Locke, Spinoza and the Philosophical Debate

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Locke, Spinoza and the Philosophical Debate Concerning Toleration in the Early Enlightenment (c. 1670 - c. 1750)

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The late seventeenth and early eighteenth century witnessed the decisive advance, indeed the first real triumph, of the concept of toleration in western Europe if not officially, and in law, then certainly in the intellectual sphere and in practice. In the United Provinces, beginning in the era of De Witt's 'True Freedom' and continuing during the stadholderate of William III after 1672, religious, if not full philosophical, toleration was powerfully affirmed, expanded and in some respects, as with the Anabaptists, formalized.[1] In England, as a consequence of the Glorious Revolution of 1688-91, not only religious toleration but also freedom of the press grew appreciably.[2] In France, as the Abbé Houtteville observed, in 1722, there may have been no outward formalization of toleration but anyone viewing the situation in the 1720's could not possibly fail to see that a huge change had come about in French society over the past generation or so since the onset of the new century. Without even thinking about the matter, or discussing it, he says, toleration had on a pragmatic, day-to-day basis, insensibly, and by degrees, become entirely acceptable to educated Frenchmen. Where, before, uniformity and stringency were the rule, and were taken for granted by most, now 'on laisse chacun arbitre de ses opinions particulières et libre de se composer à son gré sa propre religion'.[3] In short, confessional rigidity had suddenly and dramatically relaxed and Christianity in France, at least in lay society, had become 'tolerant'. Despite being known as a liberal churchman and a 'Malebranchiste', Houtteville considered this decisive advance of practical toleration in France an utterly disastrous development, indeed a dreadful thing, in part because it weakens the authority of the Church and allows too much freedom in doctrinal matters to the individual but, above all, because one can not in practice, even if one can in theory, separate toleration of other Christian churches and theologies from toleration of irreligion, impiety, atheism and (worst of all in his eyes) Spinozism.[4]

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[1] See H.H. Rowen, *John de Witt* , Princeton, New Jersey, 1978, p. 420-441; Wiebe Bergsma, 'Church, State and People', in Karel Davids and Jan Lucassen (eds), *A Miracle Mirrored. The Dutch Republic in European Perspective*, Cambridge, 1995, p. 197-213; see also J.I. Israel, *The Dutch Republic. Its Rise, Greatness and Fall 1477-1806*, Oxford, 1995, p. 637-76, 1019-37.

[2] Nicholas Tyacke, 'Introduction' to Ole Peter Grell, J.I. Israel and Nicholas Tyacke (eds), *From Persecution to Toleration. The Glorious Revolution and Religion in England,* Oxford, 1991, p. 7-16; see also J.I. Israel, 'William III and Toleration', in Grell, Israel and Tyacke, *From Persecution to Toleration*, 129-70.

Houtteville's condemnation of the new French toleration which arose after the death of Louis XIV partly on the grounds that religious freedom weakens the Church and ecclesiastical authority but even more on the grounds that it encourages freedom of thought and irreligion, arguably points to one of the most fundamental dilemmas of early Enlightenment Europe. Those thinkers whom most modern intellectual and cultural historians today identify as the chief theorists of toleration of that age, in the first place Locke and Bayle, based their claims for toleration on what they saw as the necessity of freedom of conscience and religious practice, argued in large part from a theological perspective which was undoubtedly sincere in Locke's case[5] but which may not have been genuine, or altogether genuine, in that of Bayle.[6]

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[3] Alexandre Claude François Houtteville, *La religion chrétienne prouvée par les faits,* (1722), (2 vols, Paris, 1740), vol. I, p. VIII.

[4] Ibid., p. IX.

[5] John Dunn, *Locke,* Oxford, 1984, p. 17; David Wootton, 'Introduction' to *John Locke. Political Writings,* London, 1993, p. 94-110; John Marshall, *John Locke,* Cambridge, 1994, p. 119-54, 329-83.

