Reviews

Spinoza's Religion: A New Reading of the Ethics by Clare Carlisle (Princeton University Press, 2021).
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Like many readers, I first learned to interpret Spinoza as a radically modern thinker. Influenced by Deleuze and Negri, I saw Spinoza rejecting Platonic transcendence, Aristotelian teleology, and Judeo-Christian moral values for a metaphysics of immanent power that underpins a relativistic ethics and an anti-authoritarian politics. Anglo-American scholars such as Curley and Nadler confirmed that Spinoza was a great secularizer, materialist, and opponent of Cartesian dualism: the 'renegade Jew who gave us modernity', as one book's subtitle has it.[1] Spinoza's major work, the *Ethics*, is based on the concept of God, to be sure. But 'God' doesn't mean the paternalistic creator of the universe who sits in judgment and deserves our worship. 'God' is just another name for 'being' – *God or Nature*, as Spinoza puts it. Two and a half centuries before Nietzsche, Spinoza had killed the God of theology and replaced him with a concept of natural power.

As I studied Spinoza further, I began to question this story. Spinoza's politics, I discovered, is not radical but supremely moderate. He is no more a materialist than an intellectualist, who believes that all minds are in God's infinite intellect. His metaphysics frequently hearkens back to Platonic and Aristotelian themes, and his ethics presents principles close to those found in classical and Renaissance sources. It is true that Spinoza rejects principles of Cartesian metaphysics: that God is separate from the universe, that minds and bodies are different kinds of substance, and that the human mind has a free will that disconnects it from nature. He rejects key tenets of Calvinist theology too: the fixity of moral values, the emphasis on subjection and self-abasement, and the belief that souls are pre-selected for salvation. Yet we forget that the materialism, anthropocentrism, individualism, and moralism of Descartes and Calvin were themselves radical departures from the

[1] Rebecca Goldstein, *Betraying Spinoza: The Renegade Jew Who Gave Us Modernity* (New York, NY: Schocken Books, 2009).

seventeenth-century status quo. Spinoza's rejection of Cartesian dualism and Calvinist ethics seems radical to us because those ways of thinking became entrenched in European thought, while the medieval tradition on which Spinoza draws has become strange and unfamiliar. Seen in this light, Descartes and Calvin are the radicals, while Spinoza pulls thinking away from modernity and back into the Renaissance.

Clare Carlisle's fine book presents Spinoza as a thinker who resisted the tendencies of modern thought, and particularly the tendency to separate God and nature. God's immanence to the universe was a mainstay of medieval theology. Spinoza's claim that 'God is the immanent, not the transitive, cause of all things',[2] much heralded by Deleuze as signalling the rejection of the transcendent God of Judaism and Christianity, does no such thing, on Carlisle's account. Instead, it returns to an earlier conception of a God that is ontologically superior to nature without being separate from it. Nature depends on God causally and conceptually, but they are one and the same being. Modernizers such as Descartes argued that nature was utterly separate from the God that created it, clearing space for a mechanistic natural philosophy on the one hand, and a wholly spiritual religion on the other. Spinoza, by contrast, argues for a more intimate relationship between God and nature, opening different possibilities for philosophy and religion. This is the terrain that Carlisle explores in *Spinoza's Religion*.

The relationship between God and nature is encapsulated in the notion that all things are 'in God', which Spinoza sets out early in the *Ethics*. Spinoza states 'whatever is, is in God' (Spinoza, *Ethics*, IP15), meaning that all created things, or modes, depend on God for their being; no finite thing is an independent substance, capable of existing or being conceived without God. For Carlisle, this principle is 'Spinoza's deepest thought' (p. 4), for it indicates that our existence, thoughts, and actions are undertaken 'in God' and must involve and be referred to God. If theology is taken in its most basic sense as a thinking of God, then philosophy, including the writing of the *Ethics,* is theological. Since our knowing and acting are 'in God', knowing, acting, and living well – *flourishing*, to use the Aristotelian term – is a form of religion. This accords with Spinoza's characterization of religion as 'whatever we desire and do … insofar as we know God' (Spinoza, *Ethics*, IVP37S1). One's religion is how one desires and acts, relative to how one knows God. Spinoza thinks we can be

[2] Benedictus de Spinoza, *The Collected Works of Spinoza. Vol. 1*, ed. E. M. Curley, vol. 1, 2 vols (Princeton, N.J: Princeton University Press, 1985). *Ethics*, IP18.

better or worse at desiring, acting, and knowing. Religion, then, is the variable power, or *virtue*, of knowing and feeling one's relation to God. This is the sense in which this book is about 'Spinoza's religion': Carlisle argues that the relation to God is central to understanding Spinoza's philosophy. Focusing on this relation, she adds, helps to broaden our own sense of what religion is.

