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Alexander Kah

Xavier University

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Alexander Kah

Introductory Remarks

“You didn’t deserve to be born in America” were the words with which I was condemned by a particular fundamentalist Christian demonstrator one evening when I attempted to engage him in friendly philosophical conversation while attending a festival in downtown Cincinnati, Ohio. This condemnation came in response to my question to the demonstrator about why an all-loving God would favor the United States over every other nation in the world. At the end of our discussion, the man proclaimed to me that the Bible contains the answers to life’s greatest mysteries and that the only way I could be saved from eternal damnation was by believing in the Bible as God’s infallible, holy Word and accepting Jesus Christ as my personal Lord and Savior. For the sake of fairness, I promised to spend some time reading Scripture if in return he promised to examine some philosophical literature (Baruch Spinoza’s work was among my recommendations). Reluctantly he obliged, but as we parted ways he remarked, “Your philosophers don’t have all the answers!” I replied, “Exactly. And neither do you.”
At first, this anecdote seems trivial. The demonstrator had his opinions, I had mine, we exchanged these opinions, and we went our separate ways. There were times when the discussion became intense, and there were times when the demonstrator conveyed palpable disdain in response to my probing questions. But even though the demonstrator advocated a radical position and his words certainly were less than ecumenical, he did not resort to violence to defend his beliefs. Some would argue that I should not have approached the man at all. Sure, there are a few fundamentalists like this man who roam the streets, but if we ignore them, they will cease to be a nuisance. If we simply ignore fundamentalist demonstrators (for instance, the Westboro Baptist Church), they will stop protesting because the positive reinforcement they gain from our attention to them will be eliminated. Seems plausible, right?

In reality, I do not believe this to be the case. Not all fundamentalists display their faith in such a grandiose and militant fashion as do the Westboro Baptist Church and similar groups. Although the United States has become more secularized, there still exists a substantial number of religious dogmatists. This is not to say that all these people are openly violent in displaying their faith, but these beliefs are certainly capable of inspiring contempt for fellow citizens who are outside the faith. Additionally, dogmatism appears in multiple forms and should not necessarily be construed as exclusive to religion. For example, proponents of scientism also may be deemed dogmatic. But once again, while dogmatists of this kind typically do not spread their message through violent means either, they still may inspire contempt for fellow citizens who do not grasp the “truth” that they apparently hold.

Religious dogmatism, along with the contempt or outright hate for unbelievers that it can inspire, is not just a contemporary issue. This sociopolitical dilemma was alarmingly present during the time of the philosopher Baruch Spinoza. In his *Theological-Political Treatise*, Spinoza first offers an account of the human condition, in which he locates the roots of superstition. Then, Spinoza explains
that natural superstition later can morph into dogmatism and intolerance, which he decries. Finally, Spinoza proposes a political project whose goal is to combat intolerance both by establishing freedom of thought and by removing religious leaders from their position of political authority.

I hope to answer the following research questions with my thesis: For Spinoza, what is the relationship between reason and religion, and how does Spinoza manage the problem of religious dogmatism? There is evidence in the work suggesting that Spinoza writes esoterically. How does this esotericism inform his management of the theological-political problem?

In this paper, I will argue that Spinoza uses an esoteric strategy to combat dogmatism. In presenting contradictory versions of the Divine Law, he directs religion toward the political goal of social stability and paves the way for freedom of thought. I will begin by explaining Spinoza’s assessment of the human condition and how superstition emerges and persists. Second, I will show how Spinoza’s esoteric strategy informs his presentation of multiple definitions of the Divine Law, or true religion. Third, I will explain Spinoza’s framing of dogmatism in terms of his divorcing philosophy from theology. Finally, I will argue that neutralizing dogmatism helps Spinoza achieve his political goals.

The Human Condition and the Origins of Superstition

Before diagnosing the problem of dogmatism within a Spinozistic framework, it is necessary to understand Spinoza’s assessment of the human condition, which complements his conjectures regarding the origins of superstition. In this section, I will discuss first the interplay between Spinoza’s conception of the human condition and the origins of superstition. I will focus on two key attributes of superstition that can be derived from Spinoza’s account: its naturalness and its permanence. Then, in the following section, I will discuss Spinoza’s
distinction between superstition and “true religion,” and how the two are related.