[6] The predomiant view since the apperance of E. Labrousse, *Pierre Bayle,* 2 vols, The Hague, 1963-4, is to affirm the sincerity of Bayle's Calvinism and Christian faith; among others this view is echoed by Walter Rex, *Pierre Bayle and Religious Controversy,* The Hague,

Later too, as we proceed into the eighteenth century, it remained usual to argue for toleration, as for example Voltaire does in the *Dictionnaire Philosophique* (1764), on the grounds that religious persecution is harmful and destructive and that the truly religious must follow their consciences which cannot be forced from above[7], even in cases such as that of Bernard Mandeville where the perspective is obviously republican and fiercely anti-clerical, as well, one suspects, as designed to further freedom of thought generally rather than freedom of conscience and faith. 'It is evident', insists Mandeville, that 'there is no characteristic, to distinguish and know a true church from a false one' and that the 'greatest argument for tolleration is, that differences of opinion can do no hurt, if all clergy-men are kept in awe, and no more independent on the state than the laity',[8] a strikingly Spinozistic sentiment.

In effect, in the late seventeenth century and early eighteenth nearly all men in positions of authority, indeed nearly all educated persons, agreed that impiety, irreligion and philosophical atheism were exceedingly dangerous and highly undesireable in society but also that religious persecution is mistaken and wrong because it too patently harms society. The inevitable consequence was that respected theorists seeking to influence the mainstream, and steer opinion towards toleration, were bound to follow the path mapped out by Locke and Bayle. In Bayle's case, the strategy is clear even if his underlying motives and objectives remain more than a little debateable. 'Bayle's reciprocity argument for religious toleration', as the point has been expressed, 'turns on the frightful results of the Wars of Religion'.[9] By showing that religious persecution and efforts to impose religious uniformity by force fearfully disrupt life and property, he demonstrates that religious persecution is intrinsically wrong and therefore cannot be authorized by God, Christ or, justifiably, by any ruler or church. It follows from this that those scholars who accept the views of Madame Labrousse and what in recent decades has become the dominant

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1965, and John Kilcullen, *Sincerity and Truth. Essays on Arnauld, Bayle and Toleration*, Oxford, 1988, p. 54-105; but there are also now quite a number of scholars who hold to the contrary view originally upheld in Bayle's life-time by Jurieu, Poiret and Le Clerc, see in particular G. Cantelli, *Teologia e ateismo. Saggio sul pensiero filosofico e religioso di Pierre Bayle*, Florence, 1969, and David Wootton, 'Pierre Bayle, libertine?', in M.A. Stewart (ed.), *Studies in Seventeenth-century European Philosophy*, Oxford, 1997, p. 197-226.

[7] Voltaire, *Dictionnaire Philosophique*, Paris, 1964.

[8] Bernard Mandeville, *Free Thoughts on Religion, The Church and National Happiness*, London, 1720, p. 241, 246.

[9] Kilcullen, *Sincerity and Truth*, p. 110-11.

interpretation of Bayle, seeing Bayle as a sincere Calvinist and member of the Walloon Reformed Church, plausibly conclude that Bayle's toleration, like Locke's, is theologically based and primarily designed to secure freedom of conscience and religious practice. The alternative school of thought, however, among which I include myself, suspect that there is much subterfuge in Bayle's method and rhetoric and that, as many of his opponents alleged during his own lifetime, among them Pierre Jurieu, Pierre Poiret and Jean Le Clerc, his real position is not that of a sincere Christian and that in reality he was an unbeliever, or, as has recently been claimed, the 'greatest of the "libertins érudits"'.[10] If the latter are right this means that Bayle's plea for freedom of conscience is simply an implement with which to further the advance of an essentially secular freedom of thought.

In any case, there can be no doubt as to the theological grounding or the Christian sincerity of Locke's theory of toleration. Jonas Proast, the foremost opponent of Locke's toleration in England, at one point characterizes his theory as a plea for 'an universal Toleration of Religions'.[11] But this is not altogether accurate since not all religions seek to procure the 'salvation of souls'. Closer to the mark perhaps is the description of Locke's theory by Daniele Concina, the foremost writer against philosophical radicalism in Venice in the mid-eighteenth century, a publicist friendly to Locke, who calls his concept a '"tollerantismo" between the Christian churches',[12] albeit Locke did make room also for some other faiths, including that of the Jews. As Van Limborch repeatedly observed in his correspondence with Locke, the argument of the anonymously published *Epistola de Tolerantia* which appeared in Latin and Dutch, in Holland, in 1689, is so close to that set out over recent decades by leading Remonstrant theologians in the Netherlands, such as Episcopius and himself, that Dutch readers, seeing that the positions it defends were like those of the Arminians, wrongly believed it had been written by a Remonstrant.[13] Van

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[10] Wootton, 'Pierre Bayle, libertin?', p. 226.

