

The question of secularization: Spinoza and his relationships to deism and atheism

Abstract

The aim of this article is to bring to light some of the factors that allowed the emergence of secularization, and to understand to what extent and in what ways these factors contributed to the formation of the main lines of Spinozism. I will first examine the issues of secularization, emphasizing the importance of the transformations in the status of the Hebrew language during the Renaissance. I will then analyze the role that the *Tractatus theologico-politicus* may have had in European culture. Finally, I will clarify Spinoza's relationship to deism and atheism, specifying the nature of the controversies related to his religious attitude.

Keywords: secularization, Hebrew, Spinoza, *Tractatus theologico-politicus*, deism, atheism

Mots-clefs

Sécularisation, Hébreu, Spinoza, *Tractatus theologico-politicus*, déisme, athéisme

The term secularization appeared in Europe in 1567,¹ but the roots of the notion he designates are already in Biblical Tradition. Thus, *Leviticus* 10: 10 contrasts the categories of the holy (*qodesh*) and the profane (*hol*); terms that the *Vulgate* translates as *sanctum* and *profanum*. The profane man is referred to in the *Midrash* by the term *hylony*, in the sense of non-priest (*Kohen*).² This opposition will then undergo a double transformation. Whereas in Judaism, these terms fall into strictly priestly categories, Christianity extends the notion of *saeculum* to the world itself, as Paul points out in his *Letter to the Christians of Rome* 12: 2, to qualify the temporal dimension of human life, that is, the "century," from which it is appropriate to distance oneself. The foundation of secular society, which opposes temporal and spiritual power, is to be found in Christ's words: "Give to Caesar what is Caesar's, and to God what is God's (*quae Caesaris sunt Caesari et quae Dei sunt Deo*)" (*Luke* XX, 25). We are thus witnessing the transition from an opposition specific to the priestly domain (sacred/profane), to a dichotomy of a theological-political order between spiritual and temporal power. However, the Christian origin of secularization has been challenged, emphasizing that it proceeds from a break caused by the emergence of modern science and a new conception of politics.³ Similarly, although the religious notion of eschatology has been brought closer to the secular notion of progress, Hans Blumenberg noted their difference, which could be precisely related to Spinozism: "eschatology speaks of an event irrupting into history, in relation to which it is *transcendent* and heterogeneous; the idea of progress extrapolates into the future from a structure *immanent* to history and forming part of any present."⁴ The classic studies of Jonathan J. Israel and Yirmiyahu Yovel have shown the decisive role of Spinoza, on the one hand, in the rise of

¹Bloch O, Von Wartburg W. *Dictionnaire étymologique de la langue française*. 3^e Ed. Paris, PUF; 1960;183–581.

²Regarding the transliteration of Hebrew, I have followed, most of the time, the system given by Ch L Echols and Th Legrand.

https://www.academia.edu/5388085/Transliteration_of_Hebrew_Consonants_Vowels_and_Accents_etc

<http://www.lire-et-dire.ch/images/docs/Translitteration-hebreu-grec.pdf>

³Asad T. *Secular translations: Nation-State, modern self, and calculative reason*. New York: Columbia University Press; 2018;14.

⁴Blumenberg H, Bajohr H, Fuchs F, et al. *Secularization. History, Metaphors, Fables*, Ithaca, Cornell University Press; 2020;57.

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secularization, and on the other hand in that of atheism. For the former, by challenging the basis of the religious order, Spinoza presented a radically secular philosophy that laid the foundations of modernity.⁵ For the second, he was only a camouflaged theist, and his philosophy of immanence, first inspired by the deism of Uriel da Costa, has been loudly denounced as purely atheistic.⁶

The origins of secularization

It should be noted that one of the stages that led to the emergence of secularization concerns the status of the Hebrew language during the Renaissance. At the time, there was a deep and widespread interest in its study, especially by Italian Jews, who played a fundamental role in the revival of science, literature, and the arts.⁷ The study of Hebrew, which was considered a sacred language, became part of the secular setting of the University.⁸ At the same time, there was a rupture between religion and culture, which was truly consummated in the Age of Enlightenment,⁹ first aiming to promote intellectual emancipation.¹⁰ The beginning of the colonization of the American, African, and Asian continents allowed the European Renaissance to discover non-monotheistic religions, laying the foundations of an anthropology of otherness that was no longer based on the Bible.¹¹

The so-called secular age has been seen as a transition from humanity's childhood to adulthood, in which man comes to assume his solitude and freedom from the cosmos.¹² However, *secular* and *anti-religious* should not be confused since, for example, in the

⁵Israel J I. *The radical enlightenment. the philosophy and manufacture of modernity 1650-1672*. Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press; 200;4.

⁶Yovel Y. *Spinoza and other Heretics: Marrano of reason*. Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press; 1989;142–143.

⁷Busi Cf G. *The Renaissance speaks Hebrew*. In: Busi GS Greco, editor. *The Renaissance speaks Hebrew*. Silvana Editoriale, Cinisello Balsamo, Milano; 2019;6–43.

⁸Kirtchuk Cf P. *Hebrew in the Universities*. 2011;ffhal-00639142f

⁹Tillich P. *Religion and Secular Culture*. *The Journal of Religion*. 1946;26(2):82.

¹⁰Israel JJ. *Enlightenment Contested. Philosophy, modernity, and the emancipation of man 1670–1752*. Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press; 2006;409–435

¹¹Feiner S. *Shorshay ha-hyloun. Matyranut usapqanut be-Yahadut ha-me'eah ha-18*. Jerusalem, Mercaz Zalman Shazar, 2011;32. Patricia Falguières has relativized the importance of the discovery of non-European populations for the formation of anthropological reflection in the Renaissance: *Les inventeurs des choses. Enquêtes sur les arts et naissance d'une science de l'homme dans les cabinets du XVI^e siècle*. <http://journals.openedition.org/actesbranly/94>

¹²Taylor C A *Secular Age*. The Belknap press of Harvard University Press; Cambridge: Mass, London; 2007;364.