From the outset of the *Theological-Political Treatise (TTP)*, Spinoza paints a bleak portrait of humanity’s natural state. He states, If men were able to exercise complete control over all their circumstances, or if continuous good fortune were always their lot, they would never be prey to superstition. But since they are often reduced to such straits as to be without any resource, and their immoderate greed for fortune’s fickle favours often makes them the wretched victims of alternating hopes and fears, the result is that, for the most part, their credulity knows no bounds. In critical times they are swayed this way or that by the slightest impulse, especially so when they are wavering between the emotions of hope and fear; yet at other times they are overconfident, boastful and arrogant.¹

Already, one can see Spinoza’s connection of the human condition and superstition as he locates the origins of the latter in human ignorance or “credulity.” Not understanding natural phenomena, human beings invent the notion of “fortune” because they do not know what will take place in the future. Lamentably, human beings’ ignorance causes their susceptibility to “alternating hopes and fears,” which, along with a lack of “control over all their circumstances,” renders them “prey to superstition.” Due to ignorance, the passions come to dominate humanity. Spinoza elaborates on this ignorance of the causes of natural events: “[T]here is no end to the kind of omens that they imagine, and they read extraordinary things into Nature as if the whole of Nature were a partner in their madness.”² Here Spinoza claims that in their ignorance human beings tend to think about natural events anthropocentrically, conceiving of “Nature” as a “partner,” an agent of some kind. Spinoza considers this ignorance a precursor to superstition, as the passions of hope and fear color people’s judgments of natural events. Thus, in Spinoza’s view, ignorance with regard to nature and the subsequent dominance of the passions lays the foundation for superstition.
Spinoza’s pessimism about the human condition is elaborated in Chapter 16. He argues, “[N]ot all men are naturally determined to act in accordance with the rules and laws of reason. On the contrary, all men are born in a state of complete ignorance . . . [and] they have to live . . . by the urging of appetite alone, for Nature has given them nothing else and has denied them the actualised power to live according to sound reason.” Spinoza reaffirms the dominance of the passions, or “appetite,” over reason: Human beings by nature are primarily irrational. This passage also hints at Spinoza’s determinism. A critical way that human beings are in “complete ignorance” is that they do not understand fully that “all individual things are determined to exist and to act in a definite way.” Again, Spinoza emphasizes that the influence of the passions coupled with ignorance naturally promotes superstitious thinking.

Spinoza wants to emphasize that both ignorance and the passions are the cause of superstitious thinking. At times, his deterministic comments suggest that superstition stems from an intellectual misunderstanding of the workings of nature. While this may be true to some extent, superstition is rooted deeply in the passions, by which, Spinoza claims, all people are influenced in varying degrees (as some are more rational and can mitigate the influence of the passions): “[It is] fear, then, that engenders, preserves, and fosters superstition . . . [Thus,] it clearly follows that all men are by nature liable to superstition . . . For it arises not from reason but from emotion, and emotion of the most powerful kind.” For Spinoza, “emotion” dominates the human psyche. As he locates the origins of superstition in “fear,” an “emotion of the most powerful kind,” it follows that the prevalence of fear will lead to the prevalence of superstition.

To support this claim, Spinoza draws on historical examples. For instance, Spinoza reminds readers that Alexander the Great, in the midst of military defeat and illness, was incited to “employ seers.” According to Curtius, Alexander was filled with great fear when placed in tangibly dangerous situations, and as a result, he sought the
counsel of “seers,” who likely knew no more about the causes of natural events than he did. With this example, Spinoza illustrates that the predisposition to superstition due to the dominance of the passions occurs even in some of the most powerful and rational figures in history. On the other side of this coin—and arguably more important, because political leaders’ manipulation of theological leaders for self-benefit and to inspire fear is one aspect of the theological-political problem that Spinoza is trying to solve—Alexander the Great preyed on his subjects’ fears and thus on their superstitious tendencies. Spinoza claims that rulers like Alexander “to render themselves secure . . . tried to persuade men that they were descended from immortal gods, thinking that if only their subjects and all men should regard them not as their equals but should believe them to be gods, they would willingly suffer their rule and would readily submit.” Alexander proclaimed himself as a descendant of the “immortal gods” for the sake of the security of his position of power. His subjects, moved by their passions and likely influenced further by the rhetoric of theological leaders, feared Alexander as a deity and hoped for his divine blessing. This practice gets at the heart of Spinoza’s political project to reduce the influence of religious figures on the populace. As we will see, Spinoza views these political motives as misguided: Theocracy propagates dogmatism, which is exactly what Spinoza is attempting to alleviate.

