all tenets that must be held by faith (ex. “By faith we understand that the universe was formed at God’s command, so that what is seen was not made out of what was visible” (Heb.11:3); for “As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts” (Isa. 55:9). Therefore, the conclusion of the theology versus human reason debate for most believers is this: of course reason must be ultimately subordinate to theology. From Jesus to St. Paul to St. Augustine to Luther, Calvin, Thomas a Kempis, Pascal, Steno (and the list goes on and on), the attitude of created things must be that of surrender, faith, and obedience. Though perhaps overstated, the saying “Ours is not to reason why; ours is but to do and die” is not too far from the mark according to the devout. Much of Spinoza’s TTP is devoted to attacking this position.
Conclusion

As our brief summary and samples from the TTP show, there is much in the TTP that is philosophical (just as in our earlier chapter we saw that there is much in the Ethics that deals with biblical theological issues). Because of this similarity in philosophical mission, we can make a few observations in conclusion. First, each book shouldn’t be seen as entirely different books, for both “do philosophy” and theology. Second, both show Spinoza’s heart, his passion, and his mission to wean human beings away from the teat of ancient revelation unto the maturity of independent and disciplined reasoning and science. We should have also learned from this exposition that Spinoza’s philosophy and “views regarding scripture” were largely formulated from early on. If this is so, then they shouldn’t be seen as completely new based on chronological time – that is, as if the Ethics is a more mature work than the TTP.

Scholars who refer to and treat the TTP as philosophy

Stephen Nadler says that the TTP is a great work of philosophy

Stephen Nadler argues that, “Without a doubt, the Theological-Political Treatise is one of the most important and influential books in the history of philosophy, in religious and political thought, and even in Bible studies. More than any other work, it laid the foundation for modern critical and historical approaches to the Bible.” Moreover, Spinoza’s Theological-Political Treatise is “Arguably the most important – and certainly the most scandalous and vilified – work of philosophy of the seventeenth century.” In both passages,

\[1029\] Upcoming “A Book forged in Hell”, op. cited, 326.
Nadler categorizes the *TTP* as philosophy. In Jonathan Israel’s Introduction to his (and Michael Silverthorne’s) 2007 *Benedict De Spinoza: Theological-Political Treatise*, Israel also identifies the *TTP* as “one of the most profoundly influential philosophical texts in the history of western thought.”

Yitzhak Melamed: the *TTP* elaborates some of the *Ethics’* metaphysics and presents original metaphysical thoughts besides

Melamed opens his essay “The Metaphysics of the *Theological-Political Treatise*” from the newly brought out volume *Spinoza’s Theological-Political Treatise: A Critical Guide* 

“wondering what we could have learned about Spinoza’s metaphysics had not the *Ethics* ever gotten published. This is a creative and brilliant intuition pump to explore the *TTP* with.”

He comments on the fact that not only does “the existing literature on the TTP pays little attention to the metaphysical doctrine of the book”, but even “studies of Spinoza’s metaphysics commonly make little use of the TTP.” He argues that it is a mistake to neglect the *TTP* on both counts. For one thing, he tells us, the *TTP* says a lot on Spinoza’s metaphysical views; for another, it discusses some metaphysical issues with even more elaboration than the *Ethics*. Melamed goes on to prove these claims in the bulk of his essay delineating such philosophical issues as that between substance and attributes, God’s essence and existence, and the nature of the *conatus*. But there are many other philosophical and metaphysical issues dealt with in both the *TTP* and in Melamed’s treatment of it in this essay. It is not my purpose in this section to explicate all these, but

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1032 Ibid. 2.
1033 Ibid.
only to give enough examples to make the case that the TTP is not only a work in biblical criticism but also one of philosophy. As Melamed sums up the TTP: “the book is an invaluable resource for understanding Spinoza’s metaphysics.”

Israel’s argument that the TTP is philosophy

Israel says that “a particular system of philosophy inspired and underpins the whole of the Theological-Political Treatise” and that “his revolutionary metaphysics, epistemology and moral philosophy subtly infuse every part and aspect of his argumentation.” At the same time, he does a lot of historical, philological, and exegetical work. But “it is the latter features rather than the underlying philosophy to which scholars chiefly call attention when discussing this particular text.” Chapter 6 on miracles is a good case in point. It is particularly philosophical. He seeks to get to the truth of the question of miracles by relying only on reason and principles which are “wholly philosophical.” Spinoza’s overall historical-critical exegesis is “anchored in a wider naturalistic philosophical standpoint.”

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1034 Ibid. 23.
1035 Ibid. x.
1036 Ibid.
1037 Ibid. xi.
1038 Ibid. xii. I’m afraid that my presentation of Israel’s argument that the TTP is philosophy is a bit misleading. So let me make clear that Israel makes qualifications in his use of the term “philosophy” here. The following two qualifications should be combined with Israel’s use of the term “philosophy” above. First, in his “Note on the text and translation”, Israel cautions the reader that Spinoza’s use of terms such as “philosophy” follows “the requirements of his philosophical system.” Following Klever, Israel says that it is “invariably difficult or impossible adequately to translate Spinoza’s term philosophia as ‘philosophy’ as it is usually understood, because Spinoza means by it the whole of science together with all other soundly based knowledge” (xliv). Secondly, “The Theological-Political Treatise (1670) is not a work of philosophy in the usual sense of the term. Rather it is a rare and interesting example of what we might call applied or ‘practical’ philosophy. That is, it is a work based throughout on a philosophical system which, however, mostly avoids employing philosophical arguments and which has a practical social and political more than strictly philosophical purpose, though it was also intended in part as a device for subtly defending and promoting Spinoza’s own theories” (viii). In some respects, I think that Israel overstates his qualifications. For one thing, in many respects the TTP explicitly does employ philosophical arguments and as such should certainly be considered as “philosophy” in the modern sense. As such, in these respects, it goes too far to imply
Historical approaches to the scriptures were utilized before Spinoza, but these treatments were usually made to orbit about what was taken to be the higher or sacred history of Scripture. Not so with Benedict Spinoza.

