

# Plato and Spinoza on the Theological-Political Problem

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In the spirit of Alfred North Whitehead's remark that all philosophy must be seen as an extension of Plato's thought I am proposing that Spinoza's *Theological-Political Treatise* can be read as a modern response to Plato's *Laws*. Despite the frequent discussion of divine law, piety and impiety, and the freedom to philosophize publically, Spinoza's work ignores Plato, who perhaps more than any other philosopher, ancient or modern, merits careful consideration on these matters. I will explain how the *Laws* raise a distinct theological-political problem for Spinoza's vision of liberal democracy—namely, whether or not the freedom to philosophize is compatible with a state that recognizes the authority of divine law. The two specific problems entailed by the *Laws* are two major themes of the work of Leo Strauss, i.e. the tension between reason and revelation and the problem of Socrates. I will demonstrate how Spinoza's *Treatise* can be read as a response to both problems.

First I will unpack Book X of the *Laws*, which is concerned with the challenge of impiety, including the philosophical kind, for a state guided by divine law. Specifically, we might ask how does a state guided by divine law allow for independent thinking, i.e. philosophy, which might challenge the enterprise of revelation itself? Next, I turn to

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Spinoza's *Treatise* and present its discussion of piety, divine law, and the problem of philosophical objections to revelation. I will consider Spinoza as a modern responder to the ancient teachings found in *Laws X*. Finally, I will consider the limits of Spinoza's response.

Let me make some general remarks about the nature of the problem within the *Laws*. The interlocutors in the *Laws* assume that philosophy is a potential danger to the good of the state because it places reason over and above divine law—a powerful means of motivating citizens to be concerned with the common good. For Plato, it is religion, not philosophy that has this power. If the philosopher is to be involved in aiding the use of divine law for the good of the state the philosopher must be moderate, that is, must not speak against the enterprise of revelation. There is good reason, then, to see impious speech as dangerous to the common good. So, here we have the problem of reason and revelation. This is consistent with other dialogues of Plato (the *Apology* and *Republic*), which do not shy away from what Strauss calls the problem of Socrates, which asks: Can the public use of worldly philosophy be good for a state that requires mythic and other non-rational bonds? While Spinoza's defense of the freedom to philosophize in his *Treatise* is compatible with the modern natural right tradition, I think there are several limits to his teaching that, if I am correct, pose significant problems for his political philosophy. In order to make this argument I first must explain the problem as presented in Plato's work.

### I: PLATO'S LAWS X

Book X of the *Laws* begins with the Socratic teacher—the Athenian Stranger's—intent to craft a law against impious acts and beliefs. Believers in the gods never voluntarily act or speak impiously, and thus the perpetrators are the non-believers along with those who express doubts about the gods' concerns for human justice and the gods' integrity (*Laws* 885b). One of the Athenian's companions, Kleinias, thinks it rather easy to persuade those who do not believe, and persuasion is the method of the gentle lawgiver. Kleinias' persuasion consists of appealing to the earth, sun, the stars, the order of the seasons, and the universality of belief in the gods by both Greeks and barbarians.

If Kleinias means to say that the earth and heavenly bodies are gods then this speech echoes Socrates' speech in the *Apology*, in which the

accused philosopher ambiguously suggests his belief, with the common man, in the divinity of the sun and moon. There are other textual clues that suggest Socrates' apology is relevant. First, immediately before Kleinias cites the divinity of the earth and sun the Athenian Stranger presents the views of the non-believers in a joking way. He situates their defense in a "jocular speech" (*Laws* 885c). In the *Apology*, Socrates also speaks of a jocular speech, but not from the mouth of the allegedly impious man. Rather, it is Meletus, the accuser, who Socrates claims is the comical speaker.

Second, the Athenian Stranger echoes Meletus' doubt about Socrates' belief in the heavenly gods. Meletus claims that Socrates believes the sun to be stone and the moon only earth. The Athenian likewise says, "When I and you adduce evidence that the gods exist, bringing forward these very things—sun and moon and stars and earth—as being gods and divine things, those who are convinced by these wise men would say that these things are earth and stones..." (*Laws* 886d). In both dialogues the rebuttal to the divinity of the sun and moon is the same.