Carolingian period, this term had a legal meaning, designating a procedure for the expropriation of Church property by the secular power.¹³ Likewise, secularization is not always synonymous with atheism, nor is the rejection of any belief in the Deity necessarily secular, as shown by, among others, primitive Jainism and Taoism.¹⁴ Generally speaking, secularization has itself incorporated specifically religious notions. Thus, the philosophy of the Enlightenment has been perceived as a secular form of Monotheism, whose unitary features it projects both into the system of nature, and into the absolute trust placed in it.¹⁵ However, secularization refers first and foremost to the transfer from the religious to the profane, in order to put an end to the transcendent and theology.¹⁶ It represents what Max Weber called the “disenchantment of the world (*Entzauberung der Welt*),” promoted by empirical knowledge and technical progress.¹⁷ Such disenchantment has made it possible to reject any idea of Providence and transcendence, sending man back to his natural and immanent determinations alone. The image of the secular man is not only of an individual order, but constitutes a central figure in the public sphere, affecting the cultural, political, constitutional, and juridical order at the same time.¹⁸

Spinoza's contribution to secularization

Among the intellectual factors that contributed to the emergence of Spinozistic secularization, and which I will specify later, we must mention what Koenraad Oege Meinsma called the «Spinoza circle».¹⁹ This included friends of Franciscus Van den Enden such as Lodewijk Meyer, Simon de Vries, Pieter Balling, Jarig Jelles, Johan Bouwmeester, Adriaan Koerbagh, Jan Rieuwerts, and Jan Pietersz. In fact, this circle was composed of eclectic individuals, ranging from simple merchants to those who recognized themselves in the French libertines and Dutch Cartesians.²⁰

Spinoza uses the term *saeculum* only once, to characterize the poetic utopia of a golden age (or century) (*saeculum poetarum aureum*), in which the masses and political leaders would live exclusively under the dominion of reason.²¹ He also utilizes the adjective *profanos*, twice in the *TTP*, to designate the vulgar on the one hand, and the non-Levites on the other.²² If, in the *Short Treatise*, Spinoza still retained the notion of Providence (*Voorzienigheid*), both general and particular, he nevertheless emptied these terms of all religious content. General Providence concerns only the laws of

nature, and particular Providence refers to the effort of each person to maintain his own being.²³

Steven Nadler sees in the publication of the *TTP* the birth of the secular age.²⁴ Indeed, Spinozism constitutes the main force of secular modernity, which has succeeded in integrating, in a unique way, all the philosophical, social, ethical, and political aspects of this modernity. The novelty of this secularism concerns first the theory of immanence, which has brought about the transition from the framework of man's Covenant with God to a natural and anthropocentric culture.²⁵ By also laying the foundations, *solo scriptura* of Biblical Criticism, immanentism has shaken the foundations of European society as a whole. As Paul Hazard noted, the *Tractatus theologico-politicus*, published in 1670, was the bearer of a novelty capable of shaking all Judeo-Christian values, overcoming all national and religious particularities. In doing so, he undermined the foundations of traditional beliefs, including attacks on transcendence, cults, superstitious practices, and priestly power. The *TTP* aimed to show that these remnants of the past sought only to stifle human reason and freedom, in favor of an oppressive power maintained by religious institutions. However, in this work, on the one hand, Spinoza himself remained conservative and demanded obedience to the laws of the sovereign. He also showed an intolerance of “heretics and schismatics (*haereticos et scismaticos*) ... those who teach opinions that are likely to incite insubordination, hatred, rivalry and anger.”²⁶ But on the other hand, he was fighting on two fronts, theological and political, in order to free man from both heavenly and earthly kingship. To do this, he had to attack Scripture as the source of all dogmas. Paul Hazard points out that Spinoza's novelty consists of a series of negations: there was no Revelation at Sinai, nor a chosen people depository of an eternal teaching, but only an ephemeral Hebrew political institution; there were no prophecies, but only imaginary perceptions, and therefore no Divine message, there were no miracles, but simple natural phenomena etc.²⁷ To this negative series, Shmuel Trigano added that, according to Spinoza, the Torah is not the Torah, the Jews are not the Jews, and God is not God.²⁸ Generally speaking, God, identified with nature, could only provide a natural moral law, which can just be grasped by natural light.²⁹ This is why, when interpreted rationally, Scripture could then appear to be a purely human work, thus calling into question the Divine and Mosaic authorship of the *Pentateuch*, as well as the authenticity of the other biblical books.³⁰

Spinozism brought about a radical paradigm shift which, by promoting the *conatus* as the universal ontological principle of

¹³Funkenstein A. *Theology, and the scientific imagination from the Middle Ages to the Seventeenth century*. Princeton: Princeton University Press; 1986;5–6.

¹⁴Colpe C. Syncretism and secularization: complementary and antithetical trends in new religious movements? *History of Religions*. 1977;17(2):169.

¹⁵Adorno T W, Horkheimer M. *Dialectic of enlightenment*. Engl. transl. New Ed. Stanford, Stanford University Press; 2002;89.

¹⁶Saada J, Introduction à J. Saada. *Hobbes, Spinoza ou les Politiques de la Parole: Critique de la Sécularisation et Usages de l'Histoire Sainte à l'Âge Classique*. Lyon: ENS; 2009;16.

¹⁷Weber M. *Gesammelte Aufsätze zur Religionssoziologie*. Tübingen Mohr-Siebeck; 1988;564.

¹⁸Stern Y T, *Pirqey Mavo 'Myhu hylony? Qry'ot hilkatyot*. Jerusalem, Ha-Makon ha-Israely le-demoqratyah; 2012;14–15

¹⁹Meinsma K O, *Spinoza en zijn kring. Historisch-kritische studiën over Hollandsche vrijgeesten*. Martinus Nijhoff, Den Haag; 1896;XXIII–XXIV.

²⁰Gootjes A. Spinoza between French Libertines and Dutch Cartesians: The 1673 Utrecht visit. *Modern Intellectual History*. 2018;17(3):1–27.