The ‘historical’ in Spinoza’s sense (which is also the characteristic ‘modern’ meaning) was in fact conceptually impossible until, philosophically, all supernatural agency had been consciously stripped out of all forms of historical explanation, a development that was remote from the thoughts of most early modern thinkers and writers.1039

Spinoza’s history is empirical, not theological. History is shaped by natural forces, not providence. How could it be otherwise since there are no spiritual or supernatural forces? His philosophy is a one-substance monism and upon this philosophical rock of naturalism, he rejects all a priori biblical assumptions of revealed claims and subjects them to a historical analysis that is in accord with nature. History and nature converge. Text and nature converge. Even religion for Spinoza is a product of nature - human nature and its psychological and emotional needs all completely stem from nature and not from a kingdom outside of or transcendent to nature. As a result, religion is a natural phenomenon, and therefore within the provenance of philosophy. It is natural for humans to feel fear and dread in the face of the horrors of the natural world. Thus fear, hope, and ignorance drive men to imagine a human-like God who may help, and who also may punish.1040

In the final analysis, the text, political circumstances, motives, language, idioms, grammar, and the histories that generated all the biblical texts are all to be understood in the context of nature: As Israel sums it up: “All of this then in turn needs to be explained, philosophically, as a product of nature and natural forces.”1041 This theory of culture and religion is part and parcel of Spinoza’s philosophy. It is not only part and parcel of his TTP,

that the TTP is only a work of applied or practical philosophy with a social and political goal. It might well be that Israel would agree with my characterization of his characterization, as the rest of his presentation of the TTP given above seems to bear out.

1039 Ibid. xiii.
1040 Ibid. xiii-xiv.
1041 Ibid. xii-xiii.
but also part and parcel of his not yet completed *Ethics*. It is rooted in his one-substance doctrine which reduces “All reality including the entirety of human experience, the world of tradition, spirit and belief not less than the physical, to the level of the purely empirical.”

Though Israel does not refer to Curley’s essay “Notes on a Neglected Masterpiece: Spinoza and the Science of Hermeneutics”, he explains Spinoza’s science of textual criticism on a par with the science of the study of nature very much as Curley does. We must study the texts of Scripture in the same way we do the things of nature. First we must seek to find those aspects that are universal, and then, by degrees, from there to the most specific. Properly done then, biblical criticism is also a legitimate science. Because of this philosophy, the social and intellectual sciences are on a par. History and the study of religion are “methodologically no different in principle from the other sciences” – as Spinoza puts it: “I say that the method of interpreting Scripture ... does not differ from the [correct] method of interpreting nature, but rather is wholly consonant with it.” We will take up Curley’s argument that Spinoza’s *TTP* should be considered a work of science and philosophy below.

Israel goes on to outline Spinoza’s political philosophy: his philosophical theory of toleration, freedom, democratic republicanism, and so on; but we will not delineate these sections, as they are outside the focus of this study’s provenance. Let us add one further note here regarding Israel’s treatment of the reception of Spinoza and of his *TTP*, which calls for either confirmation or refutation from other historians.

It is agreed by all the contemporary works on Spinoza’s *TTP* that it was by far one of the most controversial and well-known books of the time. What is not so known, or agreed about, however, is how to explain the dearth of coverage Spinoza’s *TTP* received subsequently, both in its political philosophy and its philosophy of religion. Israel

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1042 Ibid. xv.
1043 Ibid. xvi-xvii.
complains of “The prevailing lack of interest in the origins of modern democratic republicanism [and theory of toleration] today” in Spinoza. He says that they “have continually been played down” and “indeed masked.” More, Israel is dumbfounded that there has been, almost everywhere since the mid-nineteenth century a pervasive misconception that Spinoza was a thinker whom practically no one read, understood or was influenced by ... This remains today an entrenched and widely accepted view despite its being wholly unhistorical and at odds with how Spinoza was actually received in the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries ... As a historical phenomena, the almost universal tendency since the nineteenth century to marginalize, if not Spinoza the lofty philosopher, then certainly the historical, politically engaged Spinoza” calls for further study.

Seymour Feldman’s annotations of “Ethics’ philosophy” in the *TTP* (or the *TTP’s* philosophy in the *Ethics*)

One of the great values of the second edition of the *Theological-Political Treatise* translated by Samuel Shirley is the annotations throughout the book made by Seymour Feldman.

What I found particularly helpful in these annotations are the many references to the *Ethics* that Feldman cites throughout the text of the *TTP*. Since our purpose in this section is to only provide a few samples from the *TTP* that show it to be a largely philosophical text, we cannot give an exhaustive or systematic treatment of this subject. The best that can be done here is to refer these annotations to the reader who wishes for more proof of just how much “Ethics’ philosophy” is contained in the *TTP* (or vice versa, e.g. how much *TTP* philosophy is in the *Ethics*). I say “Ethics’ philosophy” contained in the *TTP* or *TTP* philosophy in the *Ethics* because the contents of both works were pretty much known and formulated around the same time. It is a mistake to think that the *Ethics* is a later and therefore more mature philosophical presentation of Spinoza’s philosophy (though some of the latter parts of the *Ethics* were probably added in later years). The bulk of Spinoza’s “Ethics’ philosophy”

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1044 Ibid. xxxii-xxxiii.
1045 Ibid. xxxiii-xxxiv.
according to many Spinoza scholars was understood by Spinoza as early as 1665, seven years before the publication of the *TTP*. Thus his philosophy was in most respects complete even before he wrote and finished both the *TTP* and the *Ethics*.

Edwin Curley’s argument that the *TTP* should be considered as philosophy and science and no longer neglected

Before presenting Curley’s view of the *TTP* as “science” let us first see what led Spinoza to apply the method of science to scripture and then what he means by the method of science. Spinoza tells us in the *TTP* that he was led to come up with his scientific method of interpretation because of the quarrels, dissensions, and wars over theology that continued to tear at Europe.¹⁰⁴⁶ Spinoza begins his chapter “Of the Interpretation of Scripture” lambasting both how so many believers say that the Bible is the Word of God and yet don’t live according to it, and how many men, including theologians, have come up with all sorts of beliefs which they claim to come from Scripture, but are in actuality far from it. He’s talking about the history of Christianity and especially the 16th and 17th centuries.