Spinoza goes so far as to claim that the emotions of hope and fear constitute the sole basis of superstition. Spinoza acknowledges that religion has played a role in fueling superstitious thinking, but religion cannot be regarded as the basis of superstition. He writes, “[O]nly while fear persists do men fall prey to superstition, that all the objects of religious reverence have been no more than phantoms, the delusions springing from despondency and timidity.” While people superstitiously treat some things and people as “objects of religious reverence,” Spinoza argues that the superstition stems not from the objects themselves but instead from “despondency and timidity.” Human beings are slaves to fortune, and superstition is driven by the
fear of the unknown. Spinoza adds that superstition does not stem from “a confused idea of a deity possessed by all mortals.” Spinoza seems to use the word “idea” in a Cartesian sense, signifying an innate concept which has been formulated through reason. As previously stated, Spinoza believes that a misuse of reason may promote superstition, but superstition is ultimately rooted in the passions. On these grounds, Spinoza dismisses as a viable candidate for the basis of superstition the content of innate religious beliefs. Religion, then, is neither the equivalent nor the basis of superstition, although it has played a significant part in promoting superstition. Again, Spinoza wishes to highlight the natural origins of superstition in the human condition. This is significant because as we will see, the naturalness of superstition is an obstacle around which Spinoza must work in implementing his political project.

In addition to explaining superstition as a natural phenomenon, Spinoza also discusses superstition’s relative permanence. Unfortunately, this susceptibility to superstition is difficult and often impossible to shake, according to Spinoza. He writes,

I know how deeply rooted in the mind are the prejudices embraced under the guise of piety. I know, too, that the masses can no more be freed from their superstition than from their fears. Finally, I know that they are unchanging in their obstinacy, that they are not guided by reason, and that their praise and blame is at the mercy of impulse.

Spinoza makes several claims in this passage. First, he acknowledges that people have “prejudices” that are “deeply rooted.” In this case, Spinoza seems to be referring to religious prejudices, but as he has argued before, superstitions promoted by religion are rooted ultimately in the human condition. Spinoza then goes on to claim that the multitude (“the masses”) cannot be “freed from their superstition.” This sentence is Spinoza’s most direct assertion of the permanence of superstition. Because it is rooted in their “fears,” and fear is a natural and dominant emotion, superstition reigns supreme for the vast majority of people. Finally, Spinoza argues that the
multitude is “obstinate,” “not guided by reason,” and “at the mercy of impulse.” In Spinoza’s view, people grow accustomed to superstitious thinking; so, human beings are predisposed naturally to adopt superstitious thinking, and their aversion to change facilitates the persistence of superstition throughout life. Thus, superstition persists not only as the result of innate fears, but also as a result of human beings’ unwillingness to critically examine and change their thinking patterns when superstition has already taken root. This consideration plays a significant role in Spinoza’s political project because, assuming his theory of superstition is correct, it would be more feasible for political leaders to re-channel the superstitious thinking of the multitude for the betterment of the state rather than try to eradicate superstition once and for all.

Spinoza’s Two Versions of “Divine Law” and Esotericism

Because superstition is such a fundamental and malignant condition, Spinoza takes considerable care to set it apart from what he considers to be “true religion.” Spinoza proclaims that “[true] religion stands in no need of the trappings of superstition. On the contrary, its glory is diminished when it is embellished with such fancies.” Spinoza’s statement implies that religion is something of value. It is Spinoza’s aim to rescue religion from corruption and harmonize it with the well-being of the state. Spinoza also asserts that “true religion” is “divinely inscribed . . . in men’s minds.” True religion is innate; on the other hand, the “trappings” of corrupted religion are artificial and play on people’s natural fears, which results in superstitious thinking. True religion and superstition are diametrically opposed.

Despite his insistence on the inherent goodness of true religion, Spinoza does not always define true religion consistently in the TTP. Spinoza often uses the term “Divine Law” to signify true religion. Spinoza presents his first formulation of the Divine Law in Chapter Four. He distinguishes between “human law” and “divine law,”
stating, “By human law I mean a prescribed rule of conduct whose sole aim is to safeguard life and the commonwealth; by divine law I mean that which is concerned only with the supreme good, that is, the true knowledge and love of God.” It is important to note that here Spinoza defines “human law” in terms of morality and social stability but defines “divine law” in terms of the intellect.

Of great relevance to this first version of the Divine Law is Spinoza’s identification of God with Nature:

By God’s direction I mean the fixed and immutable order of Nature, or chain of natural events; for I have said above...that the universal laws of Nature according to which all things happen and are determined are nothing but God’s eternal decrees, which always involve eternal truth and necessity. So it is the same thing whether we say that all things happen according to Nature’s laws or that they are regulated by God’s decree and direction. God and Nature are identical in Spinoza’s account. It follows from this that divine laws are the same as natural laws. Therefore, the first version of the Divine Law that Spinoza presents in this chapter can be summarized as the comprehension of natural events.

