Response to Graeme Hunter

Spinoza and the Boundary Zones of Religious Interaction

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Mennonites in Amsterdam during Spinoza's Career

Graeme Hunter has emphasized Spinoza's associations and affinity with the Collegiants. To defend his thesis he draws partly upon a rich and well-established historiographical literature about Spinoza's religious world. What is striking for me is that many of Spinoza's closest associates were not simply Collegiants; they were also Mennonites who were active in Collegiant circles. These included Pieter Balling, Jan Hendrik Glazemaker, Jarig Jelles, Jacob Ostens, Jan Rieuwertsz, Sr., and Simon Joosten de Vries.[1] These men made sure Spinoza's work was translated and published, and they also provided him with friendship and encouragement after (and maybe even before) his excommunication from Amsterdam's Jewish community.

Because of the close connection between these Mennonite Collegiants and Spinoza, I'll say a little more about Dutch Mennonites in the 1650s and 1660s. Most historians agree that the Anabaptists of the early sixteenth century are usefully described as representatives of the so-called "Radical Reformation," but Mennonites and other groups of Anabaptists did not remain fixed for long in a "radical" mode. By the middle of the sixteenth century they, like many of their Christian neighbors, had begun to establish new confessional and institutional traditions.

One of the most famous products of conservative Mennonite culture is *The Martyrs Mirror*, which includes three confessions of faith in the introduction, all modeled on mainstream Christian confessions of faith and all emphasizing the Mennonites' creedal orthodoxy and obedience to secular authorities. The conservative leader Thieleman Jansz van Braght published the martyrology in the Netherlands in 1660, and since then it has gone through dozens of printings in multiple languages. What is often forgotten is that *The Martyrs' Mirror* was intended largely as an only slightly veiled polemic against a group of ethically- rather than confessionally-oriented

Mennonites who gathered in Amsterdam in the congregation of preacher Galenus Abrahamsz.[2] This is the same congregation with which Spinoza's Mennonite friends were affiliated.

Abrahamsz, like Spinoza's Mennonite friends, was an active Collegiant, as well as a doctor, alchemist, and associate of many of Amsterdam's intellectual elite. However, unlike some of his Mennonite Collegiant colleagues, he seems to have had little contact with Spinoza. A brief summary of some of Abrahamsz's beliefs can help us understand a few of the differences that may have separated him from Spinoza.[3]

Historian Andrew Fix has proposed a useful ideal-typical distinction between "spiritualizing" versus "rationalizing" views among Collegiants.[4] While the distinction was not so marked in the early years of the Collegiants' history, it became clearer in the course of the 1660s. In the 1650s the spiritualistic Abrahamsz believed that the church had fallen soon after the life of Christ and that human efforts to achieve perfection in this world were doomed. Therefore, he put little faith in confessions of faith or church hierarchies. Instead, the Word of God in the Bible and the example of the life of Christ were crucial measures for him. Attitudes toward Jesus separated Abrahamsz from Spinoza. While Spinoza did write regularly and approvingly of Jesus in the *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus* (hereafter *TTP*), for him Jesus was only a man, albeit one who had a special relationship with God. This was a position not only counter to the Nicean Creed but also illegal after civil authorities across the Netherlands outlawed Socinianism in the 1650s. Because Abrahamsz (like the Socinians) did not hold to the Satisfaction doctrine, his Mennonite opponents had him charged in 1663 with the crime of Socinianism, but he was acquitted for he held largely conventional Trinitarian views.

Baptism (adult baptism, to be specific) was also more important for Abrahamsz than it was for Spinoza. Spinoza's lack of concern for baptism is especially noteworthy, since one of the few rituals Collegiants did practice regularly was adult baptism by immersion.[5] Furthermore, Spinoza probably had little interest in either the alchemical projects Abrahamsz spent great energy on or the millenarian hopes he harbored. Unlike Abrahamsz who held largely spiritualizing views, Spinoza's closer Mennonite contacts tended toward more strongly rationalizing views, influenced by the works of Spinoza and René Descartes.