The 17th century is still an age of Confessionalism. After the Protestant Reformation, all sorts of new Christian churches sprouted, each with slightly different theologies (of eschatology, ecclesiology, pneumatology, etc.), each supposedly based on better hermeneutical principles than the others. Each denomination believed that they had the best and most correct interpretation of Scripture. Think of all the differences of opinion in the 17th century on theology! The Roman Catholics (Franciscans, Dominicans, Jansenists, ¹⁰⁴⁶ If Spinoza’s explanation in the *TTP* of what led him to write the *TTP* to promote his new method of biblical interpretation is true, other factors are also nevertheless true. We know through Spinoza’s letter to Oldenburg and from Stephen Nadler’s historical-social researches that Spinoza stopped working on his *Ethics* in order to write the *TTP* to help fight against the orthodox onslaught against freedom in Amsterdam and in the Netherlands. He not only wanted to teach the truth about scripture to Europe, but also to advance its political liberties.
Minims, etcetera), and Protestants (Lutherans, Calvinists, Quakers, Anglicans, Anabaptists, etcetera) fought over a variety of interpretations, and each tried to found these claims on Scripture. Europe was wracked by controversy over masses, relics, stigmata, pilgrimages, shrines, sainthood, transubstantiation, priestly vestments, church art, church power, purgatory, the Virgin Mary, indulgences for sale to get out of purgatory, limbo, the confessional, rosary beads, substantial forms, and other theological claims.

After alluding to their many different interpretations of Scripture (though he does not explicitly refer to all the concrete exemplifications of these as I did above), he says:

When I pondered over these facts ... I deliberately resolved to examine Scripture afresh, conscientiously and freely, and to admit nothing as its teachings which I did not most clearly derive from it. With this precaution I formulated a method of interpreting the Bible.1047

And again:

In order to escape this scene of confusion, to free our minds from the prejudices of theologians and to avoid the hasty acceptance of human fabrications as divine teachings, we must discuss the true method of Scriptural interpretation and examine it in depth; for unless we understand this we cannot know with any certainty what the Bible or the Holy Spirit intends to teach.1048

And how is Spinoza going to give the “true method of Scriptural interpretation” that “unless we understand this we cannot know with certainty what the Bible or the Holy Spirit intends to teach”?1049

Now to put it briefly, I hold that the method of interpreting Scripture is no different from the method of interpreting Nature, and is in fact in complete accord with it ... In this way ... steady progress can be made without any danger of error ... this is not merely a sure way, but the only way open to us.1050

So there it is: Spinoza’s method in its barest essentials. How should we interpret Spinoza’s meaning on this subject?

1049 Ibid.
1050 Ibid. 87.
Now that we have set out Spinoza’s general statement on the matter, let us now see what Edwin Curley says about it after first giving some background on his essays. In his “Notes on a Neglected Masterpiece (II): The Theological-Political Treatise as a Prolegomenon to the Ethics,” Edwin Curley argues that the neglect of the TTP has been a big mistake for many reasons. For one thing, the TTP illuminates our understanding of the philosophy of the Ethics. Curley comes up with a very instructive thought experiment or “intuition pump.” He asks us to imagine that all of Spinoza’s works, except the TTP, were never published, but instead destroyed. He asks, “How much of the teaching of the Ethics would we be able to reconstruct from the TTP?” The simple and general answer to this question, it turns out, is: “A lot.” There is a lot of philosophy being done in the TTP, which, Curley argues, has been neglected by many previous commentators (such as Jonathan Bennett). Curley cites many of these philosophical issues within the course of his essay.

In Curley’s earlier equally excellent essay on this theme, “Notes on a Neglected Masterpiece (I): Spinoza and the Science of Hermeneutics”, he takes a different tack to argue for the necessity of knowing the “scientific” or philosophical nature of the TTP for scholars who wish to do justice to Spinoza. And his conclusion on this issue is never in doubt: “I conclude, with Spinoza, that it is proper for interpreters of texts to think of themselves as engaged in an enterprise not fundamentally different from the one natural scientists are engaged in.”

1052 Ibid. 114.
1054 Ibid. 27.
The subject of Spinoza and science is too big to be dealt with here, but perhaps a couple short notes on this are in order here. First, Spinoza is much more of an empiricist than he is often presented as being. Curley reviews David Savan’s essay “Spinoza: Scientist and Theorist of Scientific Method” and agrees with Savan in that Spinoza is “much less the paradigm of aprioristic rationalism he is generally taken to be, and much more an empiricist.”

For one thing, “As far as the natural sciences and mathematics are concerned ... Spinoza was thoroughly competent and acquainted with some of the best work of his time.” For another, as Nadler tells us, “Spinoza shared absolutely Boyle’s commitment to the mechanical philosophy.” We see this commitment in many places in Spinoza’s works. In the *TTP*, Spinoza argues that the passages in the Bible that deal with God’s active participation in nature are better explained by adverting to naturalistic causes.

In one place, Spinoza cites three different passages of Scripture in a row to exemplify his scientific-mechanical view of nature:

In Genesis chapter 9 v. 13 God tells Noah that he will set a rainbow in the cloud. This act of God, again, is assuredly nothing other than the refraction and reflection of the sun’s rays which they undergo in droplets of water.

In Psalm 147 v. 18 the natural action and warmth of the wind whereby frost and snow are melted is called the word of God; and in v. 15, wind and cold are called the command and word of God.

In Psalm 104 v. 4 wind and fire are called messengers and ministers of God, and there are many other such passages in Scripture which clearly indicate that God’s decree, command, edict and word are nothing other than the action and order of Nature.

Therefore there can be no doubt that all the events narrated in Scripture occurred naturally; yet they are referred to God because, as we have already shown, it is not the part of Scripture to explain events through natural causes; it only relates to those events that strike the imagination, employing such method and style as best serves to excite wonder, and consequently to instill piety in the minds of the masses.