Third, after Kleinias admits that the task of persuading the skeptic is harder than he first admitted, the Athenian responds, "What must we do? Will we pronounce a defense as if someone were accusing us before impious human beings, who say to those defending themselves in regard to the legislation that we are doing terrible things when we legislate that gods exist" (*Laws* 886e)? In Pangle's translation he explains in his footnotes that the Greek word for "pronounce a defense" is *apologeomai*, the verbal form of the same word in the title *Apology of Socrates*. Thus, it is not simply mere assertion to say that Socrates' way of life—the way of life of philosophy—is the tacit problem in *Laws X*.

Plato's *Laws* is a dialogue about divine law and how any city under the authority of divine law could encourage and compel its citizens to accept the divine law as completely authoritative. Our question then is: What is the role of the philosopher in any society guided by divine law? Mark Lutz, in *Divine Law and Political Philosophy in Plato's Laws* argues that the philosopher can help guide divine law. Political rationalism is thus compatible with revelation. But this compatibility only remains insofar as the political philosopher either accepts the gods or does not publically reject them.

The role of the political philosopher is to aid in clarifying divine laws through the use of intellect, which can "discern and guide the

different laws regarding virtue to make sure that they work together or that they aim at a single goal.”<sup>1</sup> Yet divine law cannot be effective purely on rational grounds. The political philosophy must support a mixture of natural theology and mythology.<sup>2</sup> If the gods are so wise and just the skeptical citizen might wonder why their laws commanding virtue and piety do not necessarily lead to happiness. While a mythological account of divine retribution might be enough to convince the non-philosophical citizen, it surely would not convince the independent thinkers in any city where divine law is present. That is why Book X contains such an elegant discussion of the gods’ existence and concern for justice.

But the arguments will not be enough to persuade all who do not believe and inevitably many of them will speak out against the gods. The conversation of Book X then turns to the punishments for impiety. While the Athenian Stranger considers impiety in action or speech dangerous, there is an exception for the moderate unbeliever who is “naturally just.” This is why the punishments for impiety must be unequal. While it is clear that impiety is a crime that demands imprisonment it is not clear if the naturally just unbeliever would either have a soft punishment or none at all:

Moreover, since the matters involving impiety have three causes, which we’ve gone through, and each of such causes gives rise to two kinds, there would be six kinds of faults worth distinguishing, concerning the divine things, which do not call for equal or similar judicial penalties. For a naturally just disposition may come to characterize the man who doesn’t believe the gods exist at all. (*Laws* 908b)

The three causes referred to above are simple unbelief in the gods, doubts about the gods’ concern for human affairs, and the belief that the gods’ favor can be appeased or bought by unjust individuals. With respect to unbelief in the gods the contrast has to do with moderation:

But there are those who, in addition to the opinion that all things are bereft of gods, may be afflicted by lack of restraint as regards pleasures and pains, and may also possess strong memories and sharp capacities to

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<sup>1</sup> Lutz, *Divine Law and Political Philosophy in Plato’s Laws*, 46.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 150–52, and *Laws* 903b.

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learn. The disbelief in the gods would be a disease that inheres in both, but as regards the ruin of other human beings, the one would do less, the other more, harm. (*Laws* 908c)

It does not appear that the Athenian thinks disbelief in the gods is a cause of immoderate behavior. Rather, unbelief and immoderation are simply private and public qualities of one kind of citizen. The immoderate unbeliever harms others while the moderate unbeliever only harms herself. So, while unbelief, privately, is still considered a “disease,” it is more tolerable when accompanied by moderation with the passions. There is no clear category for the unbeliever who refrains from publicly teaching others or openly ridiculing the gods or the state, which would “make others like himself” (908d). Nevertheless, impiety is a serious danger to the state and must be punished.

Pangle’s commentary highlights the importance of containing impiety for the good of the state. Questioning the “correct opinions” of the lawgivers is tantamount to questioning the divine sanction of the laws and customs of the state.<sup>3</sup> Throughout the dialogue, the Athenian has maintained that injustice and vice are the result of ignorance and criminal prosecution is a matter of remedial education.<sup>4</sup> Yet, can this framework explain the speech and actions of Socrates? In the *Apology*, Socrates wonders why his accusers didn’t privately admonish him and educate him since they believe his philosophizing was damaging to the state. But was Socrates really ignorant of the fact that his lifestyle could be seen as undermining the state? It would be hard to construe the intellectual doubt of the philosophically minded citizen who is not convinced by the arguments put forward by the Athenian as a matter of involuntary ignorance.