We may recall that in the preface Spinoza characterizes the multitude as primarily irrational and bound by superstition. It is curious, then, that true religion would consist in the “knowledge and love of God,” which can only be apprehended through “philosophic thinking and pure activity of mind.” It is strange that Spinoza seems to set such an unattainable end for true religion. The multitude, in his view, is obstinate and not predisposed to “philosophic thinking and pure activity of mind”; rather, most people are predisposed to superstitious thinking due to their natural ignorance and fear. It would be naïve to leap to the conclusion that Spinoza has contradicted himself unwittingly by setting such a high standard. But, this is neither the only nor the final version of the Divine Law that Spinoza presents in the treatise.
Spinoza reformulates the Divine Law in Chapter 12 of the *TTP*. He begins the chapter with an attack on proponents of Biblical infallibility. For Spinoza, “God’s eternal Word” is not constituted by a holy book alone, and he criticizes those who maintain the infallibility of holy books as such: “[They] are carrying their piety too far, and are turning religion into superstition; instead of God’s Word they are beginning to worship likenesses and images, that is, paper and ink.”\(^{16}\) True religion is not dependent on “paper and ink,” but many prefer to think that this is the case. As a result, religion has degenerated into superstition because the true message has been lost.

In light of this attack, Spinoza revisits the concept of the Divine Law, or true religion. Spinoza has not lost all hope for Scripture to be instructive and constructive. While he expresses his skepticism with regard to Biblical authorship and warns against worshipping “paper and ink,” he stresses the truth of Scripture’s overarching message. Spinoza argues that Scripture is holy only insofar as “its message [is]…to love God above all, and one’s neighbour as oneself.”\(^{17}\) For Spinoza, true religion boils down to “the doctrine of charity.”\(^{18}\) The minutiae of a particular holy book are of no concern to Spinoza because they are not sufficient for the existence of true religion. Moral action, then, is the essence of true religion.

This is an interesting change in tone from Spinoza's assertions in the fourth chapter that true religion consists in intellectual love and knowledge of God. The shift likely is purposeful. It can be argued that in the expression of his ideas, Spinoza uses language or appeals to a tradition that his audience is familiar with and can better understand. In this way, Spinoza’s writing may at times be considered esoteric, in the sense that his message is disguised by a common language or tradition. Bagley goes even farther to argue that Spinoza’s method is deliberately deceptive.\(^{19}\) Citing as a key example Spinoza’s “inconsistency” with regard to the validity of knowledge derived from revelation, Bagley asserts that “the esoteric or true teaching of the *Tractatus theologico-politicus* often amounts to the realization that the doctrine asserted most conspicuously is
exoterical or untrue, as is the case with the claim that what is attained from prophecy or revelation offers an assured disclosure of some ‘certa cognitio.’” \(^{20}\) In other words, Spinoza may be conveying an esoteric message that is antithetical to the message gleaned from a superficial reading of the treatise.

It is likely not the case that Spinoza is adapting his diction and appealing to tradition solely for the sake of accessibility. To a certain extent, Spinoza is intentionally inaccessible from the outset of the work. In keeping with his pessimistic attitude toward the multitude, he “prefer[s] that they disregard this book completely” because they will “misinterpret” it. \(^{21}\) While this remark may not be sufficient to deter certain people from reading the treatise, it is still illustrative of his intentions. On the other hand, it is conceivable that this serves as a ploy to induce critical thinkers to read further, acting as an invitation for those capable of philosophy to think critically.

Spinoza adds that at the time of his writing philosophy is not “liberal” enough, as the majority attempt to make it the “handmaiden of theology.” \(^{22}\) Spinoza thus addresses the treatise not to the general public, but to those who try constantly to assert the primacy of theology over philosophy. The Preface seems to be the most forthright section of the work; however, the Preface simultaneously makes Spinoza less accessible as evidenced by the fact that he limits his audience significantly. Spinoza does not intend to be accessible to all, but he may want to attract potential philosophers to his cause. The contradictions in the work may be reflective of his intentions.

The tension between the two versions of Divine Law that Spinoza presents in the *TTP* may be viewed as less contradictory when taking Spinoza’s political project into account. Rice states that Spinoza’s primary goal in the treatise is the complete “freedom of philosophizing” because “[f]reeing human society from the burden of religious dogmatism opens the door to a pluralistic view of human cognition and the liberation of human science.” \(^{23}\) This “human science” of which Rice speaks in actuality sounds similar to Spinoza’s first framing of true religion as the intellectual knowledge
and love of God, as Spinoza takes God to mean Nature. In this way, the pursuit of natural science is true religion; however, Spinoza’s negative view of human nature seems to preclude this possibility.