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1055 Ibid. 1.
1056 Curley quotes from Savan’s book here. Ibid. 1.
1057 Nadler’s *Spinoza: A Life*, op. cited, 192-193.
1058 Spinoza. *TTP*, trans. Shirley, op. cited, 79. I take this passage as extremely important because it shows that the Bible’s (as opposed to many philosophers’) claims on the relation of God to nature is direct, constant, and personal. The Bible clearly and distinctly demonstrates over and over again from the first page of Genesis to the last page of the Book of Revelation that God is personally
Curley disagrees with Savan’s claim that Spinoza “contributed little of importance to research or theory”, but fully agrees with (and then develops) Savan's acknowledgment that in the *Theological-Political Treatise*, Spinoza showed that the methods of the natural sciences could be fruitfully extended to the scientific study not only of the Bible, but of historical texts generally. Spinoza is the founder of scientific hermeneutics ... It was the extension of the scientific outlook and scientific methods to the study of historical texts that Spinoza was innovative and influential. He emphasized the importance of the careful collection of empirical data. Variations and changes in the data must be noted, compared, and cross-checked ... In [this] his most successful and important scientific work, then, Spinoza is an empiricist.1059

How Savan and Curley define “science” of course is a central issue here. I don’t think that Curley is arguing that Spinoza’s “science” of hermeneutics is a science in the *same way* as, say, physics or geology. The question as to how to define “philosophy” and “science” is a big, and deep, and important philosophical subject, but it lies outside the boundaries of this study. My purpose in bringing up this issue of seeing the *TTP* as “philosophy” and “science” is not so much to take sides, but to simply argue that the *TTP* deserves far more attention in the contemporary philosophical community (especially with respect to its obvious relevance to today’s culture wars).
Strauss on Spinoza’s “scientific” *Theological-Political Treatise*

Like Curley, Strauss also argues that Spinoza’s *TTP* should be considered a “science.” And he seems to agree with Spinoza in thinking that the “criticism of religion is by intent scientific criticism.”

Strauss rightly points out that

> Once [Spinoza] had gained insight into the ... 'vulgarity' of Scripture – in other words, into its total lack of scientific thinking – awareness of the superiority of the scientific mind to Scripture followed. This superiority, in an age in which science was felt to be not essentially completed but constantly progressing, could not but appear to him as belonging to a more advanced stage of human thought.

But Strauss’ take on “science” is a “science of culture” rather than a “hard” science view. We see this, for instance, in passages such as follows:

> The philosophic question to which the modern study of the Bible gives rise is primarily the methodological question, the question of the methods of historical studies or of 'the sciences of culture,' as distinguished from natural science ... [for Spinoza] the method of Biblical study is fundamentally the same as that of natural science ... Once it is assumed that the Bible is a literary document like any other, it must be studied and interpreted like any other literary document; it becomes the object of the sciences of culture like all their objects; the foundation of Biblical science is no longer a problem. Hence the justification of that assumption, i.e. the critique of the opposed presupposition, that of revealed religion, is the true foundation of Biblical science in the modern sense.

**Conclusion**

I hope that this section has shown that the *TTP* should not be thought of as *only* a work of biblical criticism and therefore outside the purview of philosophy proper. Yet, I am keenly aware that my brief summary of arguments and citations from the *TTP* and of scholars arguing that the *TTP* should be considered more seriously as a work of philosophy may have fallen short with some skeptical readers. Besides seeing more of the details in the

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1062 Ibid. 35.
arguments of the scholars noted above (who contend for the philosophical nature of the
*TTP*) the best that I can say to skeptical readers is to urge them to see the more fully worked
out proofs of my claims from the works that I have cited in this section. See all of Feldman’s
*Ethics*’ references in Shirley’s second edition of the *TTP*. And see all of Curley’s references to
“*Ethics*’ philosophy” in the *TTP* (or *TTP* philosophy in the *Ethics*).

Because of the *TTP*’s major place in 17th century philosophy and as one of the major
precursors to the Radical Enlightenment, I wish to join the growing call of some
contemporary Spinoza and Enlightenment scholars to add at least some study of the *TTP*
with the *Ethics* in courses on early modernity and Spinoza.
Chapter Seventeen

Conclusion: Summing it all up

The Sea of Faith
Was once, too, at the full, and round earth’s shore
Lay like the folds of a bright girdle furled.

But now I only hear
Its melancholy, long, withdrawing roar,
Retreating, to the breath
Of the night-wind, down the vast edges drear
And naked shingles of the world.

Ah, love, let us be true
To one another! for the world, which seems
To lie before us like a land of dreams,
So various, so beautiful, so new,
Hath really neither joy, nor love, nor light,
Nor certitude, nor peace, nor help for pain;
And we are here as on a darkling plain
Swept with confused alarms of struggle and flight,
Where ignorant armies clash by night.1063