²¹Spinoza, *Political treatise*, I, 5. Regarding the works of Spinoza, I'm referring to the Latin edition: Universitätsbuchhandlung, Bd. Carl Gebhardt, *Baruch de Spinoza Opera*. Heidelberg, Carl Winter 1925. The English translations are mine. Concerning the *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus (TTP)*, I'm following the Latin text as it was established by Fokke Akkerman and published by Lagrée J, Moreau P F, *Traité Théologico-politique*. Paris: PUF; 1999.

²²Spinoza. *TTP XII(3):430–431. TTP, XVII (29):582–583.*

²³Spinoza *KV. I(2): G. I,40.*

²⁴Nadler S. *A book forged in hell: Spinoza's Scandalous Treatise and the Birth of the Secular Age*. Princeton NJ, Princeton University Press; 2011.

²⁵Balfer E, Baruch Spinoza we-hylona shel ha-Yahadut. In: Ravizky A, Editor. *Dat u-Medynah behagut ha-yehudyt beMe'ah ha-Esrym*. Jerusalem, Ha-makon ha-Israely leDemoqratyah, 2005. 116 p.

²⁶Spinoza, *TTP*, XIV(13):480–481.

²⁷Hazard P, *La crise de la conscience Européenne*. (1680-1715). Paris, Fayard; 1961;134–135.

²⁸Trigano S, *La demeure oubliée. Genèse religieuse du politique*. Reed, Paris, Gallimard; 1994;203, 219,241.

²⁹Spinoza, *TTP(IV)*,188–191. Franks P, Sinai since Spinoza: Reflections on revelation in modern jewish thought. In: Brooke G J, Najman H, Stuckenbruck L T, Editors. *The significance of Sinai: traditions about Sinai and divine revelation in Judaism and Christianity*. Leiden, Brill: 2008;339.

³⁰Spinoza, *TTP*, VIII(5):334–335; *TTP*, VIII, 7-12, 341–351. Spinoza, however, grants that prophecy was a moral certainty (*certitudo prophetae moralis*), *TTP*, II, 4,116–117, on which rests all the usefulness of the Revelation. *TTP*, XV(10):502–503. It is from this purely naturalistic perspective that Revelation can be beneficial to the state. Cf. H. De Dijn, Spinoza and Revealed Religion. *Studia Spinozana*. 11, 1995;41-42.

modernity,³¹ constituted the “backbone” of the entire European Enlightenment.³² In this sense, he also contributed greatly to forging the image of the Jew in the European society of the Enlightenment,³³ by presenting secularization as the only alternative to traditional Judaism.³⁴ Philosophy then ceased to be at the service of theology (*ancilla theologiae*), as Spinoza put an end to the *interpretatio hebraica*, of Philonian origin, which illuminated Greek philosophy from a Biblical point of view. He thus nullified the philosophical foundations of the three Monotheistic religions.³⁵ Moreover, he completely disengaged the relationship between the Divine real ethics. In this sense, the Spinozistic God, standing beyond good and evil, ceases to be the warrantor of morality. Consequently, the closer man comes to the Spinozistic God, that is to nature, the stronger his *conatus* becomes, but also the more his consciousness of any duty towards others weakens, as we show elsewhere.³⁶ Finally, as Yitzhak Y. Melamed has pointed out, Spinoza inaugurated the most radical anti-humanism, based on a fourfold conception. First, the marginalization of man in the infinite natural universe. Second, the criticism of anthropomorphism as unfounded arrogance, itself constituting the source of imaginary beliefs. Thirdly, the removal of barriers between man – human dignity – and the rest of nature. Fourth, amorality.³⁷

Spinoza’s innovation, which forged the weapons of the revolutionary spirit,³⁸ was perceived as much more radical than that of Hobbes or Bayle.³⁹ It truly inaugurated modern thought, and Spinozism served as a model for all theories of immanence, including Kantian, Hegelian, Marxian, Nietzschean, Freudian, and Einsteinian.⁴⁰ Spinozism appears to be equally present, albeit in a non-manifestly way, in Heideggerian philosophy.⁴¹ While these theories can be described as “Specters of modernity,” Spinoza’s “ghost” remains both omnipresent and destabilizing, complicating the essential relations it seems to have with modernity.⁴² This can itself be

defined as the “triumph of the scientific method”.⁴³ However, Antonio Negri proposed to understand the fundamentally subversive character of Spinozism, first as being “anti-modern,”⁴⁴ and then as constituting a “post-modern” philosophy.⁴⁵ For his part, Remo Bodéi considers Spinoza to be the representative of the “classical world,” which seeks, through the treatment of passions, to avoid inner conflicts.⁴⁶ Be that as it may, Spinoza’s modernity, anti-modernity, post-modernity or classiquity are intriguing and disturbing, and this is what needs to be explained.⁴⁷

Faced with the difficulties of defining the exact theoretical status of Spinozism, it has been pointed out that, to a certain extent, it reflects more a collective construction of Spinoza’s disciples and his publishers rather than the true theory of this philosopher.⁴⁸ Moreover, some have noted that Spinoza, in fact, did not actually abandon the faith of his ancestors, but he would have reworked it according to his personal metamorphoses.⁴⁹ Indeed, Spinoza’s attitude toward Jewish philosophy often bears the mark of ideological conflicts arising from very complex factors that are still debated by commentators.⁵⁰

Spinoza and deism

We should note that the notion of deism, on the one hand, comes from Italy and was imported into France in the 16th century,⁵¹ then was introduced in England in 1621 by Robert Burton⁵². This notion was not presented as a concept *per se*, but primarily as a polemical term, generally attributed to the writings of Edward Herbert of Cherbury (1583-1648), who, according to John Laland, presented deism as an elaborate system.⁵³ Deism has been defined as a rational and natural religion, in the sense that it derives from a reflection of reason on nature. The purpose of such a religion is to determine the set of natural elements that can lead to the discovery of the moral law. Although God is the object of this religion, it has no Divine origin, but proceeds only from a reflection on the world, while seeking to define the framework of a theology that can deduce the attributes of God from an investigation carried out by the human intellect. For deism, the difference between natural religion and revealed religion is ultimately the same as that between fact and fiction.⁵⁴ Let us recall that

³¹Goetschel W, *Spinoza's Modernity: Mendelssohn, Lessing, and Heine*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press; 2004. 31 p.