Nevertheless, Rice provides another insight that is integral to reconciling the apparent contradiction in Spinoza’s two versions of Divine Law, claiming that “superstition [is propagated by] the transformation of religion from practical to speculative doctrine. This distinction between religion and superstition becomes a cornerstone of Spinoza’s argument for academic freedom in *TTP.*” Here Rice reiterates that Spinoza distinguishes between superstition and true religion. Superficially it seems that Spinoza’s first version of the Divine Law is a “speculative doctrine,” but interpreting God to mean Nature changes the meaning of the first version entirely: Instead of true religion consisting in speculation about the God of Scripture, it actually consists in the comprehension of natural events through reason. Spinoza then proposes a “practical doctrine” in the second version of the Divine Law, the aforementioned “doctrine of charity.” Loving one’s neighbor, then, is true religion, as well, and one can see easily how this would be beneficial politically. Interpreting the two versions of the Divine Law in this manner allows Spinoza to have his cake and eat it too, so to speak. The first version allows for Spinoza’s political goal of “academic freedom” by sanctioning the practice of natural science. The second version both keeps religion from becoming speculative and devolving into superstition (or at least re-channels the superstitious thinking of the multitude) and accommodates the multitude by giving them practical rules to follow.

Levy puts this in another way. He writes that for Spinoza the purpose of religion is “to educate the citizens toward obedience . . . by appealing to understanding, but not by coercion.” The multitude can be persuaded to understand that the message of Scripture is to love one another. “Education” implies refinement of reason and desires, which is consistent with Spinoza’s first version of Divine Law, which is framed in terms of the intellect. Religion does not
relinquish its practical purpose either, as it inspires the public’s “obedience” to the sovereign power without resorting to force.

I suspect that the second version of the Divine Law is Spinoza’s way of coming down to earth, so to speak. It seems that a secure and stable society would be a necessary precondition for the open and free refinement of the intellect. Given his view of human nature, it seems that Spinoza is conceding that his political project—of which intellectual freedom is a crucial part—will involve re-channeling superstition rather than eradicating it completely. To a great extent, the second version of the Divine Law can be understood as a precondition for the first version. Even though the multitude’s superstition and their common ground (i.e., Scripture) are not destroyed outright, the meaning of Scripture is limited significantly insofar as it cannot contradict the doctrine of charity. While it can be objected that this is detrimental to freedom in general, the limitation of Scriptural meaning paves the way for philosophers like Spinoza to engage in free inquiry more or less safely.

Spinoza’s esoteric strategy is manifested in his ability to present seemingly contradictory conceptions of Divine Law or true religion as if their coexistence poses no problem. Vigilant readers will notice that Spinoza asserts that true religion is housed in the mind innately, which is where ignorance and the domineering passions also reside innately. This cohabitation seems impossible given Spinoza’s view of the human condition. The irrational multitude cannot be expected to attain knowledge of God. As suggested above, the esoteric truth of the first version of the Divine Law seems to be the comprehension of natural events, given Spinoza’s pantheistic doctrine.

A reexamination of the second version of Divine Law proves equally fruitful. The doctrine of charity that Spinoza proposes is metaphysically groundless. If God and Nature are one, there is no divine command to love one another and humans can be viewed as machines driven by their passions. However, Spinoza does not expect any religious believers reading his treatise to notice this inconsistency. The esoteric truth of the second version of the Divine
Law may be that the state’s health is contingent on the citizens’ love of one another. Jobani goes even farther to argue that the political is in tension with the ethical and the former supersedes the latter in Spinoza’s project: “Obedience to God, which in the first part of the Treatise was identified only with ‘love of [one’s] neighbor,’ is identified in the second part with blind obedience to the political authority.”27 In Jobani’s account, Spinoza uses “obedience to God” as a political tool, at least in the section of the work where he presents his political project. In effect, Spinoza esoterically declares religion as a means to a healthy state.

As we have seen, Spinoza invests a considerable amount of effort in the TTP assessing the human condition and locating the origins of superstition within it. From Spinoza’s claims it may be deduced that superstition is a natural and permanent condition. The naturalness and permanence of superstition is a function of the naturalness and permanence of ignorance and, more important, the dominance of the passions (e.g., fear). Because superstition is so deep-seated and persistent, it is one of the greatest obstacles to a healthy state. Spinoza’s conception of true religion provides a healthy alternative because it demands that people love one another. In Spinoza’s view, true religion becomes imperative for a healthy state because of the widespread peace it promotes. Even if people choose to hold on to extraneous superstitions (as the enlightenment of the multitude is likely impossible), as long as they hold the belief that others should be treated in the same way that they would want to be treated, the state can function well or flourish. These considerations pave the way for a discussion of how Spinoza frames religious dogmatism and its political implications.

The Roles of Philosophy and Theology: A Spinozistic Framing of Dogmatism

In the Preface of the TTP, Spinoza criticizes those who try to make philosophy the “handmaiden of theology” and surmises that
they “will derive great profit from this work.”