1063 Taken from the last two stanzas of Mathew Arnauld’s “Dover Beach.” While perhaps overly pessimistic, it nevertheless also epitomizes the deep worry that many had regarding the disintegration of religion (in this case, toward the end of the 19th century). Many scholars say that the Christian faith was at its lowest ebb in the 19th century. Times have changed since then. In fact, in the last few decades there has been a world-wide religious revival threatening many of the hard-won victories of the Radical Enlightenment. We see this struggle mostly in the Islamic world today; but it is alive and well in the United States as well, as may be witnessed in its opposition to the teaching of evolution, and in its continued conservative attitude toward homosexuality. Many interpret this revival of religion as they have the revival of religion in the Hellenistic-Christian early centuries. This “failure of nerve,” as it has been called, was diagnosed by philosophers such as Sidney Hook as early as 1943 in his essay “The New Failure of Nerve.” In this essay, he quotes from Gilbert Murray’s Four Stages of Greek Religion. He says that Murray “characterizes the period from 300 B.C. through the first century of the Christian era as marked by ‘a failure of nerve.’ This failure of nerve exhibited itself in a rise of asceticism, of mysticism, in a sense, of pessimism; a loss of self-confidence, of hope in this life and of faith in normal human efforts; a despair of patient inquiry, a cry for infallible revelation … a conversion of the soul to God. A survey of the cultural tendencies of our own times shows many signs pointing to a new failure of nerve in Western civilization” (Evolution and Religion: The Conflict Between Science and Theology in Modern America, edited by Gail Kennedy (Boston: D.C. Heath and Company, 1957), 97. See also E. R. Dodds’ Pagan & Christian in an Age of Anxiety (op. cited).
It is now time to sum up, to tie up some of the chief strands of many chapters to wrap up this study. We have covered a lot of ground in these 500 pages. We have gone from the Greeks to Leibniz and Spinoza picking out some of the arguments of some of the West’s greatest philosophers in relation to the question of revelation and theology. We have done a lot of philosophy of religion, history of philosophy, historiography, analysis of theology, and even biblical criticism. Our study has not been limited therefore to the enunciation of philosophical arguments against revelation and orthodox theology. Along the way, we have had to deal with some of the intricate scholarly issues involved in interpreting these philosophers, theologians, and historical periods. Readers will know now that many of these issues are really quite complicated and not as simple or cut-and-dried as some may think. On the other hand, lest we fall prey to excessive relativism or skepticism in which “The best lack all conviction, while the worst are full of passionate intensity”\textsuperscript{1064}, some of these central issues are cut-and-dried. Spinoza’s \textit{TTP} for instance roundly and clearly refutes the traditional belief in divine inspiration, inerrancy, and unity of the Scriptures. This alone is the death knell of traditional Judaism, Christianity, and Islam.

Our focus has been on the struggle and the work of rationalist-leaning philosophers against the religion of their culture – hence the title “Philosophical Precursors to the Radical Enlightenment.” As such, this study has not given as much coverage – or sympathetic coverage – of philosophers and their arguments \textit{in defense} of their religion and against the arguments of the enemies of the faith - though we have presented and quoted their positions more than is done in all the studies I’ve seen. Readers with only a cursory knowledge of this subject and who have read this dissertation may end up with a one-sided view of religion and Christianity – that is, against them. But a religion is greater than only

\textsuperscript{1064} Taken from William Butler Yeats’ powerful poem “The Second Coming,” which, by the way, bespeaks the same concern of our study.
some of its parts. There are values to religion that this study has not spoken of.¹⁰⁶⁵ We have
only focused on its theological claims that touch on ontological, epistemological, and ethical
issues. And with these, we do not support.

In his essay “Pascal’s Anti-Augustinianism”, Vincent Carraud criticizes a book by
Philippe Sellier which argues that Pascal was an Augustinian; but he does so knowing full
well how much he owes to Sellier’s previous work. Consequently, Carraud makes a
confession: “I want to take a moment here to express my debt to this book which has given
me the means, albeit a contrario, to better measure the elements of anti-Augustinianism in
Pascal’s thought.”¹⁰⁶⁶ I feel the same way regarding all those in this study whom I have
critiqued – from the Jewish scriptures to the New Testament, to St. Paul, Augustine, Aquinas,
Luther, Calvin, Descartes and Leibniz. I owe a great deal to their thinking and works.

With this said then, let us summarize the principal philosophical forces against
revelation and theology and for a Radical Enlightenment that were made in some detail in
the foregoing chapters. In sum, the major philosophical precursors, influences, causes or
arguments against orthodox faith in revelation and orthodox theology (in various shapes
and forms both as anticipatory and causal) that led to the Radical Enlightenment were
derived from the following:

1) Some of the radical arguments of the pre-Socratics.
2) Some of the enlightened arguments of Socrates and Plato.
3) The influence of various rationalist elements in Greek and Roman philosophy
and culture (as precursors in various shapes and forms both as only anticipatory
and as causal) in the Church Fathers, medieval philosophy, scholasticism, and
then in Renaissance humanism and textual criticism, the Scientific Revolution,
New Philosophy, the Enlightenment, and the Radical Enlightenment.

¹⁰⁶⁵ For some of these values, see works by Mircea Eliade, Carl Jung, and, recently, by Charles Taylor
(see for instance his A Secular Age).
¹⁰⁶⁶ Vincent Carraud. “Pascal’s Anti-Augustinianism,” Perspectives on Science, 2007, vol. 15, no. 4
(Mass: The Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 2007), 452.
4) Renaissance textual criticism of ancient texts including the beginnings of some biblical criticism.

5) The explosion of naturalist-leaning explanations of nature via Copernicus, Galileo, Descartes and many others in the Scientific Revolution.

6) The rejection of Aristotelian and Scholastic metaphysics by the New Philosophers, most notably, Descartes.

7) The added and revolutionary historical and textual criticism of the Bible (by many philosophers, but especially Spinoza’s TTP).

These then are the major general philosophical precursors to the Radical Enlightenment, which the foregoing pages have laid out in more specific detail.

We started this study asking Will Durant’s question: “How did it come about that a major part of the educated classes in Europe and America has lost faith in the theology that for fifteen centuries gave supernatural sanctions and supports to the precarious and uncongenial moral code upon which Western civilization has been based?” We now have our answer.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


APPENDIX A: CONTEXT OF NIETZSCHE QUOTE AND THE MADMAN APHORISM
As was mentioned in our study, Nietzsche considered Spinoza his precursor. Jonathan Israel's terminology refers to the “Radical Enlightenment”; Nietzsche uses the language of “God is dead.” The complete passage is an exquisitely written aphorism that wonderfully epitomizes some of the seriousness of what is at stake in the death of God or the Radical Enlightenment. We provide the full text from which the quote above derives to show its context and because we refer to some of the passages in this aphorism several times in this study.

The madman. Have you not heard of that madman who lit a lantern in the bright morning hours, ran to the market place and cried incessantly: ‘I am looking for God! I am looking for God!’ – As many of those who did not believe in God were standing together there he excited considerable laughter. Have you lost him then? said one. Did he lose his way like a child? said another. Or is he hiding? Is he afraid of us? Has he gone on a voyage? or emigrated? – thus they shouted and laughed.