Despite these differences, there was a key similarity: both Galenus Abrahamsz and Spinoza advocated a doctrinally minimalistic, ethical form of religion. Abrahamsz's Amsterdam congregation, composed as it was of a significant number of Collegiants and led by a self-styled reformer, was a testing ground for a version of what we might consider (following Hunter) a Spinozist-style of religious reform, the purpose of which was to establish the basis for religious peace. The irony, however, was that the anti-confessional ideals of Abrahamsz and his fellow Collegiants resulted in a major Mennonite schism.

Disputes starting around 1655 between orthodox confessionalists and Collegiants in Abrahamsz's Amsterdam congregation resulted in what became popularly known as the "War of the Lambs." The title is partly a play on the name of the Mennonites' meeting house (the church *bij het Lam*, so-called because it was marked with a sign of a lamb), and partly a reference to a conflict in a supposedly peaceful flock of Christ. The church also served as an occasional Collegiant meeting house. By 1664 Galenus's Lamists had succeeded in forcing out van Bragh t's Zonists (the confessional faction named after their new meeting house marked with the sign of the sun). The schism lasted for well over a century. The Jewish community was not the only one plagued by dissension.

Reservations about the Hunter Thesis

Because there were strong affinities between some Mennonite Collegiant beliefs (especially those of Pieter Balling and Jarig Jelles) and Spinoza's philosophy, and also because of the close association Spinoza had with freethinking Mennonites, I'm inclined to see a great deal of value in Hunter's thesis. My suspicion is that it may be most surprising to philosophers unfamiliar with the historical context. Having said this, however, I do have a reservation about it. Hunter wants to do more than develop the historically well-founded view that Spinoza's Collegiant associations were a key aspect of his philosophical and religious development; he wants to frame Spinoza in a Protestant tradition of reform. In Hunter's own words Spinoza was "a child of the Reformation" who, like other Protestant reformers before him, wished "to recover [Christianity's] original shape."[6]

To explain why I think this is an overstated position, I will begin with a critique of the heuristic concept of the *nadere reformatie* (Dutch for

further or second reformation). It is a concept created by European Protestant historians to write about the revivalistic spirit that inspired some Protestants from the late sixteenth through the eighteenth centuries to grow tired of mere (and, in their view, failed) institutional reform and to prefer instead a fundamental reform of morals. From what I read in the *TTP*, this aspiration resonates well with Spinoza's thought. This is also why Hunter argues that "What Spinoza is advocating is not the abolition of Christianity, but a second reformation of it." My concern is that the aspiration for a reform of religious life in Spinoza's mid-seventeenth century milieu was not uniquely Protestant or even Christian. Labeling Spinoza a Protestant runs the risk of over-defining him.

My position is influenced by historical research organized around another heuristic concept: "confessionalization." Historians use it to discuss the processes of collective identity formation and institutionalization among believers in the early modern period. Originally historians applied the concept to mainstream Christian churches – Lutheran, Calvinist, Catholic – as an analytical alternative to the older Reformation / Counter-Reformation dichotomy. In my view, the concept of confessionalization applied in this narrow sense fails to realize its full heuristic utility, because it ignores similar processes of institutionalization that took place in other religious communities, both nonconforming and non-Christian.

A very good contribution to scholarship on this subject is a 2003 essay by the Göttingen German studies professor Gerhard Lauer.[7] On the basis of a careful study of early modern Jewish history and devotional literature, Lauer redefines confessionalization as a process in which believers rejected established forms of religious life because these forms did not satisfy deeply felt spiritual needs. Actions typical of these believers included writing biblical commentaries, condemning false believers, adopting ascetic practices, or participating in messianic fervor. The consequence was a differentiation of Jewish religious expression: sometimes the devotional impulse led to a newly intensified, institutionalized orthodoxy; and occasionally it led to radical, heterodox, extra-institutional forms, some of which survived while others vanished into obscurity after a brief existence. To cast Lauer's thesis in terms that Hunter uses, it was not fear of religion but fear of insufficient devotion that drove a process of ongoing change in Jewish communities.