For Spinoza, philosophy and theology (which also will be called reason and religion, respectively, in this section) both have important roles to play in society, and he cautions against their interference with one another. Spinoza elaborates on this theme in Chapter 15, which has the effect of clarifying his views on dogmatism.

Spinoza argues vehemently against the view that we can make theology consistent with philosophy, and vice-versa. With respect to the first alternative, this adaptation is not possible because “Scripture teaches only piety, not philosophy, and . . . all its contents were adapted to the understanding and preconceived beliefs of the common people.” This assertion is reminiscent of Spinoza’s second version of Divine Law insofar as “piety” consists in moral action (i.e., loving one’s neighbor). “Philosophy” can be taken to mean the investigation and comprehension of Nature, the freedom for which is allowed by his first version of Divine Law. With respect to the second alternative—that is, that philosophy can be adapted to theology—Spinoza warns that if this were possible, we would have to “accept as divinely inspired utterances the prejudices of a common people of long ago, which [would] gain a hold on [our] understanding and darken it.”

These admonitions serve to illustrate Spinoza’s views about the limited knowledge of the Biblical authors and, in turn, about proponents of superstition. Spinoza clearly does not take Scripture as literal truth, and he warns that others doing so is pernicious. Dogmatists uphold these “divinely inspired utterances” that comprise Scripture and have no qualms about spreading them as truth. Spinoza thinks that the dogmatist propagation comes at the expense of a healthy “understanding,” or reason.

Spinoza, like many Enlightenment thinkers who came afterward, champions reason as the “gold standard” of human cognition. Accordingly, he is keenly aware of what he perceives as affronts to reason. Spinoza laments,

I am utterly astonished that men can bring themselves to make reason, the greatest of all gifts and a light divine,
subservient to letters that are dead, and may have been corrupted by human malice; that it should be considered no crime to denigrate the mind, the true handwriting of God’s word, declaring it to be corrupt, blind, and lost, whereas it is considered to be a heinous crime to entertain such thoughts of the letter, a mere shadow of God’s word. They think it pious to put no trust in reason and their own judgment, impious to doubt the trustworthiness of those who have transmitted to us the Sacred Books. This is not piety, but mere folly.  

To be sure, Spinoza does think that Scripture can be something of great value to the multitude, insofar as it inspires love toward fellow citizens. However, in this passage it is evident that Spinoza has no sympathy for those who uphold the authority of Scripture (“letters that are dead”) at the expense of reason (“the true handwriting of God’s word”). Dogmatists do not condone skepticism toward “the letter” or toward “those who have transmitted to us the Sacred Books,” and they consider this unconditional trust to be a virtue.

Spinoza wishes to debunk the false notion of piety that is equivalent to doctrinal faith. Spinoza dismisses this notion of piety when he proposes the second version of Divine Law. He adds to this, claiming that the unquestioning belief in Scriptural narratives is not constitutive of true theology, and theology’s message does not come at reason’s expense: “[B]y theology I mean the Word of God properly so called, which does not consist in a set number of books….If you look to its purpose and end [i.e., loving one’s neighbor], it will be found to be in no respect opposed to reason, and is therefore valid for all men.”  

More important, Spinoza establishes formally the respective roles of reason and religion, stating that the former is concerned with “truth and wisdom” while the latter concerns “piety and obedience.” As we have seen already in Spinoza’s proposal of two versions of Divine Law, the assignment of roles to reason and religion accommodates both philosophers and the unphilosophical multitude. The key word in this assignment of roles is “obedience.” This word signifies a shift in the focus of the treatise to Spinoza’s
political project. Citizens’ obedience to the laws made by the sovereign power will be crucial to the health of the state. For Spinoza, the state’s focus should be on inducing this obedience rather than on intellectual and moral cultivation.

These are fighting words for dogmatists. Religion as it stands in their view is under attack by Spinoza. The claim that the canon of sacred texts is irrelevant amounts to a threat to the essence of religion. After all, the Scripture constitutes the infallible Word of God, and who could possibly have the nerve to question that? Apparently, Spinoza does. Although Spinoza does acknowledge the truth of Scripture’s core message, the love of one’s neighbor, he is skeptical of the purported infallibility of the specific books of the Bible and their respective authors. Furthermore, Spinoza warns against taking the present-day theologians at their word. In Chapter Seven, Spinoza argues that, opposed to “charity,” theologians “imagine that the most profound mysteries lie hidden in the Bible, and they exhaust themselves in unravelling these absurdities while ignoring other things of value. They ascribe to the Holy Spirit whatever their wild fancies have invented.” Spinoza is so dismissive of the possibility of theology being a speculative discipline that he does not