Lutz’s thesis that rational political philosophy can guide divine law leaves open the possibility that the public use of philosophy could also harm any state founded on it. The solution to the tension between philosophy and the divine law tradition is to cultivate a healthy dialogue between the two.<sup>5</sup> Strauss argued that independent thinkers could conceal their true beliefs for one audience yet reveal them to another through irony and esoteric writing. The unbelieving philosopher must remain

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<sup>3</sup> Pangle, 502.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 496–499.

<sup>5</sup> Lutz, 181–2.

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silent about the truth concerning the origin of the divine law—namely, that it is merely human and that all myths, divinations, and incantations used to guide a society founded on divine law are really lies.

Plato's implicit teaching about philosophy and impiety might be that the philosopher should seek to guide divine law rather than refute it. This preserves the tension between the two. The philosopher is moderate, but is still able to keep religion and the theological foundation of the state in check since it is this force, which contains the potential for preserving the common good, also contains the potential for persecuting philosophy.

## II: THE ARGUMENT OF SPINOZA'S *TREATISE*

I now turn to a modern thinker, Spinoza, who provides a clear and relevant response to the problem of philosophy and divine law with regard to piety and the challenge to revelation that philosophy presents through impious speech. Spinoza thinks divine law and public philosophy are compatible and that the philosopher, living in a democratic republic, need not conceal her true beliefs because philosophical reason can never actually contradict revelation. This vision of society is one free of compulsion to believe in gods or revealed religion of any kind.

Anticipating Freud's critique of religion, Spinoza begins his *Theological-Political Treatise* by immediately identifying fear as the cause of superstitious belief. Standing at the opposite of fear and superstition is his vision of the free state—a democratic republic, guided by reason, whose goal is individual liberty and freedom of thought. But Spinoza is not opposed to religion and even has a place for divine law in his vision of society, which is to direct citizens towards love of God and love of neighbor. In other words, civic duties are reinforced by a civil religion.

As with Plato's *Laws* only divine law can bring the common good and the individual good together. Spinoza has to get liberal democracy through egoism and the social contract, but there is no non-utilitarian reason to pursue justice if one is not a philosopher. The philosophers do not need justice, but the non-philosophers do and their good is equal to the philosophers in a liberal democracy. Yet while the *telos* of the society in the *Laws* is the whole of virtue, or justice, guided by divine law, for Spinoza it is security and liberty guided by reason. But Spinoza's liberal democracy is not against divine law. Rather, he wants to bring divine law

and politics together as well as allowing the philosopher to challenge superstitious interpretations of revelation and divine law.

While divine law could take many forms under the framework provided by Plato's *Laws* Spinoza limits it to only one legitimate kind, namely, his own. There is no reason to think that Spinoza expected the citizens of his ideal society to share his own philosophical religion of *Deus sive Natura*, or for that matter to even read his philosophy. He composed both of his great works in Latin, not in Dutch, which was the language of his homeland, or in Portuguese, which was the language of his family. His democratic society is a society free of superstition and probably lacking in institutions promoting pantheism or any other God of the philosophers. While citizens would not be compelled to accept his own religious beliefs, they would be compelled to accept his interpretation of revealed scripture if there is to be any hope of a common faith between citizens of different religious traditions.

Let us examine Spinoza's teaching on religion and politics more closely. Much of the *Treatise* addresses what Spinoza considers to be the mistaken beliefs about the Hebrew religion, its state, and its scriptures. While heavily critical on the Hebrew tradition, including Mosaic authorship of the Torah and the uniqueness of the Hebrew election, Spinoza is reluctant to criticize the Christian tradition. Spinoza's preference for early Christianity appears to be due to its capacity to legitimate how a civil religion can fit into liberal democracy. In this sense, the early Christians mirrored the Hebrews living under Moses due to the fact that both societies were preserved in holy writ not for their virtue or intellect, but for their civic piety. In Chapter Two he highlights the ignorance of the prophets concerning philosophy and science and uses this as evidence to conclude that the point of prophecy is not to offer profound natural knowledge. Yet neither is the goal of prophecy to offer a profound theological presentation of God. Quite to the contrary Spinoza concludes that the doctrine of God presented in the Bible is "commonplace" and widely available to gentiles (*Treatise* II.13).