The madman sprang into their midst and pierced them with his glances. ‘Where has God gone?’ he cried. ‘I shall tell you. We have killed him – you and I. We are all his murderers. But how have we done this? How were we able to drink up the sea? Who gave us the sponge to wipe away the entire horizon? What did we do when we unchained this earth from its sun? Whither is it moving now? Whiter are we moving now? Away from all suns? Are we not perpetually falling? Backward, sideward, forward, in all directions? Is there any up or down left? Are we not straying as through an infinite nothing? Do we not feel the breath of empty space? Has it not become colder? Is more and more night not coming on all the time? Must not lanterns be lit in the morning? Do we not hear anything yet of the noise of the gravediggers who are burying God? Do we not smell anything yet of God’s decomposition? – gods too decompose. God is dead. God remains dead. And we have killed him.

“How shall we, the murderers of all murderers, console ourselves? That which was holiest and mightiest of all that the world has yet possessed has bled to death under our knives”
to death under our knives – who will wipe this blood off us? With what water could we purify ourselves? what festivals of atonement, what sacred games shall we need to invent? Is not the greatness of this deed too great for us? Must not we ourselves become gods simply to seem worthy of it? There has never been a greater deed – and whoever shall be born after us, for the sake of this deed he shall be part of a higher history than all history hitherto." 1067

Here the madman fell silent and looked again at his listeners; and they, too, were silent and stared at him in astonishment. At last he threw his lantern on the ground, and it broke into pieces and went out. “I have come too early,” he said then; “my time is not yet. This tremendous event is still on its way, still wandering; it has not yet reached the ears of men. Lightning and thunder require time; the light of the stars requires time; deeds, though done, still require time to be seen and heard. This deed is still more distant from them than the most distant stars – and yet they have done it themselves”

It has been related further that on the same day the madman forced his way into several churches and there struck up his requiem aeternam deo. Led out and called to account, he is said always to have replied nothing but: “What after all are these churches now if they are not the tombs and sepulchers of God?”

Introduction

The primary purpose of this appendix is to give some elucidation to the meaning of the term “post-enlightenment” or “postmodernity” for readers of this study who may not be knowledgeable of the differences between the two. The reason why we have added “in Philosophy and Literature” is because the terms “modernism”, “Enlightenment”, “post-enlightenment”, and “postmodernism” have somewhat different meanings in philosophy as opposed to art and literature. Any general account of the terms therefore seems to require that this distinction is drawn out and explained.

As we will see, philosophers use these terms differently than literary critics. Not only is this so, but the dating for modernism and postmodernism in philosophy is also very different from that given by students of literature and the arts. Despite their many differences, however, there is also a great deal of similarity and overlapping in meanings. For many writers on this subject, modernism in both philosophy and literature, for instance, either doubt or displace the role and meaning of God. This “death of God,” as the philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche phrased it, is one of the most dramatic and revolutionary characteristics of modernism in philosophy and literature.

As is the case with most important terms, there is a great deal of academic controversy and debate on the meaning and dating of modernism and postmodernism, both in philosophy and literature. It would be impossible within the short space of this broad introduction to do justice to the many different perspectives and arguments made by eminent philosophers, historians, and literary critics on these questions. This appendix can

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1069 The two works cited above for instance not only delineate the different dates and uses of the terms “modernism” and “postmodernism,” they also show how these varied from country to country and even city to city.
provide only a generalized and therefore simplified look at some of the major features of our subject. We will begin with philosophy because of its pivotal role and influence in literature and the arts. Then we will explore how modernism and postmodernism in literature is to be distinguished from that in philosophy. Hopefully, this will suffice for the general reader who may not be knowledgeable about this subject.

In philosophy

To begin then. Though there is a great deal of controversy as to when modernism commences in the western world, most historians and philosophers are agreed that it began with or soon after the Renaissance with its revolutionary change of focus from God to man. This humanistic movement quickly led to a revolution in scientific and philosophical thinking. For instance, the Copernican-Galilean theory that the earth revolves around the sun and not the sun around the earth, as tradition and the scriptures taught encouraged in some a radical rethinking of the role and authority that religion and the Church should have over the mind.

Great successes in the sciences and new epistemological methodologies that stemmed from these successes led some thinkers to replace faith in God, revelation, and the supposed authority of the Bible, with faith in human reason, human experience, and empirical science. The foundations of knowledge should no longer be derived from theology, but from rationality. Though it is true that the great philosophical rationalists Descartes and Leibniz maintained the theological view that there are absolute and universal epistemological truths, they nevertheless sought to found these beliefs in reason and not in theology.

They also generally speaking defended the belief that our mind can know the outer world and that our language accurately reflects this. Though humans might sometimes err or be fooled by illusion, still, all in all, man is able to apprehend the world directly.\textsuperscript{1071} We can ultimately trust our reason and senses. Empiricists maintained the same view. As John Locke put it: our minds are like blank slates (\textit{tabula rosa}) which, generally speaking, accurately receiving the impressions of the outer world.\textsuperscript{1072}

This optimistic enlightenment epistemology was soon to be challenged by several important philosophers whose works were precursors to postmodernist thought. The philosopher David Hume discovered a serious problem at the very foundation of empiricism. He discovered that there are no certain grounds for scientific or causal induction. It is true that we can only learn from experience that billiard ball A will move billiard ball B upon contact; but after we learn this by experience, how can we \textit{know and universalize} this \textit{particular} inference to \textit{all} future occurrences? For Hume, we cannot \textit{know} this. We only "know" this, he taught, by habit of association. But habit of association cannot serve as foundational or certain knowledge.\textsuperscript{1073}

This epistemological theory led the great German philosopher Emmanuel Kant to postulate that the human mind is more like a filter than a blank slate when it receives sense impressions from the outer world. According to Kant, this radically different perspective should lead to a “Copernican revolution” in epistemology.\textsuperscript{1074} No longer must we think that we can directly apprehend the world via our senses. Things are a lot more complicated.

