

Spinoza as Religious Philosopher: Between Radical Protestantism and Jewishness

INTRODUCTION

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Interest in the nature and definition of the period of history known as the Enlightenment has grown recently as scholars have taken fresh approaches to old materials amid the shifting trends of contemporary methods and interests. One of the most illuminating scholars to present a compelling new perspective on the Enlightenment as a whole is Jonathan Israel, the intellectual historian whose lengthy works, *Radical Enlightenment*¹ and *Enlightenment Contested*,² offer a novel framework for understanding how and why the transition from the pre-modern era to modernity occurred. Israel's central thesis is that the Enlightenment was a two-level phenomenon, one of which was "radical" and virtually the product of one person, Benedict/Baruch Spinoza. This movement stood in critical relationship to another movement, the "moderate" Enlightenment, characterized by the thought of Locke, Voltaire, and Hume.

By presenting Spinoza's as the unifying strand of "radical" Enlightenment thought, which actually combated the advancement of the "moderate" Enlightenment, this conception of the shift toward modernity opens up a new range of meanings for key terms like "Enlightenment," "modernity," and even "radicalism." It also seeks to recapture some of the lost potential of certain marginalized aspects of the Enlightenment project. In addition, it provides a different historical framework that allows us to discard prior, inadequate, falsely conceived ideas of what the modern shift was about, thereby calling for a new awakening in current anti-Enlightenment ideologies. By taking a new, closer look at Spinoza's radical Enlightenment project, his context, and the concomitant movement, it is possible and perhaps even fruitful to reconceive the very problem of modernity.

Symposium on Spinoza as Religious Philosopher

The four articles in this section of CGR comprise proceedings from

a symposium, “Spinoza as Religious Philosopher: Between Radical Protestantism and Jewishness,” held in Toronto on October 20, 2006, at the Victoria University Chapel. Attended by approximately fifty professors and graduate students from universities across southwestern Ontario, the symposium was organized by the Toronto Mennonite Theological Centre (TMTC) and co-sponsored by Emmanuel College. Financial support for travel and publicity costs was provided by Conrad Grebel University College. Jeremy Bergen, Interim Director of TMTC, opened the event; Jonathan Seiling introduced the theme, and Peter Hartman introduced each speaker. The organization of the event and the book reviews on Spinoza-related literature appearing in this issue were undertaken by doctoral students affiliated with TMTC.

Organizers struggled to come up with the perfect title for the symposium, and while it falls somewhat short of perfection, the two poles it sets up – radical Protestantism and Jewishness – represent the key emphases of the two main speakers, Willi Goetschel and Graeme Hunter, both of whom have recently published monographs on different aspects of the religious nature of Spinoza’s thought. Responses to these speakers followed, by David Novak from the perspective of Jewish Studies, and by Michael Driedger, stemming from his historical research into the related activities of Dutch Mennonites from that era, some of whom interacted with Spinoza and played an important role in the early Dutch Enlightenment.³ The monographs by Goetschel and Hunter are reviewed in this issue. In addition to the four main papers, Brayton Polka provided reflection on the symposium theme from the perspective of his very recent scholarship appearing in a two-volume study on Spinoza, the Bible and modernity, also reviewed in this issue.⁴

The lead articles by Hunter and Goetschel that follow, based on their symposium presentations, make use of further study along lines of investigation they started in their recent monographs. Hunter reflects on the scholarly tradition concerning Spinoza and the reaction to his thesis on Spinoza’s “radical Protestant Christianity.”⁵ Goetschel explores in greater depth the notion of modern Jewishness as a product of Spinoza’s philosophy. In his response, “Spinoza and the Boundary Zones of Religious Interaction,” Driedger provides further background on the later social-political and

religious context of Spinoza and the Mennonites with whom he interacted. Novak, in “Spinoza’s Excommunication,” explores key questions, largely in response to Goetschel, on the concept of Spinoza’s Jewishness and how modern Judaism should consider Spinoza’s status as an excommunicated Jew.