[11] Jonas Proast, *A Third Letter Concerning Toleration in Defence of the Argument of the Letter Concerning Toleration, Briefly Consider'd and Answer'd*, Oxford, 1691, p. 9.

[12] Daniele Concina, *Della Religione Rivelata contro gli Ateisti, Deisti, Materialisti, Indifferentisti, che negano la Verita de' Misteri*, 2 vols, Venice, 1754, vol. II, p. 362.

[13] E.S. De Beer (ed.), *The Correspondence of John Locke*, 8 vols, Oxford, 1976-89, vol. III, p. 607-12, 646-50, 681-5; see also J.I. Israel, 'Toleration in Seventeenth Century Dutch and English Thought', in Simon Groenveld and Michael Wintle (eds), *Britain and the Netherlands* XI, Zutphen, 1994, p. 16-22, 28; J.I. Israel, 'The Intellectual Debate about Toleration in the

Limborch, for his part, was happy to congratulate himself, as he told Locke, that 'so scholarly a book and one of such service to the common cause of Christianity should be thought incapable of issuing from any other source than the workshop of the Remonstrants'.[14] Without going so far as to equate Locke's theory entirely with that of Episcopius, Van Limborch and Le Clerc, the fact that Locke wrote the *Letter* in November and December 1685 during the period of his most intense involvement with his Arminian friends – as well as with the Jewish controversialist Isaac Orobio de Castro then deeply engaged in his 'friendly dispute' with Van Limborch, le Clerc and Locke – and at the time of the international furore surrounding the Revocation of the Edict of Nantes and the persecution of the Huguenots in France (as well as the accession of Catholic dynasties in Britain and the formerly Calvinist Palatinate) enables scholars to fix both the intellectual and general historical context readily enough.[15]

For Locke every individual Christian is not just personally responsible for seeking the salvation of his or her soul but is obliged, as Episcopius , Le Clerc and Van Limborch held, to perform openly that form of worship through which redemption is sought.[16] Locke's toleration is therefore primarily concerned with freedom of worship, or religious practice, as an extension of freedom of conscience, rather than with freedom of thought, speech and of the press.[17] A well-known consequence of the theological grounding of Locke's plea for toleration is that it is somewhat grudging about extending toleration to certain groups and positively hostile to toleration of certain others.[18] In particular, three limitations to Locke's toleration are noteworthy. Firstly, because his toleration is essentially what one scholar has called a 'privilege' and 'immunity' exempting religious

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Dutch Republic', in C. Berkvens-Stevelinck, J.I. Israel and G.H.M. Posthumus Meyjes (eds), *The Emergence of Tolerance in the Dutch Republic,* Leiden, 1997, p. 18-25.

[14] 'Ego mihi plaudo, librum adeo eruditum et communi rei Christianae adeo utilem, credi non aliunde quam ex Remonstrantius officina prodire posse', *Correspondence of John Locke,* vol. III, p. 648.

[15] See, however, Wootton, 'Introduction', p. 95-7.

[16] Simon Episcopius, *Vrije Godesdienst* (n.p. 1627)(Knuttel 3753), p. 37-47; P.J. Barnouw, *Philippus van Limborch,* The Hague, 1963, p. 18, 41-4; Israel, 'Toleration', 20-1.

[17] Wootton, 'Introduction', p. 105, 109-10; John Dunn, 'The Claim to Freedom of Conscience: Freedom of Speech, Freedom of Thought, Freedom of Worship ?', in Grell, Israel and Tyacke, *From Persecution to Toleration*, 174-8; Ian Harris, *The Mind of John Locke,* Cambridge, 1994, p. 185-6.

[18] John Redwood, *Reason, Ridicule and Religion. The Age of Enlightenment in England 1660-1750,* London, 1976, p. 83; Wootton, 'Introduction', p. 104-5.

dissenters from the church otherwise prescribed and generally obligatory for the whole people – the state church established by crown and Parliament – toleration can only formally and expressly be granted to categories of the population possessing an organized, publicly acknowledged and constituted form of worship for which immunity can be claimed, Protestant dissenters in the first instance but potentially at least also Catholics, Jews and Muslims.[19] Persons subscribing to no recognized church or sect, by contrast, be they agnostics, sceptics, deists or 'Indifferenti' while not specifically excluded are left in a vague limbo without any precise status or acknowledged freedom. Exemption from what generally applies is justified by Locke on the typically Remonstrant ground that the individual's own perception of their religious duties, obligations and requirements must override all other concerns in human life. Saving one's soul has priority over everything else so that a wisely governed state will always accept that the dictates of the individual's conscience and faith must be fully respected. But if a particular individual's spiritual disposition is such that no organized form of religious dissent can be specified or acknowledged, it then becomes unclear what precisely the justification for toleration is.