\textsuperscript{1072} See the anthology: \textit{The Empiricists}. New York: Doubleday Anchor Book, 1974.
\textsuperscript{1073} Ibid. 322-40.
\textsuperscript{1074} And so it did. Kant’s work led many philosophers after him to adopt a position in philosophy called idealism. Very roughly put, idealism is the view that knowledge of the world is purely, or almost purely, mental or ideational - “Esse est percipi,” being consists in being perceived. Fichte, Schlegel, Schopenhauer, Hegel, Bradley, and many more philosophers in differing degrees followed this thinking. See Emmanuel Kant (trans. Norman K. Smith). \textit{Critique of Pure Reason}. New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1965, 22.
than that. Now we must realize that our minds are so constituted that to some degree we mentally project onto the world certain categories such as causality, time, and space. This thinking led to the doctrine of philosophical idealism, that is, the belief that we can never really know the world directly through the senses, but only through the mind or the ideas that enter the mind. Idealism was especially prominent in Germany, but it was also influential in France and England.

By the 19th century, the major epistemological debates were between realists and idealists. However, toward the end of the 19th century, the American philosopher William James came up with a new theory of truth, a theory and philosophy he called pragmatism. Like idealism, pragmatism also argued against the simple and easy realistic correspondence theory of truth. The pragmatic theory of truth (in over-simplistic terms) states that a belief is true not in the sense that it perfectly corresponds to the world, but in the sense that if it works in the world, then it is to some extent true. As the slogan of pragmatism puts it: If it works, it's true.\textsuperscript{1075}

Then came the new fields of psychology, sociology, cultural anthropology, along with revolutionary new theories in physics and astronomy. Psychologists such as Sigmund Freud showed that man is not the rational animal that Aristotle and modernist philosophy presumed. On the contrary, Freud demonstrated that human beings are actuated by all sorts of subconscious and unconscious ulterior motives – for sex, for prestige, for power, and so on.\textsuperscript{1076}

Sociologists and cultural anthropologists came to see that human beliefs are more a function of what time and place one lived in than the naïve belief that our reason and experience perfectly mirrors things. History and culture determines one's beliefs about the


world, not some theorized abstract and universal human reason.1077 And then, in the early twentieth century, Newton was refuted. Einstein’s un-commonsensical relativity theory of curved space and Heisenberg’s uncertainty principle threw the philosophy of science in disarray. Thinkers such as Nietzsche and Thomas Kuhn questioned the notion of the history of science as a glorious accumulation and progression to greater and greater truth. Kuhn’s influential *Structure of Scientific Revolutions* seemed to prove that science proceeds by changing paradigms and not through ever-increasing absolute truth.1078

The philosophical end result of all these theories resoundingly put modernism or some of the Enlightenment ideals in question. Philosophers and thinkers such as Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida, Ludwig Wittgenstein, Karl Mannheim, Hans-Georg Gadamer, Max Horkheimer, Theodore Adorno, Richard Rorty and Stephen Toulmin, all rejected enlightenment optimism and its modernistic faith in reason and science. In a word, by the 1960s this anti-modernist philosophy comes to be called postmodernism.1079

Generally speaking, postmodernism places no faith in any proposed absolute or universal authority or ultimate foundation for knowledge or morality. It asserts that the only truths are particular truths relative to one’s specific and local culture. All truths, moreover, are contingent upon history and therefore are not really discovered, but instead *constructed*. There are no ultimate foundations for our knowledge; nor are there any true, solid, or irrefutable bases to prove human beliefs.1080

In literature (or art)

Many of the philosophical issues we have dealt with above manifest themselves and become paramount also in literature and the arts, though there are differences as well. As we observed above, in order for the reader to be more knowledgeable about the meanings and uses of “Enlightenment” or “modernism” and “post-enlightenment” or “postmodernism” as it appears in various literatures it is important to make sure that they understand at least some of these differences.

Modernism in philosophy was to some degree a reaction against scholasticism, but modernism in literature and the arts was a reaction against aesthetic realism.1081 And not against aesthetic realism alone.1082 Modernist poets and novelists reacted against 19th century bourgeois morality, Victorian cultural arrogance, and in the naïve optimism of the enlightenment’s faith and values in absolute and universal Truth and Reason.1083 Because of this breaking up of so many of the core values and beliefs of Western Civilization, a pessimistic strain pervades many modernist literary works. The Irish poet W. B. Yeats summed up this feeling well: “Turning and turning in the widening gyre/The falcon cannot hear the falconer/Things fall apart; the center cannot hold.”1084

1081 Eagleton, Illusions of Postmodernity: “For the realist, the world and a literary text can be known. There is a one to one correspondence between word and world or reality. Language is not so contextualized that one can never transcend purely cultural and historical meaning” (135).
1083 In his 1935 essay “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” Walter Benjamin argues that even our sense perception changes and is not constant or absolute. “During long periods of history, the mode of human sense perception changes with humanity’s entire mode of existence. The manner in which human sense perception is organized, the medium in which it is accomplished, is determined not only by nature but by historical circumstances as well.”
1084 Eagleton, The Illusions of Postmodernity: “The dawning of modernity was the moment when we began to realize that there were many conflicting versions of the good life; that none of these versions could be unimpeachably grounded; and that, strangely enough, we were no longer able to agree on the most fundamental issues in the field.... With the onset of modernity, humanity enters for the first time upon that extraordinary condition, now thoroughly naturalized in our heads, in which we fail to see eye to eye on all the most vital matters – a condition which would have been mind-bendingly unimaginable for some of the ancients.... The political upshot of this condition is liberalism.
No longer is the old order with its moral values considered sacrosanct. Now writers question everything. We can see some of this loss of epistemological and moral center in works such as Flaubert’s *Madame Bovary* and Ibsen’s *Hedda Gabler*. Both explore the role of women in modern society, their unhappiness owing to patriarchal cultural dominance, and their need for greater freedom, power, and pleasure despite the mores of church and age-old tradition. The questioning of the nature of sexuality and the nature of mind becomes even more pronounced after the psychologist Sigmund Freud unleashed his psychoanalytic findings upon a world soon to be further reeled by World War I and then World War II. Questions about traditional human sexuality continue to arise in other modernist works such as Thomas Mann’s *Death in Venice*. For the first time blatant ‘obscenities’ are used in literature and become protected by law. In Joyce’s *Ulysses*, adultery, premarital sex, masturbation, female sexual orgasms, and cursing are rampant.