Historical and Religious Background

Baruch (or Bento) d’Espinosa, later named Benedictus Spinoza (1632-1677), was born into a community of Sephardic Jews in Amsterdam coming from a branch known as the Marranos. After the Inquisition when many Spanish Jews had fled to Portugal, most were forced to openly convert to Christianity, but they continued to practice Judaism in secret. When the Dutch Republic gained independence from Spanish imperial rule in 1581, the religious toleration available in the north provinces attracted these Jews and other religious dissidents. Many Jews arrived in Amsterdam, which became the largest place of Jewish settlement, and they quickly began re-establishing their social and religious identity and economic prosperity during the Golden Age of Dutch trade. Philosophy, science, and the arts flourished, and many freethinkers and radicals were drawn to the “buzz” around various cultural and intellectual centers in Holland.

Why would Mennonites today host an event about Spinoza, a man widely considered the first secular Jew? The answer may be as intriguing for contemporary religion and philosophy as it is for historical research. It is well documented that after his excommunication it was largely Dutch Mennonites who supported Spinoza by providing him with finances, defending him, interpreting his thought in light of their own religious tradition, and ultimately by editing, translating, and publishing his works.⁶ They were part of a growing body of Mennonites involved in a quasi-church movement in seventeenth-century Holland called the Collegiants.⁷ Although the Collegiants were making increasingly stronger ties with the Mennonite churches in certain areas, where some Mennonites led and hosted the Collegiant meetings, other conservative Mennonites sharply opposed this movement.⁸

Beyond the fact that Spinoza hung out with Mennonites and that Mennonites hung out with Spinoza, what does this explain about that era

of Dutch religious society and the interactions of different religious groups – Mennonites, Jews, Quakers, Socinians, Remonstrants, Collegiants, and other radicals – within the context of the broader Calvinist society? How did such events and conflicts in this era of confessionalization inform these traditions at a key point in their identity formation? While the engagement of certain Dutch Mennonites with Spinoza says something about Spinoza’s context, it also says quite a bit about this strand of Dutch Mennonites, about whom we know far too little.⁹

Through a greater awareness of the context in which this radical strand of the early Enlightenment developed, we may come to recognize more fully the important but largely unsung role Dutch Mennonites played in a key early stage of that era. Michael Driedger’s previous article on Mennonites in the Dutch Enlightenment in general is a helpful place to begin further discovery of the genesis of complexity underlying Dutch Mennonite modernity.¹⁰ Many parts of this story remain to be told.¹¹

Notes

¹ Jonathan Israel, *Radical Enlightenment: Philosophy and the Making of Modernity 1650-1750* (Toronto: Oxford Univ. Press, 2001).

² Jonathan Israel, *Enlightenment Contested: Philosophy, Modernity, and the Emancipation of Man 1670–1752* (Toronto: Oxford Univ. Press, 2006).

³ Michael D. Driedger, *Obedient Heretics: Mennonite Identities in Lutheran Hamburg and Altona During the Confessional Age* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2002); reviewed by Werner Packull in *CGR* 21.2 (Spring 2003).

⁴ Brayton Polka, *Between Philosophy and Religion: Spinoza, the Bible, and Modernity* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2006).

⁵ Another recent study on Spinoza’s view of Christ is Amalia Bettini, *Il Cristo di Spinoza* (Milan: Ghibli, 2005).

⁶ Benedictus de Spinoza, *B.D.S. Opera posthuma*, ed. Jarig Jelles (Amsterdam: J. Rieuwerts, 1677). The Dutch Mennonite Collegiant scholar Jarig Jelles wrote the preface to this collection in Dutch, which was then translated into Latin. A comparative analysis and description of the preface is found in F. Akkerman and H.G. Hubbeling, “The Preface to Spinoza’s Posthumous Works 1677 and Its Author Jarig Jelles (c. 1619/20–1683),” *Lias* 6.1 (1979): 103-73. For a biographical article on Jelles, see W.G. van der Tak, “Jarich Jellesz’ Origins, Jellesz’ Life and Business,” *Mededelingen vanwege het Spinozahuis* 59 (1989): 11-22. It is puzzling why Jonathan Israel believes the supporters were Socinians and implicitly not Mennonites. See Israel, *Enlightenment Contested*, 121-23.