³²Israel J I, *Radical Enlightenment. Philosophy and the Making of Modernity*, (1650-1750). However, it has been shown that the European Enlightenment was formed from, and not as a radical break, the theological thought of the Middle Ages. Gillespie Cf M A, *The Theological Origins of Modernity*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press; 2008. 258 p.

On the other hand, it has been possible to revise the image of the medieval period (forged in particular by Petrarch) as being particularly gloomy. Nagy Cf. Z H, *Le temps des ténèbres : la naissance de l'image négative du Moyen Age*. *Verbum Analecta Neolatina*. 2010;XII(1):167–183.

³³Seidler Cf M, Baruch Spinoza – Me'avev tadmyt ha-Yahadut 'avur ha-Haskalah ha'yropyt. *Daat*. 2004;54:29–45.

³⁴Strauss Cf Z, Spinozism as an alternative within modern Jewish Life. In: Honnacker A, Ruf M, editors. *God or Nature: Perspectives according to Spinoza (Philosophie aktuell 12)*. Münster, LIT Verlag; 2015;91–108.

³⁵Wolfson H A, Philo Judaeus. In *Studies in the History of Philosophy and Religion*, Cambridge: MA, Harvard University Press; 1973;1:70.

³⁶Rozenberg Cf JJ. L'altruisme, l'utilitarisme, l'égoïsme et l'idéal de l'homme libre dans la philosophie de Spinoza. *Actu-Philosophia*, Mars 2024; Demos R, Spinoza's Doctrine of Privation. *Philosophy*. 1933;8(30):161.

³⁷Melamed Y Y, Spinoza's anti-humanism: An outline. In: Fraenkel C D, Perinetti, Smith JEH, Editors. *The Rationalists: Between Tradition and Innovation*. Dordrecht, Springer Netherlands, 201;147–166, and notes 2 to 8, citing authors who consider Spinoza to be a true humanist. See also Melamed Y Y, Spinoza, Althusser, and the Question of Humanism. *Crisis & Critique*. 2021;8:170–177.

³⁸Verniere P, *Spinoza et la pensée française avant la Révolution*. I-ere partie : XVIIe siècle (1663-1715). IIeme partie : XVIIIe siècle. Paris; P.U.F, 1954.

³⁹Israel Y I, *Radical Enlightenment. Philosophy and the Making of Modernity*. (1650-1750):159.

⁴⁰Yovel Y, *Spinoza and Other Heretics: Marrano of Reason*.10.

⁴¹Vaysses J M, *Totalité et finitude - Spinoza et Heidegger*. Paris: Vrin; 2004.

⁴²Mack Cf M, *Spinoza and the Specters of Modernity. The Hidden Enlightenment of Diversity From Spinoza to Freud*. London: Continuum, 2011;146.

⁴³Manuel Ledesma Viteri J, *Modernity in Question - The Case of Spinoza. Exercizi filosofici*. 2017;12(1): 5.

⁴⁴Negri A, *L'anti-Modernité de Spinoza », Spinoza subversif. Variations (in) actuelles*. Paris, Kimé ; 1994.

⁴⁵Negri A, *Spinoza for Our Time: Politics and Postmodernity*. New York: Columbia University Press; 2013.

⁴⁶Bodéi R, *Géométrie des passions. Peur, espoir, bonheur : de la philosophie à l'usage politique*. Paris: PUF; 1997.

⁴⁷Ledesma Cf J M, Viteri, La modernité en question-le cas Spinoza. *Exercizi Filosofici*. 2017;12,10.

⁴⁸Moreau Cf P F, Spinoza était-il Spinozistic ? In: Secretan G, Dagron T, Bove L, Editors. *Qu'est-ce que les Lumières « radicales » ? Libertinage, athéisme et spinozisme dans le tournant philosophique de l'âge classique*. Paris: Éditions Amsterdam (Caute !), 2007;289–297. A. Lilti, Comment écrit-on l'histoire intellectuelle des Lumières ? Spinozisme, radicalisme et philosophie. *Annales. Histoire, Sciences Sociales*. 2009;64(1):188–189.

⁴⁹Wienpahl P, *The Radical Spinoza*. New York: New York University Press; 1979;67.

⁵⁰Feld E, Spinoza the Jew. *Modern Judaism*. 1989; 9(1):101–119. Nadler S, The Jewish Spinoza. *Journal of the History of Ideas*. 2009;70(3):491–510.

⁵¹Hazard P, *La crise de la conscience européenne*. 174.

⁵²Robert Burton, *The anatomy of melancholy*. Reed. Anboco Publisher; 2016;6645.

⁵³Laland J A *A View of the principal Deistical Writers that have appeared in England in the last and present century*. London; 1754;5.

On the relations of the first English deists to Spinoza, Colie cf R L, Spinoza and the early English Deists. *Journal of the History of Ideas*. 1959; 20(1):23–46.

⁵⁴Byrne P, *Natural religion and the nature of religion: The Legacy of Deism*. London, Routledge; 2013;8–9.

Edward Herbert of Cherbury posited, among other things, that “God Himself is in us” (*in nobis ipse est Deus*),⁵⁵ and identified Him with Nature, which in turn assimilated it with the “common Providence of things” (*Natura sive Providentia rerum communis*).⁵⁶ This is why John Leland has likened Cherbury to Spinoza, citing proposition 54 of *Ethics* IV which rejects the notion of repentance (*Pœnitentia virtus non est*), as well as the ideas of man’s free agency, immortality of the soul and future retribution.⁵⁷ Carl Gebhardt noted Cherbury’s possible influence on Spinoza’s conception of rational religion, as expressed, in particular, in the dogmas of the universal religion of the *TTP*.⁵⁸ He also pointed out that the idea of these dogmas was first forged through contact with the Collegiants whom Spinoza had frequented in Rijnsburg between 1660 and 1663; at which time he certainly wrote the *Short Treatise*.⁵⁹ It should be noted, however, that the religion of the Collegiants combined spiritualistic and rationalistic elements, which in fact went beyond deism strictly speaking.⁶⁰ Deism, by denying God’s intervention in the world, has weakened the traditional notion of faith, and has largely paved the way for atheism.⁶¹

Concerning Spinoza’s relations to Marranism, it is important to remember that Deism was widespread among the *conversos*, who had studied in Spanish universities in the seventeenth century.⁶² According to Israel Salvador Révah, Spinoza was precisely influenced by two ancient *conversos*, Uriel da Costa and Juan de Prado, who similarly rejected Revelation and Divine intervention in worldly affairs, and who advocated a natural religion common to all men.⁶³ Da Costa experienced a gradual evolution from Marranism to Judaism and then

⁵⁵De Herbert de Cherbury, *De Veritate, prout distinguitur a revelatione, a verisimili, a possibili, et a falso*. (Paris, 1624). London:1633;118.