Spinoza inquires into the meaning of biblical election, i.e. the notion that the Hebrew people were unique and elected by God for a specific vocation. Election is inseparable from the revelation of the law for it provides access to a specific way of life. The end or goal of revelation is to live well, not in the afterlife, as is the major concern of the later Christians, but in world that was created with a specific goal or purpose

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in mind. Spinoza's concern is not to reject the election of the Hebrews, but to understand its political significance.

Three possible reasons for election are three kinds of cultural contribution. The Hebrews could have been superior in wisdom and intellect or superior in moral virtue to other states. Yet Spinoza is clear that the Hebrew peoples were not superior to other peoples in these ways, but only in their political contribution. He concludes that Hebrew society was "chosen by God above others not for its understanding or for its qualities of mind, but owing to the form of its society and the good fortune, over so many years, with which it shaped and preserved its state" (*Treatise* 3.6). Divine law provided, for the Hebrews, a secure state, which is the end of all states and societies (*Treatise* 3.6). Other states had their own prophets and their own divine laws, but the uniqueness of the Hebrews is the fact that their revealed laws worked.

But does Spinoza think that divine laws are really the product of special revelation by God to prophets like Moses? No, laws are divine because of their function, not their origin:

Since law, accordingly, is nothing other than a rule for living which men prescribe to themselves or to others for a purpose, it seems it has to be divided into human and divine. By human law I mean a rule for living whose only purpose is to protect life and preserve the country. By divine law I mean the law which looks only to the supreme good, that is, to the true knowledge and love of God. The reason why I call this law divine is because of the nature of the supreme good. (*Treatise* 4.3)

Spinoza rejects the idea found in popular religion of special revelation or any kind of divination or other miraculous forms of communication. The latter ideas flourish only within superstitious believers, while the philosopher understands the true meaning of divine law. Philosophy is in fact the highest good since knowledge of God is available solely through philosophical reasoning. Spinoza goes as far as to say, "the Bible fully endorses the natural lights of reason and the natural divine law," which is a convenient conclusion to draw for his purposes.

The act of describing God as a legislator is a mistake made by the ignorant believers in popular religion (*Treatise* 4.10). As we know from Spinoza's *Ethics*, philosophy, not theology, can understand the ultimate



nature of God and God's laws are necessary and universal. Therefore, the piety of an individual religious cult, like that of the ancient Hebrews, rests on a mistake. The lack of universality in the Hebrew cult discounts it as genuine divine law. Spinoza accepts the biblical passages that conform with rational principles or secular or pagan philosophical insights. With the proper reading we can then see that "the Bible fully endorses the natural light of reason and the natural divine law" (*Treatise* 4.12). Yet, there are too many problems with this conclusion to think that Spinoza really believed it. His negative comments towards ancient Judaism coupled with praise of Jesus and Paul could be evidence for Strauss's argument that Spinoza was deliberately contradicting himself for the purpose of indirect communication.<sup>6</sup>

Spinoza makes a crucial distinction between true religion and superstition. The former is consistent with reason and philosophy while the latter is whatever contradicts reason and is probably the product of fear and ignorance. This gives him the boldness to assert that it is not impious to subject works like the Bible to historical and critical analysis. It is not contrary to true piety to say that it is a book full of errors and "mutilated, corrupt, and inconsistent" (*Treatise* 12.1–3).

True religion is common to all humanity. Certain biblical passages, like *Isaiah* 1:10, witness to the truth that true religion is not about ceremonies or buildings or books, but about a way of living. Intellect and charity are the true demands of the divine law—a law consistent with the ethical way of life discerned by unaided philosophical reasoning (*Treatise* 12.7). There is then no contradiction between reason and revelation or between philosophy and theology.

Popular belief in miracles or the legends of scripture arise because of the non-philosophical nature of the ordinary mind. Concerning the narratives of scripture he writes, "... knowing them and believing them is supremely necessary to ordinary people whose minds are not competent to perceive things clearly and distinctly" (*Treatise* 5.15). The beliefs must be guided by the wise, or at least by pastors who can direct ordinary believers towards the biblical "histories which can most move their hearts to obedience and devotion" (*Treatise* 5.18).