⁷ The most comprehensive study of this group of Dutch Mennonites and the Collegiants is still available only in Dutch: J.C. van Slee, *De Rijnsburger Collegianten: Geschiedkundig onderzoek* (Haarlem: Erven F. Bohn, 1895). Of equal value is a lengthy study from the following year, available in French: Koenraad Oege Meinsma, *Spinoza et son cercle: étude critique historique sur les hétérodoxes hollandais*, S. Roosenburg (Paris: J. Vrin, 1983), a translation of *Spinoza en zijn kring* (1896). More recent is a helpful study in English: Andrew C. Fix, *Prophecy and Reason: The Dutch Collegiants in the Early Enlightenment* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton Univ. Press, 1991), plus shorter studies by Leszek Kolakowski, whose most recent article on this topic is “Dutch Seventeenth-Century Non-Denominationalism and Religio Rationalis: Mennonites, Collegiants and the Spinoza Connection,” in *The Two Eyes of Spinoza and Other Essays on Philosophers*,” Zbigniew Janowski, ed. (South Bend, IN: St Augustine’s Press, 2004).

⁸ See Driedger’s article below for a brief overview of this controversy called “the War of the Lambs.”

⁹ In 1662, Pieter Balling wrote a Spiritualist tract, *Het Licht op den Kandelaar* [The Light Upon the Candelstick], against William Ames, an itinerant British Quaker, that was translated into English in 1663 and appears as an appendix in William Sewel, *The History of the Rise, Increase and Progress of the Christian People Called Quakers* (London: Darton and Harvey, 1811). Recently a French Spinoza specialist has argued that the tract should be considered an oral teaching of Spinoza. See Marc Bedjai, *La lumière sur le candelabre (1662) de Pierre Balling: Fragment d’un enseignement spinoziste et inédita spinozana (texte, traduction et commentaire)* (N.p.: N.d., 1986). The tract was subsequently republished in Dutch as a companion to a confession by Spinoza’s editor and close Mennonite friend, Jarig Jelles, who wrote it to demonstrate the compatibility of Spinoza’s philosophy with biblical doctrine, the New Testament in particular. A parallel Dutch-Italian edition is available as Jarig Jelles, *Professione della fede universale e cristiana, contenuta in una lettera a N. N. / Belydenisse des algemeenen en christelyken Geloofs, vervattet in een Brief an N. N. (1684)*, Leen Spruit (Macerata: Quodlibet, 2004). A large collection of these and other related writings from this era is listed in J.G. Boekenooogen, ed., *Catalogus der werken over de Doopsgezinden en hunne Geschiedenis aanwezig in de bibliotheek der Vereenigde Doopsgezinde Gemeente te Amsterdam* (Amsterdam: J.H. de Bussy, 1919).

¹⁰ Michael Driedger, “An Article Missing from the *Mennonite Encyclopedia*: ‘The Enlightenment in the Netherlands’,” in *Commoners and Community: Essays in Honour of Werner O. Packull*, ed. C. Arnold Snyder (Kitchener, ON: Pandora Press, 2002), 101-20.

¹¹ Further research into the contributions of Dutch Mennonites to the scientific progress of that era is becoming available. See E.P. Hamm, “Mennonites, Science and Progress in the Dutch Enlightenment,” in *The Global and the Local: The History of Science and the Cultural Integration of Europe*, Proceedings of the 2nd International Congress of the European Society for the History of Science, Cracow, Poland, September 6-9, 2006.

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