Secondly, there is Locke's well-known reluctance to accord toleration to Catholics. Strictly speaking, being a defined confession and organized church, there should be no difficulty about extending toleration to Catholics, and indeed Episcopius and, somewhat later, also Uyttenbogaert do so explicitly.[20] But on this point, adhering to the view he had held for many years, Locke is at the very least grudging if not positively intolerant. The magistrate, he maintains, is not obliged to protect churches which claim an authority that can be said to endanger the security of the state, compromise its sovereignty or foment civil strife or discord, as the Catholics do by claiming that the Pope can dispense them from oaths of allegiance, depose rulers, and release them from keeping faith with 'heretics'. Locke's inclination, clearly, is to deny toleration to Catholics.[21]

A third important respect in which Locke's toleration is limited is his emphatic and absolute exclusion of atheists. Since they do not believe in a providential God and belong to no recognized form of worship, and are not seeking to save their souls, by definition they are not entitled to toleration.[22] Maintaining as he does that every human being 'has an immortal soul, capable of eternal happiness or misery' whose redemption depends on fulfilling those things in this life which will secure God's 'favour, and are prescribed by God to that end, it follows from thence, first, that the observance of these things is the highest obligation that lies upon mankind'.[23] Atheists, since they neither accept nor participate in this 'stupendous and supernatural work of our salvation' exclude themselves entirely from the community. On these grounds Locke categorically denies 'atheism (which takes away all religion) to have any right to toleration at all'.[24]

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[19] Dunn, 'Claim to freedom', p. 177-9; Marshall, *John Locke*, p. 367-9.
[20] Episcopius, *Vrye Godesdienst*, p. 44; Israel, 'Toleration', 21.
[21] Wootton, 'Introduction', p. 95; Harris, *Mind of John Locke*, p. 189.

But more serious in the eyes of conservative critics than its theoretical limitations were the practical defects of a theory of toleration which condemns scepticism and atheism but positively advocates the advancement of religious plurality and the weakening of the national church at a time when religious scepticism and philosophical impiety were widely perceived to be rapidly spreading. Here the objections which Jonas Proast levelled against Locke's theory are surely relevant. In his view, the great weakness of Locke's toleration – and one might add of that of Episcopius, Van Limborch and Le Clerc – is that in practice a great many men do not consciously seek, or give priority, to the salvation of their souls. 'The impressions of education', argued Proast, 'the reverence and admiration of persons, worldly respects and the like incompetent motives determine far greater numbers'.[25] Hence men need to be prodded in the right direction and it is not surprising, he urged, that when coercion, obligation and ecclesiastical authority wane, as in England after 1688 and still more when society is inundated with the 'books and pamphlets which now fly so thick about this kingdom, manifestly tending to the multiplying of sects and divisions, and even to the promoting of scepticism in religion among us' that there should be a disastrous proliferation of 'sects and heresies (even the wildest and most absurd)' as well as of 'Epicurism and Atheism'.[26]

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[22] Dunn, 'Claim to freedom', p. 180-82; Harris, *Mind of John Locke*, p. 189.

[23] Wootton ed., *John Locke. Political Writings*, p. 421.

[24] John Locke, *A Third Letter for Toleration, To the Author of the Third Letter Concerning Toleration,* London, 1692, p. 236.

[25] Jonas Proast, *The Argument of The Letter Concerning Toleration Briefly Consider'd and Answer'd,* Oxford, 1690, p. 7-8.

[26] Proast, *A Third Letter Concerning Toleration*, p. 34-5.