⁵⁶De Herbert de Cherbury, *De religione gentilium errorumque apud eos causis*. Amsterdam; 1663;4.

⁵⁷Laland J, *A View of the Principal Deistical Writers That Have Appeared in England in the Last and Present Century*. 14.

⁵⁸Spinoza, *TTP* XIV(10):474–475, 476–477.

Matheron A, *Le Christ et le salut des ignorants chez Spinoza*. Paris: Aubier; 1971;95–114.

Jacqueline Lagrée has related Spinoza’s seven articles of faith with Cherbury’s five dogmas, J. Lagrée, « *Le salut du laïc* », *Edward Herbert de Cherbury: étude et traduction du « De religione laïci » (Philologie et Mercure)*.115.

⁵⁹Gebhardt C, *Die Religion Spinozas*. *Archiv für Geschichte der Philosophie*. 1938;41(3):354–355.

Die Religion Spinozas und die Rhijsburger Collegianten, 1932. Reed. In: von M, Schewe und A, Engstler, Editors. *Spinoza*. Frankfurt am Main. Peter Lang, 1990;323–340.

Van Bunge W, Johannes Bredenburg and the Korte Verhandeling, *Studia Spinoziana*. 1988;4:321–328.

On the evolution of the Collegiants’ thought towards *religio naturalis* and secularization, Cooper Fix cf A, *The Dutch Collegiants in the Early Enlightenment*. Princeton: Princeton University Press;1991;134–185.

⁶⁰Israel J I, *Radical Enlightenment. Philosophy and the Making of Modernity*. (1650-1750):11–12.

⁶¹Dupré L, *The Enlightenment and the Intellectual Foundations of Modern Culture*. New Haven: Yale University Press; 2004;256.

⁶²Muchnik N, Orobio Contra Prado: A Trans-European Controversy. In: Wilke C, editor. *Isaac Orobio. The Jewish Argument with Dogma and Doubt*. Berlin, Boston: De Gruyter, 2018;37.

⁶³Révah I S, Spinoza et les hérétiques de la communauté judéo-portugaise d’Amsterdam. *Revue de l’histoire des religions*.1958;154(2):184.

La religion d’Uriel da Costa. Marrane de Porto (d’après des documents inédits). *Revue de l’histoire des religions*. 1962;161(1);17.

The deist elements of Hobbes’ philosophy must be added in order to understand the formation of Spinozism. Cf. B. Milner, Hobbes: On Religion. *Political Theory*. 1988;16(3):424 note 34.

to Deism.⁶⁴ As for de Prado, it should be noted that he was accused of *impiedad* by the Portuguese Jewish Community of Amsterdam, at the same time as Spinoza.⁶⁵ Let’s recall that Lambert de Velthuysen reproached the latter for not having “risen above the religion of the deists (*non assurgit supra religionem Deistarum*).”⁶⁶ Spinozism can also be located between the skepticism of La Mothe le Vayer and the rationalism of Rousseau,⁶⁷ or to consider it as a liberal thinker regarding religious notions.⁶⁸

Despite their profound differences, deism, atheism, and Spinozism have been associated.⁶⁹ One of the essential themes which unites these doctrines concerns, as I have shown elsewhere, the theme of the Father, who in these three doctrines was similarly questioned.⁷⁰ In fact, deism, and after it atheism, replaces, in the same vein as Spinoza, the Law, which is inherently paternal, by natural law, which is inherently maternal, and in a general way, Revelation by science. With Spinozism, the question of the Father as the quality of God was revised.⁷¹

The god of Spinoza and traditional theism

Even if, in the words of Robert Misrahi, “Spinoza’s God is not a god” and its position proceeds only from Spinoza’s Marrano doublespeak,⁷² Spinoza’s accusation of being an atheist⁷³ has been contested. Already Jarig Jellesz and Lodewijk Meyer, in their *Preface to the Opera Posthuma* (1677), tried to refute this accusation.⁷⁴ For the being whom Spinoza designates by God is an omniscient, eternal, perfectly free, entirely good and a righteous Being; all these designations seem

⁶⁴Révah I S, Du ‘marranisme’ au judaïsme et au déisme : Uriel da Costa et sa famille. *Annuaire du Collège de France*: 1967;67:515–526; 1968;68:562–572;1969;69:576–585.1970;70:569–577.1972;72:653–662.

⁶⁵Vaz Dias A M, van der Tak W G, *Spinoza merchant & autodidact. Charter and other authentic documents relating to the philosopher’s youth and his relations*. *Studia Rosenthaliana*. 1982;16(2):156.

⁶⁶Letter 42, Lambert de Velthuysen to Jacob Osten. In *Spinoza*. G. IV. 207. On the historical context of the accusations of atheism made on the *TTP*, Villaverde M J, An Atheist who defended the Scriptures? A freethinking Alchemist? In: Laursen JC, Villaverde M J, Editors. *Paradoxes of Religious Toleration in Early Modern Political Thought*. Lanham, Lexington Books, 2012;9–38.and more particularly 10–14.

⁶⁷Lagrée J, Le “cantus firmus” d’Herbert de Cherbury. *Revue des Sciences philosophiques et théologiques*. 1992;76(1):4,11.

⁶⁸Pailin D A, Should Herbert of Cherbury be regarded as a ‘deist’? *The Journal of Theological Studies*. New Series. 51(1):2000;113–149.