Modernist writers break other traditional conventions, as well. Instead of using only standard novelistic or poetic discourse, many authors add a variety of genres in their works. We see this for instance in Joyce’s *Ulysses*. Joyce sometimes writes in the exact language of science, sometimes in the language of poetry, and sometimes in the language of advertising. *Ulysses* is also an excellent example of modernist writing in its use of psychoanalytic techniques such as stream of consciousness and free-associating, even to the elimination of conventional grammatical markers as the period, comma, and apostrophe.

Because the world is no longer held to be a seamless, understandable unity, modernist writers argued that works of literature should reflect this new state of affairs. Hence, instead of unity of discourse and point of view, modernist writers sometimes utilize
fragments of varying discourses, and this from different personas or selves. T. S. Eliot intimated this change of perspective in his essay “Tradition and the Individual Talent.” The point of view which I am struggling to attack is perhaps related to the metaphysical theory of the substantial unity of the soul: for my meaning is, that the poet has, not a ‘personality’ to express, but a particular medium, which is only a medium and not a personality, in which impressions and experiences combine in peculiar and unexpected ways.’

There are several other new things under the modernist sun, but because of the limits of this appendix only one further new thing will be mentioned here, and that is the prominent use of myths and symbols. Writers such as Conrad, Joyce, Eliot, Faulkner, and Wolf use myths and symbols with powerful effect in works such as *Heart of Darkness*, *Ulysses*, *The Waste Land*, *Go Down Moses*, and *Cassandra*. The most jarring use of symbols is perhaps best demonstrated in Kafka’s *Metamorphosis*. In this work, the protagonist Gregor Samsa, a traveling salesman who is inwardly conflicted about his job and his father, is metamorphosed into an insect. What makes this metamorphosis so jarring though is how everything in the work is represented in a naturalistic, realist fashion. The juxtaposition of the transformation of a man into an insect (which, of course, is not literally possible in the real world) within a realist context produces a deeply unsettling effect.

Finally, we come to postmodernism in literature and particularly postmodernist or deconstructionist literary criticism. Postmodernism in literature is primarily a post-World War II phenomenon. Writers such as Jorge Luis Borges, Italo Calvino, Beckett, Barth, and Pynchon, are some of postmodernism’s well-known proponents.

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As was mentioned in the introduction, defining modernism and postmodernism is a tricky business, for both terms are used in varying ways, many of which are not consistent. This is no truer than in postmodernist literary thought. Postmodernists are so anti-essentialist in their philosophy of language that by ‘definition’ they cannot define anything.\textsuperscript{1087} This of course seems entirely self-defeating - that is, if one relies on any static logic. The postmodernist deconstructionists, however, do not rely on any static logic. They reject the inherent binary oppositions in structuralist thought (high/low, good/bad, etc.). They completely reject foundationalism in epistemology, morals, and aesthetics. In essence, then, postmodernist thought is groundless and formless.\textsuperscript{1088}

As may have been discerned, some of the themes of modernism in literature are continued in postmodern thought. Many of these issues are postmodernist in the philosophical sense. This development was taken even further in postmodernist literature and literary criticism.\textsuperscript{1089} Certain modernist elements are taken to their most extreme form in postmodernism, some of which are barely understandable. Some postmodernist writers go so far as to reject the notions of plot, character, and meaning itself! They not only break down the division between popular and high art, they also reject all the “meta-narratives” of western culture – including Democracy, Capitalism, Science, and Progress. All narratives and truths, they claim, are constructed and relative to one’s history and culture.

Many postmodernists not only embrace the modernist death of God, they even declare “the death of philosophy” and “the death of literature”! Postmodernists argue that

\textsuperscript{1087} Eagleton, \textit{The Illusions of Postmodernism}: “There is no ultimate word, essence or reality to be the foundation of all our thought. There is also no sign or transcendent signifier – ‘God’ – that can anchor all other signs to reality, nor provide a hierarchy of meaning and values” (135).

\textsuperscript{1088} Though much of this language seems obviously self-defeating and ridiculous, there seems to be some method in this postmodernist madness. Or, at least, that is what many prominent literary critics tell us.

\textsuperscript{1089} See for instance John Barth’s 1967 essay “The Literature of Exhaustion” in \textit{The Atlantic}. 

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literature does not exist. They say that, “It is an illusion.” Because for them there is no stable or eternal object called ‘literature,’ they judge literary theory to be an illusion, as well. Thus, a party can be critiqued with just as much meaning and richness as Shakespeare. At bottom, postmodernist deconstructionists view one’s commitment to a particular literary text or theory as an issue of power, and, too often, as power to oppress.

From this brief introduction, one should not make the mistake of thinking that postmodernist ideas are purely abstract and therefore of no moment in the real world. On the contrary, postmodernist thinking has become very political and social. It has fomented campus wars with liberals calling for a revolution in education and society to accept the tenets of multiculturalism. It argues against any notion of a fixed literary canon. It has even denounced academic literature departments as oppressive “language police.” So, again, theory, or, in this case, anti-theory, matters. What’s at stake here “is much more than a mere conflict over methods or the lack of them... what is at issue in the contention between different literary theories or ‘non-theories’ are competing ideological strategies related to the very destiny of English studies in modern societies.” It is therefore well worth our time and labor to understand the two contending ideologies of modernism and postmodernism because the issues are ultimately of great importance.

I hope that this general and admittedly simplified account gives readers of this study who may not be knowledgeable on this subject at least a better idea of the meanings and uses of these terms. If so, then this appendix will have succeeded in its purpose.

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1091 Eagleton, The Illusions of Postmodernism: “According to deconstructionists, realism is an ideology which seeks to convert of naturalize its views and literary interpretations to seem as innocent and unchangeable as Nature” (135).
1092 Ibid.
1093 Eagleton, Literary Theory, 199.
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