In the midst of the intellectual ferment of the early Enlightenment, there was however, one major theory of toleration which stands out in dramatic contrast to that of Locke and Bayle and which is not built on theological or ostensibly theological foundations, namely Spinoza's 'libertas philosophandi'. In Spinoza, freedom of religion and religious practice are not the prime focus of toleration but, on the contrary very much a secondary issue. Indeed, freedom of exercise of one or another faith is not dealt with at all in the *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus*, the work in which he expounds his views on the place of theology and religion in politics and society and chiefly develops his theory of toleration because, as he himself explained later, he regarded this topic as lying outside the scope of that sensational treatise.[27] He does discuss toleration of churches briefly, though, in the later *Tractatus Politicus,* which was left unfinished at his death, in connection with the aristocratic republic which he considers a better and more absolute form of government than monarchy and more 'suitable for the preservation of freedom'. In Spinoza, toleration is overridingly about individual freedom and emphatically not the 'freedom' of organized ecclesiastical structures to confessionalize and claim authority over individuals. He contends in the *Tractatus Politicus* that everyone should have the freedom to express their beliefs whatever faith they may incline to but that large congregations should be forbidden unless these profess the state religion which, as in Rousseau, is not a form of Christianity but an idealized philosophical religion,[28] what he calls a 'very simple, universal faith' in which Christ plays no role and in which 'cultum Dei ejusque obedientiam' is held to consist 'in sola justitia et charitate sive amore erga proximum', as he expresses it in the earlier treatise.[29] 'While dissenters should be allowed to build as many churches as they wish', such churches should always be small, of fixed dimensions and well dispersed. By contrast, it is essential that churches dedicated to the state religion 'should be large and magnificent and that only patricians or senators should be permitted to perform the principal rites'. It is indeed an essential point of Spinoza's republican political theory that only those who govern the republic should be allowed to be 'ministers of churches and the guardians and interpreters of the state religion'.[30]

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[27] Benedict de Spinoza, *The Political Works,* A.G.Wernham (ed.), Oxford, 1958, p. 410-11.

[28] Ibid., p. 411.

[29] Spinoza, *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus,* trans. S. Shirley, Leiden, 1989, p. 224; Carl Gebhardt (ed.), *Spinoza Opera,* 5 vols, Heidelberg, 1925, vol. III, p. 177.

[30] Spinoza, *The Political Works*, p. 411.

It is entirely disastrous, in his view, to form a clergy separate from the ruling elite; for the 'multitude' will then regard the former as an alternative, and ultimately higher, form of authority than those who preside over the state.

The most fundamental difference between Spinoza's and Locke's theories of toleration lies precisely in the relegation of freedom of worship, freedom to express religious doctrines, and freedom to organize churches to the periphery of the debate, the emphasis, in other words, is on obviating the formation of powerful ecclesiastical hierarchies and authority.[31] In this respect, Spinoza's concept of toleration forms part of the wider Dutch republican political thought tradition, a drive to weaken the power of the clergy for the good of society which is also very marked in the writings of Lambert van Velthuysen, Johan and Pieter de la Court, Franciscus van den Enden and Petrus Valkenier. In opposition to this, Locke's toleration, in line with much subsequent modern liberal thought, inexorably involves the withdrawal, or retreat, of the state in some measure from the entire theological and ecclesiastical sphere once the liberty and autonomy of a plurality of churches is acknowledged and in place. An essential safeguard for freedom in Spinoza's view is to prevent any factions that form among the ruling patricians in an aristocracy or oligarchy from splitting into rival sects or churches supporting conflicting doctrines and priesthoods. For not only does theological strife inflate the unhealthy influence of rival clergies and inflame the divisions among the ruling elite, it also renders the latter increasingly prey to 'superstition' – Spinoza's code for subservience to ecclesiastical authority and theological notions. The more they do become prey to 'superstition', the more the rival factions will encourage ambitious churchmen to extend their leverage over the people and eventually thereby 'deprive their subjects of the freedom to express their beliefs'.[32] The individual is the freer, the clear implication is, the less he or she is bound or influenced by the tenets of an organized church.

In the Spinozist republic, it is not therefore the 'procuring the salvation of souls' which impels the drive towards toleration, and justifies it, as in Locke, but on the contrary the impulse to establish liberty of thought, belief and expression for the individual and safeguard it, a liberty which in Spinoza applies equally whether one's opinions and convictions are theological or 'philosophical' in the revolutionary sense intended by Spinoza – and indeed Van den Enden, Lodewijk Meijer, Adriaen Koerbagh, Charles Blount and the philosophical radicals of the late seventeenth and early eighteenth century more generally.