One advantage of Lauer's position is that he does not want merely to make sense of the dynamics of early modern Jewish life alone but rather to use Jewish examples to illustrate patterns of change common in Jewish and Christian circles. The case of the War of the Lambs provides examples of intensified religious concerns from both the Collegiant and conservative Mennonite sides. From a viewpoint like Lauer's emphasizing the ongoing dynamics of religious differentiation, to speak of a "first" versus a "second" Reformation (or Radical versus Magisterial Reformation) is not especially useful for advanced research, because the reforming impulse in Judaism and Christianity does not easily fit into such neatly dichotomous categories. It is better to think about concrete reformers and reform movements: some large, some small; some successful in establishing themselves in a stable and lasting form, some without staying power; many overlapping and competing. Amsterdam of the mid-seventeenth century was full of reform-minded individuals and reform movements of many descriptions. Certainly not all were Protestant. Revivalist excitement there extended well beyond Protestant communities.

The Boundary Zones of Religious Interaction

Commenting on the reasons for Spinoza's break with and excommunication from the Jewish community, Steven Nadler writes: "if one must search for the 'corruptor' of Spinoza, then, in a sense the real culprit is Amsterdam itself."[8] In his career Spinoza would have heard about, interacted with, and undoubtedly learned in varying degrees from Jewish nonconformists, ex-Jesuit freethinkers, rationalist philosophers, Christian millenarian preachers, Quaker missionaries, and Collegiants. In a place like Amsterdam confessionalization, understood in Lauer's terms as the differentiation of religious life driven by the impulse to revive religious faith and practice, created a climate providing many opportunities for interaction across established dogmatic boundaries. I offer three examples.

In the middle of the seventeenth century a small group of Mennonites, presumably from Galenus Abrahamsz's congregation, had paid Rabbi Menasseh ben Israel to publish a vocalized edition of the Mishna. Rabbi Judah Leon had done the linguistic work, while Adam Boreel, a key Collegiant leader, wrote a commentary on the text.[9] Both men had shared

living quarters and visited a local synagogue together for several years without apparently causing controversy in the Jewish community. The text was not successful in reaching a broad audience. Nonetheless, the episode is one example of the not infrequent contacts between Jews and Christian nonconformists. These contacts usually did not result in excommunication of the Jews involved.

Another dramatic example of such contacts is the visit of Jerusalem Rabbi Nathan Shapira to Amsterdam in 1657. The visit caused a stir among Protestant millenarians, since Shapira held a positive view of Jesus as a manifestation of the spirit of the messiah and thought highly of the Sermon on the Mount. Richard Popkin has made a link between Shapira's and Spinoza's attitudes toward Jesus.[10] An implication of his argument is that a philo-Christian attitude, while the unpopular view of a minority, did not on its own exclude one automatically from the Jewish community. A positive attitude toward some aspects of Christian belief did, however, help promote contacts between Christians and Jews. The purpose of Shapira's trip to Amsterdam was to raise funds for his community in the Levant, and he found a receptive audience in Christians like Peter Serrarius, Henry Jessey, and John Dury.

My final example of irenical contacts on the boundaries of religious affiliation is the work of Mennonite Collegiant printer Jan Rieuwertsz, Sr. He published much of Spinoza's corpus, as well as the work by Spinoza's close Mennonite Collegiant associates Pieter Balling and Jarig Jelles. Among his other publishing projects were:[11]

- philosophical treatises by such seventeenth-century authors as Antoine Arnauld, René Descartes, Hugo Grotius, and Petrus Ramus;

- political treatises, including a translation of a work by Oliver Cromwell;

- theological treatises by sixteenth- and seventeenth-century authors as diverse as Desiderius Erasmus, Johann Heinrich Bullinger, Dirck Rafaelsz Camphuysen, and Hermann Montanus;

- publications by Mennonite authors such as Galenus Abrahamsz, Thieleman Jansz van Braght, Antonius van Dale, Cornelis Moorman, Joachim Oudaen, David Spruyt, and Reynier Wybrantsz;

- volumes of mystical theology, especially the work of Antoinette Bourignon;

- anthologies of contemporary poetry;

- works by ancient Greek and Roman authors such as Homer, Epictetus, and Pliny the Elder;

- translations of the Quran and other Islamic works;

- accounts of travel to Brazil, the Middle East, Asia, and Africa.

Jan Hendrik Glazemaker was the translator of many of these projects. Rieuwertsz's print shop encouraged a community of readers whose curiosity was so "catholic" that it extended beyond the conventionally Christian.

