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-clés

Sécularisation, Hébreu, Spinoza, Tractatus theologico-politicus, désisme, 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 interrupting 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 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

4Kirtchuk Cf P. Hebrew in the Universities. 2011;ffhal-00639142f
5Tillich P. Religion and Secular Culture. The Journal of Religion. 1946;26(2);82.
Carolinian 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 transcendental 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 Ogge Meinsma called the «Spinoza circle ».19 This included friends of Francisculus Van den Enden such as Lodewijk Meyer, Simon de Vries, Pieter Balling, Jarig Jelles, Johan Bouwmeester, Adriaan Koerbagh, Jan Rieuwertsz, 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 Cartesianists.20

Spinoza uses the term saeculum only once, to characterize the poetic utopia of a golden age (or century) (saeculum 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 theologicopoliticus, 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 schisms (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 covenant with God to a natural and anthropocentric culture. Spinoza brought about a radical paradigm shift which, by promoting the conatus as the universal ontological principle of

22Spinoza. TTP XIV(13):480–481.
26Spinoza, 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.

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modernity, constituted the “backbone” of the entire European Enlightenment. In this sense, he also contributed greatly to forging the image of the Jew in the European society of the Enlightenment, by presenting secularization as the only alternative to traditional Judaism. Philosophy then ceased to be at the service of theology (sacrae 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. Moreover, he completely disengaged the relationship between the Divine real ethics. In this sense, the Spinozistic God, standing beyond good and evil, ceased 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. 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.

Spinoza’s innovation, which forged the weapons of the revolutionary spirit, was perceived as much more radical than that of Hobbes or Bayle. It truly inaugurated modern thought, and Spinozism served as a model for all theories of immanence, including Kantian, Hegelian, Marxian, Nietzschean, Freudian, and Einsteinian. Spinozism appears to be equally present, albeit in a non-manifestly way, in Heideggerian philosophy. 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. This can itself be defined as the “triumph of the scientific method”. However, Antonio Negri proposed to understand the fundamentally subversive character of Spinozism, first as being “anti-modern,” and then as constituting a “post-modern” philosophy. 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. 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.

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. 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. 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.

**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, then was introduced in England in 1621 by Robert Burton. 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. 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. Let us recall that...

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 C F A M, A. The Theological Origins of Modernity. Chicago: University of Chicago Press; 2008. 258 p.
33On the other hand, it has been possible to revise the image of the medieval period (forged in particular by Petarch) as being particularly gloomy. Nagy C F Z. Le temps des ténèbres : la naissance de l’image négative du Moyen Age. Verbum Analecta Neolatina. 2011;XII(1):167–183.
40Hazard P, La crise de la conscience européenne. 174.

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Edward Herbert of Cherbury posited, among other things, that “God Himself is in us” (in nobis ipse est Deus), and identified Him with Nature, which in turn assimilated it with the “common Providence of things” (Natura sive Providentia rerum communis). This is why John Leland has likened Cherbury to Spinoza, citing proposition 54 of Ethics IV which rejects the notion of repentance (Parnientia virtus non est), as well as the ideas of man’s free agency, immortality of the soul and future retribution. 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. 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. It should be noted, however, that the religion of the Collegiants combined spiritualistic and rationalistic elements, which in fact went beyond deism strictly speaking. Deism, by denying God’s intervention in the world, has weakened the traditional notion of faith, and has largely paved the way for atheism.

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. 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. Da Costa experienced a gradual evolution from Marranism to Judaism and then to Deism. 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. Let’s recall that Lambert de Velthuysen reproached the latter for not having “risen above the religion of the deists (non assurgit supra religione Deistarum).” Spinozism can also be located between the skepticism of La Mothe le Vayer and the rationalism of Rousseau, or to consider it as a liberal thinker regarding religious notions.

Despite their profound differences, deism, atheism, and Spinozism have been associated. 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.

In fact, deism, and after it atheism, replaces, in the same vein as Spinoza, the Law, which is inherently paternal, by a rational 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.

The god of Spinoza and traditional theism

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

[^6]: De Herbert de Cherbury, De religione gentilium errorumque apud eos causis. Amsterdam; 1663;4.
to be in line with the traditional traits of divinity. "This is why, for example, Herder made the Spinozistic God the “supreme reason like love (höchste Vernunft wie Liebe),”" and Novalis saw in Spinoza “the God drunk man (der Gott betrunkenen Mensch).""51 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.”"52 Spinoza has been claimed by both Catholic,53 and Protestant theologians.54 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.55 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 ‘atḥah).” 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.56 Jewish thinkers who claim secularization have been considered the “children of Spinoza,” because they have found in this author a veritable “scientific paradigm” for founding a secularized Jewish identity.57 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.”58

On the contrary, in line with Hermann Cohen’s sharp criticism,59 Emmanuel Levinas pointed out that Spinoza subordinated the truth of Judaism to the revelation of the New Testament. His tour de force consisted in proposing a form of rationalism, allowing Christianity to be surreptitiously imposed on many Jewish intellectuals.60 He noted that before Spinoza, no Jew could attack his original religion without first being baptized.61

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 attributes.62 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 superfluous.63 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 Naturae.64 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, 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.”65 From a philosophico 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.66

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.67 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 (atheismus).”68 To the reproach that the TTP “surreptitiously introduced atheism (clam Atheismum introducit),”69 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 “practic contrary to true religion.”70 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

53However, Michael Della Rocca has noted large areas of congruence between theism and Spinozism, M. Della Rocca, Spinoza. London, Routledge: 2008;285.
55Novalis (Georg Philipp Friedrich Freiherr), Schriften. 5 ed. Berlin, Reimer G, 1837;253.
61Berger S, Under 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’uwwat. Davar, December, 1953.
64Israel JJ, Revolutionary Jews From Spinoza To Marx-The Fight For A Secular World Of Universal And Equal Rights. Seattle, University of Washington Press; 2021;5.

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

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." As reported by the two informants, Tomás Solano y Robles and Miguel Pérez de Maltralinilla, 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 habia Dios sino es filosofalmente). This confirms Olas Borsh's testimony on Spinoza's atheism, as early as 1661, 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, the latter "believed only in Spinoza's God." According to Rabelais' paradoxical expression, he was ultimately a "believer of unbelief." Ernst Cassirer emphasizes that the intellectual problems posed by the Age of Enlightenment remain intimately linked to the religious question, from which they draw their impulses. However, despite its consistantual 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. In this sense, following Ludwig Feuerbach, who described Spinozistic pantheism as "materialist theology," Franz Rosenzweig calls "atheistic theology" any theological, and any discourse that dispenses from Revelation. 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.

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. 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 study 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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