⁶⁹Israel J I, *The Enlightenment that Failed: Ideas, revolution, and democratic defeat, 1748-1830*. Oxford, Oxford University Press; 2019; 129–130.

⁷⁰Rozenberg J J, *Spinoza, le spinozisme et les fondements de la sécularisation*. 61, 415

⁷¹Rassial J J, *Manifeste déiste d’un psychanalyste juif*. Toulouse, Erès. 2018;43.

⁷²Misrahi R, Atheism and Freedom in Spinoza. *International Journal of Philosophy*. 1977;31(119/120):219.

⁷³Let’s recall the books attacking Spinoza’s atheism, published during his lifetime and a few years after his death: Fr. Cuper, *Arcana atheismi revelata*. Rotterdam, 1676; Aubert de Versé. *L’Impie convaincu ou dissertation contre Spinoza*. Amsterdam, 1681 and 1685; Pierre Poiret. *Fundamenta atheismi eversa, sive specimen absurditatis spinozianæ*. In *Cogitationes rationales de Deo, anima et malo*. Amsterdam, 1685; François Lamy. *Le nouvel athéisme renversé, ou réfutation du système de Spinoza tirée pour la plupart de la connoissance de la nature de l’homme*. Paris, 1696; Just. Herwech. *Tractatus quo atheismum, fanaticum sive Boehmii naturalismum, et Spinozismum ex principiis et fundamentis sectæ fanaticæ, matris pietismi, eruit*. Lips. and Wismar, 1709; Jean-Wolfg. Jäger, *Spinozismus, sive Benedicti Spinozæ, famosi atheistæ, vita et doctrinalia*. Tubing., 1710; Joh.-Christ. Burgmann, *Exercitatio philosophica de Stoa a Spinozismo et atheismo exculpanda*. Viterb, 1721.

⁷⁴Rovere M, *Spinoza par ses amis - de Jarig Jellesz et Lodewijk Meyer*. Paris, Éditions Payot & Rivages. 2017;37–40

to be in line with the traditional traits of divinity.⁷⁵ This is why, for example, Herder made the Spinozistic God the “supreme reason like love (*höchste Vernunft wie Liebe*),”⁷⁶ and Novalis saw in Spinoza “the God drunk man (*der Gott betrunkenene Mensch*).”⁷⁷ We can then note Spinoza’s rehabilitation at the end of the 18th century, thanks to which, from being a virtuous atheist, he became “pious and Christian without knowing it, more of a believer than believers, more Christian than Christians.”⁷⁸ Spinoza has been claimed by both Catholic,⁷⁹ and Protestant theologians.⁸⁰ Regarding Judaism, a distinction must be made between progressive and secular circles on the one hand, and representatives of traditional Judaism on the other.

Meir Hallevi Letteris in 1845 had tried to reconcile Spinozism with Jewish tradition.⁸¹ For his part, Yosef Klausner in 1927 had attempted, before David Ben-Gurion, to put an end to the *Herem* (excommunication), proclaiming three times about Spinoza: “You are our brother (*‘ahynu ‘atah*).” He was thus repeating the formula of the religious authorities of the Second Temple, concerning King Agrippas, who had come to doubt the legitimacy of his reign, because of his non-Jewish origins.⁸² Jewish thinkers who claim secularization have been considered the “children of Spinoza,”⁸³ because they have found in this author a veritable “scientific paradigm” for founding a secularized Jewish identity.⁸⁴ For his part, Jonathan I. Israel analyzed the metamorphoses of spinozism, which resulted in what he calls the “revolutionary consciousness rooted in the Jewish predicament and circumstances of Jewish society.”⁸⁵

On the contrary, in line with Hermann Cohen’s sharp criticism,⁸⁶ Emmanuel Levinas pointed out that Spinoza subordinated the truth of Judaism to the revelation of the *New Testament*. His *tour de force*

⁷⁵However, Michael Della Rocca has noted large areas of congruence between theism and Spinozism, M. Della Rocca, *Spinoza*. London, Routledge: 2008;285.

⁷⁶Herder J H, Theoretical Writings. God. Some Conversations on Spinoza’s System and Shaftesbury’s Hymn to Nature. Volume 4: Writings on *Philosophy, Literature, Art and Antiquity (1774-1787)*. In: Bollacher M, Brummack J, Editors. Frankfurt am Main, Deutscher Klassiker Verlag 1994,696.

⁷⁷Novalis (Georg Philipp Friedrich Freiherr), *Schriften*. 5 ed. Berlin, Reimer G, 1837;253.

⁷⁸X. Tilliette, *La christologie idéaliste*. Paris, Desclée, 1986;26.

⁷⁹Jaquet C, La réception de Spinoza dans les milieux catholiques français. In A. Tosel, P F Moreau, J. Salem (Ed.). *Spinoza au XIX^e siècle*. Paris, Publications de la Sorbonne. 2008;243–253

⁸⁰Hunter G, *Radical Protestantism in Spinoza’s Thought*. Aldershot, Ashgate. 2005.

⁸¹Hallevi Letteris M, Baruch Spinoza. In I. S. Reggio (Ed.), *Bykourey ha-‘Itym ha-hadashym*. Vienna, Schmid und Dusch. 1845;32.

⁸²Klausner Y, Baruch Spinoza. *Moznaim*, XXVI, 1933;8–11; *Mi-‘Aplaton ‘ad Spinoza*. Jerusalem, Mad’a, 1955;329. On the details of Klausner’s speech at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, cf. D. B. Schwartz. *The First Modern Jew: Spinoza and the History of an Image*. Princeton: NJ, Princeton University Press; 2012;113–116. On the political and ideological context of this discourse, Mendes Flohr cf F, Spinoza: Renegade or Meta-Rabbi? *Forum*. 1977;2(27):60.

Berger S, Undzer Bruder Spinoza: Modern Yiddish Writers and the Amsterdam Freethinker. *Studia Rosenthaliana*. 1996;30(2);254–266. The reference to this formula, applied to King Agrippas, is found in the *Mishnah Sotah*, VII, 8. Ben Gurion D, Netaqen ha-me’uwat. *Davar*, December. 1953.