There is no conflict between reason and revelation because there can be no conflict between a belief, which implies some kind of epistemic

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<sup>6</sup> See Leo Strauss, *Persecution and the Art of Writing*.

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content or proposition, and a command, which is practical and independent of the mind. "Love thy neighbor" is neither true nor false and the activity performed in response to the command cannot be subsumed under veridical categories. We can only stamp *obedient* or *disobedient* on the action, not true or false. The way of life that obeys this command is the pious life. The philosopher is pious if and only if she obeys this one command, which is also, as I've said before, the goal of secular ethical philosophy. Spinoza concludes, "All other philosophical concerns that do not directly lead to this goal, whether concerned with knowledge of God or of natural things, are irrelevant to Scripture and must therefore be set aside from revealed religion" (*Treatise* 13.3).

Finally, let's try to focus more specifically on Spinoza's vision of liberal democracy. I do not want to exaggerate Spinoza's influence on the political philosophies of the Enlightenment as some historians have done (see, for example, Jonathan Israel's *Democratic Enlightenment*), but it would be equally foolish to ignore his influence. Spinoza has one of the earliest defenses of liberal democracy and is clearly in the tradition of Machiavelli and Hobbes. Although he read many ancient authors, especially while learning Latin, he was no follower of Plato and Aristotle. But even though his thinking departs from classical political philosophy and the wisdom of Plato's *Republic* and *Laws* he still is in conversation with them. I have positioned Spinoza as a responder to the *Laws* and the theological-political problems it raises concerning divine law, piety, freedom of speech, and tolerance. The latter two are Enlightenment values, but the presence of them in the *Laws X* is ominous.

Spinoza's vision of the state is democratic. He defines democracy as "a united gathering of people which collectively has the sovereign right to do all that it has the power to do" (*Treatise* 16.8). As with Hobbes all parties must transfer their natural right to the sovereign, and the sovereign has absolute power to even issue absurd laws contrary to reason. But Spinoza does not think that in a democratic state a sovereign would do such a thing. Furthermore, the freest state is the democratic state if its "laws are founded on sound reason; for there each man can be free whenever he wishes" (*Treatise* 16.10). Spinoza's account of freedom here is a positive rather than a negative one. Obeying laws that have a rational foundation is a positive freedom because it empowers one to live according to reason, which is the only true freedom human beings have in

this world. This account of freedom is in accordance with his *Ethics*, in which he links virtue, happiness, freedom, and reason<sup>7</sup> together.

Spinoza does not think the divine law of revealed religion, like the Hebrew religion of the Bible, has any authority over those who are not parties to the covenant disclosed to the Mosaic state (*Treatise* 17.30). Such a state does not allow for liberty or free and amiable exchange between human beings outside of the covenantal community. Piety is to be determined by the state, not the religious cult: “I also wish to demonstrate that religious worship and pious conduct must be accommodated to the peace and interests of the state and consequently must be determined by the sovereign authorities alone” (*Treatise* 19.2).

The political importance of piety for Spinoza’s democratic republic is fundamentally a question of public safety. The state exists for the safety of its members and public piety is a matter of protecting one’s neighbor. Obedience to God is really obedience to the public interests as mandated by a sovereign power (*Treatise* 19.11). Thus, divine law for Spinoza really is not like the divine law discussed in the *Laws* in the sense that Spinoza is not open to doctrines received by revelation that might contradict his Enlightenment version of civil religion. Spinoza is in the tradition of Hobbes, not Plato, Cicero, or Augustine.

### III: SPINOZA’S RESPONSE AND ITS LIMITS

Now let’s consider how Spinoza responds to the theological-political problem created by the *Laws*. He wants to maintain both a divine law tradition of a kind and allow for the freedom to philosophize publicly—namely, to challenge revelation. However, there are some clues that might lead us to suggest he was more aware of the problems than he makes it seem on the surface of writing. Thus, the *Treatise* is remarkable not only for what it says, but also for what it doesn’t say. Strauss pointed out many contradictions within the text leading him to conclude that the book is a work of esotericism.<sup>8</sup> Consider this example, which I think is quite relevant to the discussion of piety. Spinoza speaks of several opponents of his position that civil law and divine law are really one and the same (*Treatise* 19.14). Such opponents might think there is a serious tension

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<sup>7</sup> I am using reason here in the sense of an individual having enlightened self-interest. This is not to say that this concept of rationality is what Spinoza always means by reason.