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[31] The subordination of the ecclesiastical sphere in Spinoza is justified on the ground that the outward forms of religion, its public exercise and observance, are chiefly the concern of the state since they affect the peace, cohesion, stability and orderliness of the community; see Pierre François Moreau, 'Spinoza et le *Jus Circa Sacra*', in *Studia Spinozana* 1, 1985, p. 336.

[32] Spinoza, *The Political Works*, p. 411.

In the *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus*, the individual's right to liberty of thought and expression is based on Spinoza's notion of political power and conception of the state. Since the right of the state, in Spinoza, is the same as the power of the state, it follows in his view that it is impossible to control men's thoughts and that it lies entirely outside the competence of the state to seek to do so:

> if no man, then, can give up his freedom to judge and think as he pleases, and everyone is by absolute natural right the master of his own thoughts, it follows that total failure will attend any attempt in a commonwealth to compel men to speak only as prescribed by the sovereign despite their various and contrasting opinions'.[33]

Besides, Spinoza reminds his readers, whatever abuses of power actually occur, the fundamental 'purpose of the state is, in reality, freedom' (finis ergo reipublicae revera libertas est).[34] In constituting the state every individual surrenders his or her right to act just as he or she thinks fit but not his or her right to reason, judge, and express opinions, and since it is everyone's right to think and judge independently, it follows, according to Spinoza, that it is everyone's right to express their views whether about politics, religion, the law, or anything else without this harming the state. Expressing views about this or that decision, policy, or piece of legislation can only be seditious and harmful to the state, holds Spinoza, if it directly entails obstruction or contravention of the sovereign's decrees and laws. It has been argued that this is a highly problematic and risky conceptual separation to make, both in theoretical terms and in its practical implications, and perhaps it is.[35] But there can be no doubt as to the centrality of this separation between thought and outward expression, on the one hand, and actions, on the other, in the structure of Spinoza's political thought. When, then, is political or religious propaganda seditious and when not?

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[33] Spinoza, *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus*, p. 292.

[34] Gebhardt, *Spinoza Opera* III, p. 241.

[35] See on this Etienne Balibar, *Spinoza and Politics*, London-New York, 1998, p. 26-30.

A well-ordered state, contends Spinoza, 'grants to every man the same freedom to philosophize as I have shown to be permitted by religious faith'.[36] Here we simultaneously encounter the famous absolute Spinozist separation of philosophy from religious thought and knowledge and, at the same time, Spinoza's surreptitiously philosophical redefinition of the meaning of 'religion' and 'faith'. Spinoza here proclaims full freedom of religion, allowing individuals and the multitude to ascribe any significance and scope to faith that they like, while simultaneously laying down what the true scope and limits of religion are. In part he is here referring back to the astounding passage in chapter XIV of the *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus* where he formulates the seven articles of his ideal philosophical state religion and then peremptorily states that it does not matter what conclusions each individual citizen comes to about how to read and comprehend these articles:

> nor does it matter whether God is believed to be omnipresent actually or potentially, to govern things freely or by natural necessity; to lay down laws as a ruler or to teach them as eternal truths; whether man is held to obey God from free will or by the necessity of the divine decree; or, finally, whether the reward of the good and punishment of the wicked is deemed natural or supernatural. (Deinde nihil etiam ad fidem si quis credat quod Deus secundum essentiam vel secundum potentiam ubique sit; quod res dirigit ex libertate, vel necessitate naturae; quod leges tanquam princeps praescribat, vel tanquam aeternas veritates doceat; quod homo ex arbitrii libertate, vel ex necessitat divini decreti Deo obediat; quodque denique praemium bonorum et poena malorum naturalis vel supernaturalis sit').[37]

In short, Spinoza denies that religious doctrines and faith contain any truths at all. Their only purpose is to instil good conduct, charity and obedience, so much so that faith can be truly measured and assessed only in terms of good conduct, charity and obedience:

> in fact, as I have already said above, everyone must adapt these dogmas of faith to his own understanding and interpret them for himself in whatever way he thinks will best enable him to embrace them unreservedly and with complete conviction....[38]

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[36] Spinoza, *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus*, p. 295.

[37] Ibid., p. 225-6; Gebhardt, *Spinoza Opera* III, p. 241.