⁸³Biale D, *Not in the Heavens: The Tradition of Jewish Secular Thought*. Princeton, NJ, Princeton University Press; 2010;10.

⁸⁴Schapkow C, L’œuvre et la vie de Spinoza comme paradigme scientifique et fondement d’une identité juive sécularisée chez Heinrich Graetz et Jacob Freudenthal. *Revue germanique internationale*. 2002;17:193–202.

⁸⁵Israel J I, *Revolutionary Jews From Spinoza To Marx-The Fight For A Secular World Of Universal And Equal Rights*. Seattle, University of Washington Press; 2021;5.

⁸⁶Cohen H, *Spinoza on State & Religion, Judaism & Christianity*. Jerusalem: Shalem Press; 2014.

consisted in proposing a form of rationalism, allowing Christianity to be surreptitiously imposed on many Jewish intellectuals.⁸⁷ He noted that before Spinoza, no Jew could attack his original religion without first being baptized.⁸⁸

Spinoza, in spite of his title *De Deo*, begins with the definition of *causa sui*, and he introduces God only in *Definition VI*, as a synonym for substance consisting of infinite attributes⁸⁹. The fact that the *Ethics* begins with the definition of *causa sui*, then of the thing *in suo genere finita*, and finally with that of *substantia*, which *Definition VI* then posits as equivalent to that of God, seems to render the notion of God totally superfluous⁹⁰. In this sense, it has been noted that *the Ethics* would not have undergone any appreciable conceptual modification if God had not been mentioned at all, or even totally eclipsed by the formula *Substantia sive Natura*⁹¹. Let us recall that Jean Le Clerc, in the name of a “man worthy of trust,” relates that “Spinoza had composed his pretended *Ethics demonstrated* in Flemish, and that he gave it to a physician, whose name was Louis Meyer, to be translated into Latin, and that the word God was not to be found in it, but only that of *Nature*, which he claimed to be eternal. The Physician warned him that he would infallibly be made a great deal of it, as denying that there was a God, and introducing in his place Nature, which is a word more apt to mark the creature than the Creator. *Spinoza* consented to this change, and the Book appeared, as Meyer had advised him to do. In reading his book, it will be noticed that the word *God* is only a *postiche* word, so to speak, which he uses to give the reader a change. It subjects everything to I know not what necessity, which has not been imposed by anyone, but which is natural to Matter.”⁹² From a philosophical point of view, as Pierre Macherey notes, *De Deo* could have been called *Omnibus Rebus* or *De Natura Rerum*, in reference to Lucretius, whose Spinozism was close.⁹³

Spinoza and the question of atheism

Spinoza’s relationship to atheism is twofold: first, it concerns his reaction to accusations of atheism, and second, his true relationship to atheism.⁹⁴ On the first point, Spinoza told Oldenburg that one of the reasons he decided to write a book on Scripture (the future *TTP*) was to combat the public’s opinion of him, accusing him of “atheism (*atheismi*).”⁹⁵ To the reproach that the *TTP* “surreptitiously introduced atheism (*clam Atheismum introducit*),”⁹⁶ Spinoza replies, in *Letter 43* to Osten, with an argument that is by no means theoretical, but only personal and factual, allowing atheism to be defined, in the words of Mogens Lærke, as “practice contrary to true religion.”⁹⁷ Spinoza then claims that atheists “are in the habit of seeking above all else, honors and riches, things which I have always despised; all who know me

⁸⁷E. Levinas, *Difficile liberté*. Paris, Albin Michel. 2006;167–168

⁸⁸Levinas E, *Difficile liberté*, 155.

⁸⁹Spinoza, *Ethics* I, Definitions I, II, III and VI

⁹⁰Copleston FC, Pantheism in Spinoza and the German Idealists. *Philosophy*, 1946;21(78):42.

⁹¹Seligman P, Some Aspects of Spinozism. *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*. New Series.1960-1961;114–115

⁹²Jean Le Clerc, *Bibliothèque ancienne et moderne*. Part I, Amsterdam, Weinstein Brothers, 1724;135–136.

⁹³Macherey P, *Introduction à l’Éthique de Spinoza. La première partie, la nature des choses*. Paris: PUF, 1998;4 and note 1.

⁹⁴According to M. A. Rosenthal, from a political point of view, Spinoza could not tolerate atheists, because of their moral vices and their behavior as bad citizens. M. A. Rosenthal, Why Spinoza is intolerant of atheists: God and the limits of early modern liberalism. *The Review of Metaphysics*. 2012;65:813–839.

⁹⁵Spinoza, *Letter 30* to Oldenburg, G. IV, 166.

⁹⁶Lambert de Velthuysen à Jacob Osten, *Letter 42*. In *Spinoza*, G. IV, 218.

⁹⁷M Lærke, *Spinoza and the Freedom of Philosophizing*. Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press; 2021;177.

know this well (*Solent enim Athei honores, et divitias supra modum quaerere, quas ego semper contempsi, ut omnes, qui me norunt, sciunt*).⁹⁸ He emphasizes that the necessity of the divine nature, that is, of the purely natural order, does not prevent “the moral teachings (*documenta moralia*) which we receive from God, whether or not they are in the form of laws, from remaining divine and salutary.”⁹⁹ In the *TTP*, he denounces the charge of atheism levelled against philosophers by those who have no true idea of God¹⁰⁰, while at the same time calling atheism the doubt concerning the eternity of God’s laws of nature.¹⁰¹

With regard to the second point, the true relation of Spinozism to atheism, it is necessary to recall the violent reactions which the publication of the *TTP* in 1670 immediately provoked, first of all on the accusation of atheism. Thus, for example, in his refutation of the *TTP*, published in Leiden in 1674, Willem van Blyenbergh describes this book as “full of learned abominations, of an accumulation of concepts forged in hell which every reasonable person, let alone a Christian, must abhor.”¹⁰²

As reported by the two informants, Tomás Solano y Robles and Miguel Pérez de Maltranilla, before the Tribunal of the Inquisition in 1659, Spinoza had declared, a year earlier, that he had only one God in the philosophical sense (*non havia Dios sino es filosofalmente*).¹⁰³ This confirms Olaus Borsh’s testimony on Spinoza’s atheism, as early as 1661,¹⁰⁴ and this is why, according to Alexandre Matheron’s expression, certainly modelled on that of Einstein, affirming that he believed only in Spinoza’s God,¹⁰⁵ the latter “believed only in Spinoza’s God.”¹⁰⁶ According to Rabelais’ paradoxical expression, he was ultimately a “believer of unbelief.”¹⁰⁷ Ernst Cassirer emphasizes

⁹⁸Spinoza, *Letter 43 to Osten*, G. IV, 219.