<sup>8</sup> See, for example, Strauss, *Persecution and the Art of Writing*, 170.

between the two, between reason and revelation, politics and theology. But Spinoza responds:

I will not waste time on the arguments of my opponents where they strive to separate sacred law from civil law and to maintain that only the latter belongs to the sovereign authorities while the former adheres to the universal church. Their arguments are so flimsy that these do not deserve to be refuted. (*Treatise* 19.14)

Spinoza, careful thinker that he is, decides to skip over counter arguments. By omitting them he might be drawing our attention to their significance, or to the actual tension between reason and revelation.<sup>9</sup>

Spinoza's democratic state, equipped with all of the ideals of liberalism, appears to presuppose Enlightenment-style Christianity, or to use Kant's phrasing a religion within the bounds of reason. Since the main purpose of the existence of the state is to allow its members to live securely it also follows that its purpose is for them to live *freely* as well (*Treatise* 20.6). So, he begins the *Treatise* by asserting that the state exists for security and concludes that its true purpose is freedom. Only a monarchy or an extremely violent democracy could suppress freedom of speech (*Treatise* 20.2-3). But what if the free thought and speech of some of the citizens threatens the security of the state? Spinoza agrees that treasonous words are a danger to the state, and while it cannot suppress this liberty completely, it must find a moderate solution.

The only dangerous speech is the impious speech that attacks or subverts the security of the state, i.e. what can "dissolve the agreement by which each person surrenders their right to act according to their own judgment" (*Treatise* 20.9). In other words, speech is impious if it endangers the social contract fabric of society. So, the independent thinker, the philosopher, can speak freely if and only if she avoids speaking against the right of the sovereign to rule. Elsewhere Spinoza even claims that one is free to challenge the justice of law as long as the challenge is done calmly, without violating the law while it exists.

The other beliefs of the philosophers seem to be fine if made public unless the state is corrupt, meaning, "where superstitious and ambitious people who cannot tolerate free-minded persons, have

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<sup>9</sup> The development of this point would take us beyond the scope of this paper.

achieved such reputation and prominence that their authority exerts greater influence with the common people than that of the sovereign powers" (*Treatise* 20.9). As long as one always acts with charity and justice towards one's neighbor freedom to philosophize will stand unchallenged.

Spinoza's response consists of the following claims: (1) The best regime is one ruled by reason, founded on the social contract, in which citizens practice justice and charity to each other, which is the essence of piety. (2) Freedom of speech must be allowed. (3) Philosophers must be moderate if they have opinions that would challenge the power of the state and keep them to themselves. (4) There is no conflict between reason and revelation, so the philosophers could never challenge the important religious aspects of public life and/or the role of divine law in politics. I will now turn to the three limits to this response:

### 1. *Spinoza's sharp dividing line between reason and superstition*

The first limit to Spinoza's response to Plato's *Laws* concerns the sharp division between reason and superstition at work in his *Treatise*. I do not think there is any state in existence or previously in existence that embraced the rational and natural religion of Spinoza. In many ways we all must be like Spinoza in order for this idea to work. Like Plato, if we were all philosophers there would be no need for justice or maybe even for government. Like Aristotle, if we were all friends there would be no need for justice. But that is why there is government because we are not all philosophers and certainly not all friends. Spinoza fails to address (or at least ignores) this problem and even accepts a natural inequality of men with regard to the presence of reason in the theoretical or philosophical usage of the term.

Spinoza's solution is simply to empty revelation of any cognitive content. This removes any possibility of contradiction between reason and revelation, philosophy and divine law because any difference is now a difference in kind. This separation enables Spinoza to harness the power of divine law—namely, its power to direct the ends of the non-philosophical citizen towards virtue and the common good. The act of protecting the private belief of the philosophers entails the elimination of the private belief of religious citizens. Any society that allows freedom of

belief and praises the power of reason alongside divine law will engender dogmatic theology of some kind.