Spinoza frames the problem of dogmatism in terms of the respective roles of theology and philosophy. These roles are very specific, and neither discipline should attempt to go beyond its competency. Spinoza denounces dogmatism by chastising those who are afraid to use their reason and dismissing blind faith in Scriptural narratives as “folly.” As if this were not enough, Spinoza eventually advances the claim that, to a certain extent, religion should be subjected to political authority. Fradkin notes that for Spinoza, “religious opinion is free to be expressed, [but] religious action is still entirely subject to the sovereign.” Spinoza is so dismissive of the possibility of theology being a speculative discipline that he does not
care which views concerning the divine that theologians perpetuate as long as these views are consistent with the love of one’s neighbor. In turn, the love of one’s neighbor is consistent with the well-being of the state. Although Spinoza sees the political utility that religion can have, his complete apathy toward “religious opinion” is a huge slap to the face for dogmatists.

**Dogmatism and Freedom**

Just as reason is the gold standard of human cognition, freedom (especially freedom of thought) is Spinoza’s paragon of political life, and he defends it vigorously in Chapter 20 of the *TTP*. In fact, Spinoza claims that freedom is the “purpose” of the state in the sense that it should “free every man from fear so that he may live in security as far as is possible, that is, so that he may best preserve his own natural right to exist and to act, without harm to himself and to others.” While it is beyond the scope of this essay to provide an extensive account of Spinoza’s political philosophy, several important principles are contained within this short passage. First, Spinoza mentions that the state exists to “free every man from fear.” Citizens’ freedom from fear is a necessary precondition for stability, and this generates feelings of “security.” Second, Spinoza declares freedom “to exist and to act” as a “natural right.” The state exists to maintain human beings’ natural rights. Specifically, the state protects citizens’ power of self-preservation. Third, Spinoza adds the caveat that the state maintains the freedom of its citizens only when citizens act “without harm” toward themselves or other people. Thus, for Spinoza, security and stability are the ends of the state, and freedom in a very basic sense acts as a means to these ends.

The third point, the boundaries of freedom, is crucial and most closely related to dogmatism. Spinoza builds on this: [W]hile to act against the sovereign’s decree is definitely an infringement of his right, this is not the case with thinking, judging, and consequently with speaking, too, provided one
does no more than express or communicate one’s opinion, defending it through *rational* conviction alone, not through deceit, anger, hatred, or the will to effect such changes in the state as he himself decides.  

There are limits on freedom, in Spinoza’s view, and these limits most often take the form of prohibiting certain actions (i.e., “to act against the sovereign’s decree”) and even some speech. One can see that hate speech falls among the prohibited because of the threat to social stability that it carries. Dogmatists have been known to verbally denounce people of other faiths and occasionally act violently toward them, and this is not acceptable in Spinoza’s state. Another limit on freedom of speech pertains to the way opinions are defended. It is important to note that Spinoza only allows for *rational* defense of opinions in his political arrangement. This is a win for philosophers, as Spinoza has repeated throughout the work that the multitude is primarily irrational and bound by superstition. The rational can defend their opinions openly, but those who argue using “deceit, anger, hatred,” or seditious ideas are silenced. Of course, the reasonableness of this expectation may be contested, especially because most people are indeed irrational in Spinoza’s view; but, in theory, the state could intervene in extreme cases. In effect, this spells trouble for dogmatists because they cannot resort to blind faith to advance their interests, and any who attempt to use force to promote their agenda already are stifled by the state’s laws that punish militant behavior.

The limitations that Spinoza imposes on political freedom (i.e., in actions prohibited by law as well as in specific instances of speech detrimental to the well-being of the state) are in essence a method for reducing the influence of religious leaders on political life, as they are the ones who want to limit freedom of thought, the most important freedom for Spinoza. Mignini ascribes to Spinoza a negative attitude toward all of theology: “Spinoza’s judgement about theology…is thus clear and unequivocally negative: not only are the theologians enemies of reason and freedom…but they are equally
against those who, appointed to govern states, refuse to use theology as an instrument of power.”

If by “theology” we are referring to religious belief, then this assessment is accurate. Spinoza does not concern himself with religious “opinion” because he believes it irrelevant. On the other hand, we must take into account Spinoza’s definition of theology that he provides in his second version of the Divine Law as well as in the chapter detailing the roles of theology and philosophy. Theology involves “piety” or “obedience”; it does not involve speculative matters. Also, for the sake of clarity, it seems that “instrument of power” in this quotation constitutes control of citizens’ thoughts rather than control of their actions. This is a warped kind of obedience not in line with Spinoza’s political project. Dogmatism is characterized by the emphasis on having the “correct” thoughts about the divine. Thus, we could rephrase this in terms of dogmatism rather than theology, and the assessment makes more sense.