Carlisle argues that for Spinoza, 'being in God' describes not only our ontological state but our epistemic and ethical task. Since God and the world are one being, sensory and rational knowledge of the world are less and more adequate ways of knowing what God is. But *scientia intuitiva* – Spinoza's 'third kind of knowledge' – is one's immediate awareness of being in God, a consciousness accompanied by the feeling of intellectual love. This participation in God, also known as blessedness, is our goal, and we achieve it by degrees as we learn to desire and do those things that are truly good for us. On Carlisle's account, striving to be virtuous and free increases not our autonomy, as most interpretations have it, but our participation in God. Our ethical project is therefore religious, not in the sense of following a set of beliefs or doctrines, but in the sense of increasingly knowing and feeling one's relation to God.

In developing this position Carlisle draws attention to the important role that *rest* plays in Spinoza's philosophy. Spinoza understands bodies to be characterized not by constant motion, as Hobbes does, but by a ratio of motion and rest. He emphasizes the fluctuating, volatile nature of the emotions and the tranquillity of mind that we achieve when we manage them well. In particular, Spinoza exalts *acquiescentia in se ipso*, the feeling of self-contentment (sometimes translated 'rational self-esteem') that arises from contemplating our virtues. Carlisle dedicates an illuminating chapter to this feeling. Noting that *acquiescentia* refers to both *quies* (rest) and acquiescence, she interprets it to mean the 'resting in oneself' that accompanies the understanding and acceptance of one's being in God. This feeling involves the knowledge that free will is illusory, the understanding that our thoughts and actions are determined by God, and the realization that our highest virtue is to know and love the God in which we participate. *Acquiescentia* is therefore the feeling of 'resting in God': a contemplative stillness that involves obedience to the necessity of God's nature. Against the modern ideals of free will and constant striving, Spinoza calls this feeling of repose 'the highest thing we can hope for' (Spinoza, *Ethics*, IVP52S).

Carlisle's interpretation of Spinoza is consistently fresh and surprising, particularly for those of us accustomed to think of Spinoza as an enemy of theology. Carlisle does not sidestep Spinoza's critique of theology in the *Theological-Political Treatise*, but points out that it is focused on the

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'morbidly fearful religion of superstition' he identified with Calvinism, and not on theological thinking *per se* (p. 161). Similarly, Spinoza's resistance to the modern concept of religion as a set of beliefs in fixed doctrines does not entail a rejection of religion in a broader sense.

For Carlisle, Spinoza's ideas about God and religion reach back into medieval tradition and recall those of Aquinas, Anselm, and St. Paul. It is striking that Carlisle's reference points are to early Christian theology, not to the medieval Jewish theology with which Spinoza was familiar. This is not inappropriate: Spinoza grew up as a Jew, but after being rejected by the Jewish community as a young man he spent most of his life among Christians. Carlisle's concern is to indicate the resonance, not the direct influence, of early Christian ideas on Spinoza's thinking, and she takes care to explain the profound differences as well as the similarities. Indeed, one of the book's purposes is to show that 'Spinoza's religion' resists alignment with any particular faith tradition. Still, the absence of sustained discussion of Jewish theology in a book on this topic will strike many readers as surprising. And for those of us used to reading Spinoza as a secular Jew, it is somewhat jarring to encounter sentences such as 'we can read Spinoza's *Ethics* as accomplishing, in a purely philosophical medium, the task set out in Anselm's *Proslogion*' (p. 74) and 'The *Ethics* might be read as pushing certain Thomist insights further' (p. 106). Such statements challenge the image of Spinoza we have come to accept from the past forty years of scholarship.

However, it is good to be jarred, especially by writing as thoughtful as Carlisle's. Her book is refreshing and rewarding in both approach and style. It takes the form of a series of exploratory essays that make fruitful connections and offer illuminating insights, based on rigorous interpretations of primary texts and consultation of a wide range of philosophical and theological literature. This book steps decisively away from the modes of rational reconstruction and conceptual analysis that now dominate Spinoza scholarship in the English language, and is all the better for it. While the Spinoza scholar in me sometimes wished for greater elaboration of arguments and critical debates, the thinker in me was glad to have the space – indeed, the intellectual *rest* – to explore ideas in a more open and expansive way. This is an excellent book that will reward readers of Spinoza of all levels, and that has something important to say about both Spinoza's, and our, understanding of what religion can be.

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