[38] Spinoza, *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus*, p. 225.

Truth then can only be sought and grasped individually and philosophically and can never be expressed in the form of theological doctrines. In this way, and without any alternative being possible, freedom of thought, speech and expression, and not freedom of conscience and religious practice, according to Spinoza's philosophy, forms the true core of toleration.

To control men's thoughts, beliefs and judgments may be impossible but it constantly happens, nevertheless, that governments enact laws against all kinds of beliefs and views. Doubtless Spinoza chiefly had in mind the various anti-heresy decrees which were in force throughout Europe in his time and, in particular, the 1653 anti-Socinian legislation of the States of Holland which remained the basis of theological and philosophical speech and press censorship in the United Provinces during his lifetime and for many decades subsequently. For Spinoza personally this censorship posed a major day to day problem, especially as regards whether, and how, to publish his own books.[39] Even if such laws are always to a considerable extent unworkeable and can never be fully effective, they nevertheless have a formidable practical impact and, where strenuous efforts are made to enforce them, cause great harm, and pose great danger, to the state. According to Spinoza, the reason that some men seek to enlist the law to suppress certain beliefs and doctrines is so that by this means they can triumph over their rivals, extend their power and win high posts by gaining the applause and trust of the multitude. Such laws are engineered, he insists, for personal advantage but also at great cost to the state and the public. For whenever the state intervenes to ban this or that doctrine, or view, it thereby aggravates theological conflict.[40]

'Therefore', concludes Spinoza, 'if honesty is to be prized rather than obsequiousness and if sovereigns are to retain full control and not be forced to surrender to agitators, it is imperative that freedom of judgment be conceded and to govern men in such a way that the various and conflicting opinions they openly proclaim do not prevent them from living in peace together'. He held that this method of government is 'undoubtedly the best and its disadvantages fewest because it is most in accord with human nature'.[41] It is clear that by placing the main emphasis on individual freedom of thought and expression, and not on freedom of conscience and religious practice, Spinoza is clearing a much wider space for liberty than do Locke or Bayle with their theologically-based theories of toleration. Nor is this a point of merely theoretical interest. For in early Enlightenment Europe and the middle decades of the eighteenth century, a period in which the Inquisition began to be dismantled in Naples, Tuscany and other parts of Italy and there was throughout Europe a general shift from ecclesiastical to secular book and press censorship, and in which religious toleration, formal or informal, was extended in many countries such as France, Brandenburg-Prussia, Sweden and Russia, it would be a very serious historical error to confuse growing religious freedom with increasing freedom of thought and expression. There was a marked tendency for censorship of ideas to become secular rather than, as in the past, ecclesiastical, but this by no means implies that censorship became less forceful or less inclined to ban opinions and doctrines.[42] Nor is this just a matter of shifting the emphasis from theological doctrines to political opinions and views about society. For freedom of conscience and religious practice, no matter how liberally defined, even if we removed some of Locke's restrictions, with respect to Catholics and agnostics for example, by no means necessarily includes unhampered access to, and the right to express, arguments – and especially not 'philosophical' arguments in Spinoza's sense – which conflict with the essentials of revealed religion and ecclesiastical authority.[43] Spinoza's theory of toleration, in other words, is worlds away from Locke's, and is also a more modern conception of toleration. His uncompromising insistence that the 'less freedom of judgment is conceded to men the further their distance from the most natural state, and consequently the more oppressive the regime',[44] both implies full freedom of access to all ideas, and the right to express them, and simultaneously provides a way of measuring the degree of freedom provided by any given state.

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[39] See J.I. Israel, 'The Banning of Spinoza's Works in the Dutch Republic (1670-1678)', in Wiep van Bunge and Wim Klever (eds), *Disguised and Overt Spinozism around 1700,* Leiden, 1996, p. 3-14.

[40] Spinoza, *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus*, p. 296.

[41] Ibid., p. 297.