Spinoza's ideas, like Rieuwartsz's publishing, transcend conventional confessional categorization. While we could try to fit Spinoza into a distinctly Protestant reforming tradition, this seems an unnecessary and confessionally partisan treatment of an anti-confessional thinker. I would argue, rather, that what is important for understanding Spinoza is the boundary zones between Christian and Jewish orthodoxies where the unconventionally devout (and sometimes even their orthodox counterparts) met to exchange texts and ideas.

Notes

[1] See Wiep van Bunge, ed., *The Dictionary of Seventeenth and Eighteenth-Century Dutch Philosophers*, 2 vols. (Bristol: Thoemmes Press, 2003), for articles with bibliographies of Pieter Balling (45-47), Jan Hendrik Glazemaker (331-34), Jarig Jelles (492-94), Jacob Ostens (761-64), and Jan Rieuwertsz, Sr. (841-45).

[2] For further background on *The Martyrs Mirror*, as well as on the War of the Lambs (discussed later in this essay), see Michael Driedger, *Obedient Heretics: Mennonite Identities*

in Lutheran Hamburg and Altona during the Confessional Age (Aldershot, UK: Ashgate, 2002), ch. 3.

[3] Literature on Abrahamsz's life and thought, as well as on the War of the Lambs, includes: Ruud Lambour, "De alchemistische wereld van Galenus Abrahamsz (1622-1706)," *Doopsgezinde Bijdragen*, new series 31 (2005): 93-168; Andrew Fix, "Mennonites and Collegiants in Holland, 1630-1700," *MQR* 64:2 (1990), 160-77; Andrew Fix, "Mennonites and Rationalism in the Seventeenth Century" in *From Martyr to Muppy (Mennonite Urban Professionals): A Historical Introduction to Cultural Assimilation Processes of a Religious Minority in the Netherlands: The Mennonites*, eds. Alastair Hamilton, Sjouke Voolstra, and Piet Visser (Amsterdam: Amsterdam Univ. Press, 1994), 159-74); Leszek Kolakowski, "Dutch Seventeenth-Century Anticonfessional Ideas and Rational Religion: The Mennonite, Collegiant and Spinozan Connections," trans. and intro. by James Satterwhite, *MQR* 64:3 (1990): 259-97 and 64:4 (1990): 385-416; H.W. Meihuizen, *Galenus Abrahamsz 1622-1706: Strijder voor een onbeperkte verdraagzaamheid en verdediger van het Doperse Spiritualisme* (Haarlem: H.D. Tjeenk Willink & Zoon N.V., 1954).

[4] Andrew Fix, *Prophecy and Reason: The Dutch Collegiants in the Early Enlightenment* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1991).

[5] See the illustration in ibid., 136.

[6] Graeme Hunter, *Radical Protestantism in Spinoza's Thought* (Aldershot, UK: Ashgate, 2005), 76.

[7] Gerhard Lauer, "Die Konfessionalisierung des Judentums: Zum Prozeß der religiösen Ausdifferenzierung im Judentum am Übergang zur Neuzeit," in Kaspar von Greyerz, Manfred Jakubowski-Tiessen, Thomas Kaufmann, and Hartmut Lehmann, eds.: *Interkonfessionalität - Transkonfessionalität - binnenkonfessionelle Pluralität. Neue Forschungen zur Konfessionalisierungsthese.* Schriften des Vereins für Reformationsgeschichte, Nr. 201.(Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 2003), 250-83.

[8] Steven Nadler, *Spinoza: A Life* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1999), 147.

[9] Lambour, 110-11, especially n. 37. For more background on the translation project, see Richard H. Popkin, *Spinoza* (Oxford: Oneworld, 2004), 63; and Ernestine van der Wall, "The Dutch Hebraist Adam Boreel and the Mishnah Project: Six Unpublished Letters," *Lias* 16 (1989): 239-63.

[10] Richard H. Popkin, "Rabbi Nathan Shapira's Visit to Amsterdam in 1657," *Dutch Jewish History* (Jerusalem: Tel-Aviv University, 1984), 185-205.

[11] The list is compiled based on a search of the on-line catalogue of the University of Amsterdam Library: www.uba.uva.nl.

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