⁹⁹Spinoza, *Letter 43 to Osten*, G. IV, 222.

¹⁰⁰Spinoza, *TTP*, II,(1):114–115.

¹⁰¹Spinoza, *TTP*, VI(9):252–253.

¹⁰²Quoted by Meinsma K O, *Spinoza en zijn kring. Historisch-kritische studiën over Hollandsche vrijgeesten*, p.358. Meinsma mentions a pamphlet, published after the murder of the De Witt brothers, No. 33 of which concerns the *TTP*: “Forged in the company of the Devil in hell by a renegade Jew, and edited with the knowledge of Mr. Jan and his accomplices.” Another excerpt from this sheet states that this work is “exposed to the scandalous fashion of atheists, that the word of God must be explained and understood by means of philosophy.” J. Colerus, *The Life of Spinoza. In Colerus – Lucas: Biographies of Spinoza*, 19. S. Nadler, in the name of Gronovius, reports that J. De Witt, after his reading of the *TTP*, refused to meet with Spinoza. S. Nadler, *Spinoza: A Life*, 256, and 379, note 28. As I reported earlier, this author has given, as the title of his work, Blyenbergh’s description of the *TTP* as a book “forged in hell”. Nadler S, *A Book Forged in Hell: Spinoza’s Scandalous Treatise and the Birth of the Secular Age*. Princeton: Princeton University Press; 2011.

¹⁰³Révah I. S, *Spinoza et le Dr. Juan de Prado*. Paris, Mouton. 1959;31–32.

¹⁰⁴Israel J I, *Radical Enlightenment*, 163. According to Colerus, it was Franciscus van den Enden who sowed among his followers “the first seeds of atheism.” J. Colerus, *The Life of Spinoza. In Colerus- Lucas: Les vies de Spinoza*. Paris, Allia. 1999;10.

M. Bedjai, Le docteur Franciscus van den Enden, son cercle et l’alchimie dans les Provinces-Unies du XVII^e siècle. *Nouvelles de la République des Lettres*. II, 1991;24.

¹⁰⁵Hoffmann B, Dukas H, *Albert Einstein, créateur et rebelle*. Paris, Seuil, 1975;106.

¹⁰⁶Quoted by Rousset B, La querelle de l’athéisme Spinoziste In: Moreau P F, Editors. *Architectures de la raison. Mélanges offerts à Alexandre Matheron*, Lyon, ENS Edition, 1996;269.

On the relationship of Spinoza’s atheism to Judaism, Mahlev cf H, *Beyn Spinoza le’aty’iyzm*. Ph.D Dissertation, Tel Aviv University, 2009; 52–83 and 116–156.

¹⁰⁷Febvre L, *Le problème de l’incroyance au XVI^e siècle*. Paris, A. Michel, 1947;40.

that the intellectual problems posed by the Age of Enlightenment remain intimately linked to the religious question, from which they draw their impulses.¹⁰⁸ However, despite its consubstantial links with religious discourse, the spirit of atheism concerns any form of thought or existence independent of God, nourished by a perpetual oscillation between the position of a God (like nature) who is not God, and the God who is not.¹⁰⁹ In this sense, following Ludwig Feuerbach, who described Spinozistic pantheism as “materialist theology,”¹¹⁰ Franz Rosenzweig calls “atheistic theology” any theological, and any discourse that dispenses from Revelation.¹¹¹ We can thus understand, as H. E. Allison suggests, that the ontological proof of God that Spinoza provided, ultimately serves only to demonstrate the existence of nature alone, and therefore also the non-existence of the Judeo-Christian God.¹¹²

We can then summarize, with Yirmiyahu Yovel, the Spinozistic atheism by recalling the philosophical and cultural consequences of the process of secularization that Spinoza initiated. These include: skepticism about religion, which he sought to reconstruct in a purely rationalist way; the social and political decentering of religion; the autonomy of the secular domain; the weakening of the sacred; the annulment of all mediation concerning the relationship with the Divine; the importance of individualism and its secularization; the egoistic valorization of the ego and its exclusively worldly attachments; the re-evaluation of all social values; and the promotion of immanence.¹¹³

Without claiming to be exhaustive, this article has sought to highlight the importance of some factors that have contributed to the emergence of secularization in Western thought.

In this way, I have tried to show the importance of the essential cultural and ideological transformations that took place during the Renaissance, in particular the secularization of the Hebrew language. I then analyzed some factors in the process of secularization that contributed to the formation of Spinozism, which then radicalized them. I then tried to explain the importance of the notion of deism in the emergence of Spinozism and its relation to Marranism. Finally, I have sought to explain the exact nature of the qualification of atheism of which Spinoza was accused, by specifying the theoretical framework in which this last notion takes on its full meaning.

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¹⁰⁸Cassirer E, *Die Philosophie der Aufklärung*. Tübingen, Mohr, 1933;333–334.

¹⁰⁹Folsheid D, *L’esprit de l’athéisme et son destin*. Reed. Paris, La Table Ronde, 2003;427.

¹¹⁰CFJ. Deloy, Deus, sive Natura: Substance and Determinism in Spinoza’s Ethics. *Aisthesis*, 2017;8:24–25.

¹¹¹Rosenzweig F, *Atheistische Theologie*. In *Kleinere Schriften*. Berlin: Schocken Verlag; 1937;278–290.

¹¹²Allison H E, *Benedict de Spinoza: An Introduction*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press; 1987;60.

¹¹³Yovel Y, *The other within. The marrano, split identity and emerging modernity*. Princeton: Princeton University Press; 2009;352–359.