Strauss points out that Spinoza is harshest towards the Old Testament while leaving much of Christian doctrine untouched. Yet his critique extends to both Judaism and Christianity. He praises the early Christian church's civil religion, yet is silent about the doctrines of Calvinism and Catholicism. Surely he was not ignorant of them. It would then appear that in order for any society to allow any form of divine law or a revealed way of life and the public use of reason without the possibility of contradiction would demand the uniformity of belief about religion and the divine. Thus, everyone would have to be Spinozists or deists or some version of *philosophe moderne*.

## 2. *Spinoza's reduction of religion, theology, and divine law to works*

It is significant that Spinoza thinks religion and piety can be reduced to works. This framework might have been possible for ancient Greek religion, but it certainly is not plausible for the major religious traditions of Spinoza's (and our own) day. Spinoza must reduce piety and religion to works so that no speech of any philosopher or scientist could possibly contradict theological or revealed doctrine, or for that matter, any use of divine law in politics that deviates from modern political liberalism.

The only way in which a contradiction between reason and revelation could occur is if the product of revelation was knowledge. If scripture had epistemic content then its doctrines and teachings might conflict with the claims of the philosophers who speculate without special revelation. But surely no astute reader of scripture thinks it is free of claims to knowledge. Granted there are no arguments for God's existence or philosophical treatises in the Bible, but that does not mean there are no intellectual claims within it. Why else, for example, would Paul claim that the gospel is a stumbling block? Why else would the author of Colossians warn of vain philosophies unless he thought his own was the true philosophy? Historians of early Christianity are adamant that belief in the resurrection of Jesus was absolutely essential in the minds of the first Christians.

But if the resurrection of Jesus is the most important doctrine of Christianity, and resurrection is a miracle, then there is at least one thing

taught in Christian scripture that might possibly conflict with reason. Spinoza seems to ignore this possibility although I doubt he did not realize a contradiction was present. His reasoning is simply that scripture “condemns not ignorance but disobedience” (*Treatise* 13.3). What then must the pious individual obey? She need only love her neighbor to fulfill the law. Spinoza quotes Paul’s Epistle to the Romans to this effect and concludes that the only knowledge required for piety is knowledge of this single command.

### 3. *Spinoza’s silence on theological disagreements*

Spinoza ignores the theological differences of his own day. Spinoza with his Portuguese Jewish heritage, living in Protestant Calvinistic Holland with Catholic France knocking on the door, was no stranger to theological controversy. Biographers have insisted that a young Spinoza was excommunicated for impiety from his Jewish community. If Spinoza’s liberal democracy is a tolerant society then it either must tolerate theological disagreements or it must deny that any disagreements exist. Spinoza seems to approve of the latter option, but I have already shown the problems with that approach.

## IV. CONCLUSION

My argument has been that Spinoza’s response can only be successful if he can empty revelation of intellectual content. By reducing revelation to works or to a divine law tradition that is identical to natural ethics Spinoza resolves the tension between reason and revelation, thus allowing for freedom of speech which would include the impious questioning of the gods banned by the Athenian Stranger in *Laws* X. But all of this rests on the believers in popular religion accepting Spinoza’s natural religion that does not contradict rational philosophy. The three limits to this response, I think, show how Spinoza’s vision of liberal democracy would in fact not be compatible with a revealed divine law tradition. This means that the theological-political problem contained within Plato’s *Laws* cannot be resolved by Spinoza’s attempt to remove the contradiction between reason and revelation. The problem of Socrates appears to remain intact.

The *Laws* of Plato, however, still might provide a resource for the liberal tradition today, as I think Mark Lutz provides in *Divine Law and*

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*Political Philosophy in Plato's Laws*. Yet, there might need to be more work done on the meaning of Spinoza's *Treatise*. Strauss observed several contradictions and I think I have added a few more. I find it hard to accept that Spinoza was unaware of the problems of his teaching. I find it hard to accept that he would be so uncritical of Christianity, yet undermine its intellectual content. He may not have discussed Plato, but he was aware of the problem of Socrates—of free speech leading to impiety. This leads me to think that Spinoza actually recognized the limits of his response to the problem of using philosophical reason to critique the theological-political framework of the state. But that would require an esoteric reading.



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