Spinoza’s conception of religion as presented in the two versions of the Divine Law is a limited religion, and it can be used as a tool for achieving stability and freedom in society. In support of this interpretation, Jobani remarks, “The core of religion is thus the creation, preservation, and cultivation of stability, which is also the ultimate goal of politics. Religion, according to the Treatise, is thus distinct from superstition, not by dint of the truth of its concept of God, but only by virtue of its ability to stabilize society.” Spinoza’s type of religion enables the achievement of “the ultimate goal of politics” through redirecting the multitude’s superstition toward obedience to the sovereign power. One may raise the following objection: Isn’t Spinoza limiting freedom dramatically by not allowing interpretations of Scripture contrary to the doctrine of charity? In short, yes; but, he is simultaneously increasing freedom from fear (i.e., the precondition for stability and security) by attenuating dogmatism and consequently increasing the freedom to philosophize because the latter depends on this more basic freedom.
Conclusion

Although Spinoza may not have influenced the American Founding Fathers directly, Spinoza is often considered one of the first major proponents of liberal democracy, and the United States emulates this form of government. In light of this fact and considering the contemporary persistence of religious dogmatism in the United States, it is worth pondering whether the Spinozistic political project to re-channel superstition and promote security and stability has been or could be successful. Rice notes that the “political dangers of speculative theology, the threats to freedom of inquiry, the rule of the mob rather than of reason…[are] no less a threat to freedom and human liberation today than they were in Spinoza’s time.” Would Spinoza have foreseen our current state of affairs—that is, with respect to dogmatism refusing to relinquish its grip entirely on a considerable number of individuals?

Regardless of the answer to this question, we can learn a great deal from Spinoza’s account of religion that is presented in the *Theological-Political Treatise*. It is evident that dogmatism is a complex issue with acute sociopolitical implications. If Spinoza’s account of the human condition and superstition is accurate, then it may be impossible to eliminate dogmatism once and for all. Nevertheless, Spinoza holds out hope that at least we may be able to weaken dogmatism’s negative influence on the public through a state that is strong but at the same time preserves freedom of thought. While my view is not wholly consistent with Spinoza’s project, despite Spinoza’s pessimism about the human condition, I would argue that everyone could benefit from improved education. Open-mindedness about and scrutiny of religious beliefs must not remain a social taboo. If we can alleviate the discomfort that tends to pervade religious discussions, then we will be in a better position to combat intolerance effectively.
Notes

2 Ibid.
3 Spinoza, 174.
4 Spinoza, 175.
5 Spinoza, 2.
6 Ibid.
7 Spinoza, 188.
8 Spinoza, 2.
9 Ibid.
10 Spinoza, 7-8.
11 Spinoza, 145.
12 Ibid.
13 Spinoza, 49, emphasis added.
14 Spinoza, 36.
15 Spinoza, 51.
16 Spinoza, 145-146.
17 Spinoza, 151.
18 Ibid.
20 Bagley, 400.
21 Spinoza, 8.
22 Ibid.
24 Rice, 186.
26 Spinoza, 164; 225.

28 Spinoza, 8.

29 Spinoza, 165.

30 Ibid.

31 Spinoza, 167, emphasis added.

32 Spinoza, 169.

33 Ibid.

34 Spinoza, 86-87.

35 Ibid.

36 Spinoza, 167.


38 Political freedom must be distinguished from the belief in freedom (especially in the metaphysical sense), which some have deemed a “natural superstition” for Spinoza. See Steven Frankel, “Determined to Be Free: The Meaning of Freedom in Spinoza’s ‘Theologico-Political Treatise’,” *Review of Politics* 73, no. 1 (December 2011): 55-76, accessed October 26, 2014, http://dx.doi.org/10.1017/S0034670510000860.

39 Spinoza, 223.

40 Spinoza, 224, emphasis added.

41 Spinoza hints at this in several places in the treatise. See p. 227 for one of his most passionate denunciations of religious leaders trying to use “legislation” to enforce particular beliefs.

42 Fillipo Mignini, “Theology as the Work and Instrument of Fortune,” in *Spinoza’s Political and Theological Thought*, ed. C. De Deugd (Amsterdam: Royal Netherlands Academy of Arts and Sciences, 1984), 132.

43 Jobani, 402-403.

44 Rice, 194.
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Jobani, Yuval. “Ethical or Political Religion? On the Contradiction Between Two Models of Amended Religion in Spinoza’s ‘Theological-Political Treatise.’” *Hebraic Political Studies* 3,