Towards the end of the *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus* Spinoza directly broaches what for him personally was the most critical strand of the entire debate about toleration – the question of freedom to publish one's views however much these may be disliked by large parts of society. It is important to notice here that no other major early Enlightenment theory of toleration, and certainly not those of Locke, Le Clerc or Bayle, does innately champion liberty to publish. But in Spinoza, the rule that the individual must always submit to the law and the state as regards his actions but is free in thought and speech to express his own judgments emphatically applies to liberty to write and publish. All efforts, he warns, to restrict expression of views, and publicizing one's views in print, not only unjustly curtails legitimate freedom but is palpably dangerous to the state. The struggle between the Remonstrants and the Counter-Remonstrants in the early seventeenth-century Dutch Republic, he maintains, proves with the utmost clarity that the 'real schismatics are those who condemn the writings of others and seditiously incite the quarrelsome multitude against the writers, and not the authors themselves who generally write only for scholars and appeal to reason alone; and that, finally, the real disturbers of peace are those who, in a free commonwealth, vainly seek to abolish freedom of judgment which cannot be suppressed'.[45]

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[42] On this, see the chapter on European censorship in my forthcoming book on the Early Enlightenment.

[43] Mario Sina, *L'Avvento delta ragione. 'Reason' e 'above Reason' dal razionalismo teologico inglese al deismo*, Milan, 1976, p. 344-7; Wootton, 'Introduction', p. 109-10.

[44] Spinoza, *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus*, p. 297.

Recapitulating at the close of the *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus* Spinoza restates his principle that the 'state can pursue no safer course than to regard piety and religion as consisting solely in the exercise of charity and justice and that the right of the sovereign, both in the religious and secular spheres, should be restricted to men's actions with everyone being allowed to think what he will and say what he thinks'.[46] In this way political and social, as well as theological and philosophical, criticism are all emancipated and legitimated. Here plainly revealed is that radical secularizing tendency which underlays Spinoza's toleration theory, as it does the whole of his thought, and confirmation of how drastically it differs from the toleration of Locke and the Arminians. Ultimately, what Spinoza means by 'libertas philosophandi', which is proclaimed in the very subtitle of his book, is the right of every individual to inwardly reject, outwardly argue against, and ultimately help to overthrow, all prevailing structures of theological and ecclesiastical tradition, hierarchy and authority, 'philosophy' here signifying what it denoted later for the entire radical fringe of the Enlightenment, that is for all those 'philosophes' from Fontenelle and Boulainvilliers to La Mettrie, the early Diderot and d'Holbach who expressly opposed structures of moral, political and social authority based on the theologies of revealed religion or quasi-theological providential deism.

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[45] Ibid., p. 298.
[46] Ibid., p. 299.

The shift from the quest for religious freedom to the quest for philosophical freedom which begins with Spinoza's critically important theory of toleration is, in fact, one of the most characteristic features of the early Enlightenment, the period down to around 1750 when the real business of breaking the confessional structure of *ancien regime* European thought and culture was undertaken. The historical, as distinct from the philosophical, importance of Spinoza's theory of toleration, especially in its contrast with Locke, can hardly be overstated. In the early eighteenth century radical writers in Europe no longer complained about the lack of religious freedom. Suddenly, the brunt of their complaint became the lack of intellectual freedom. The point was nicely summed up in the late 1730s by the marquis d'Argens, then living in Holland.

In one of his works he remarks that all Europe is, and ought to feel, greatly indebted to the liberty of thought prevailing, he says, in Holland. For without it 'la moitié des oeuvres de Bayle n'eussent jamais vû le jour'.[47] If he had lived in another country either Bayle would never have dared to publish his books or, if he had, they would have been immediately suppressed. In another of his works, the *Lettres Chinoises*, one of his Chinamen, visiting Paris and reflecting on the Europeans, remarks:

> j'ai réfléchi quelquefois à une chose assez singulière, c'est que si tous les philosophes Grecs et Romains dont on parle tant aujourd'hui en Europe, revenoient dans le monde, on les brûleroit en Espagne et en Italie, on les enfermeroit dans une étroite prison à Paris et à Vienne.[48]

Epicurus, Anaximander, Anaximenes, Empedocles, Thales, Anaxagoras and Pherecydes, he insists, would all be mercilessly dealt with. This is indeed amusing. But the important point, surely, is that d'Argens was right.

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[47] *Memoires de Monsieur le Marquis d'Argens avec quelques lettres sur divers sujets*, 2nd ed., 'Londres', 1737, p. 308-9.

[48] Jean-Baptiste de Boyer, marquis d'Argens, *Lettres Chinoises ou correspondant philosophique, historique et critique*, 5 vols, The Hague, 1739-40, vol. 1, p. 123.