

SPINOZA'S TRUE RELIGION: THE MODERN ORIGINS OF A CONTEMPORARY FLOATING SIGNIFIER¹

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Abstract. It is my aim in this paper to demonstrate that the notion of true religion, in the wake of Spinoza's *Tractatus*, is a floating signifier. A floating signifier is a signifier with a changing signification. What makes true religion a particularly interesting floating signifier is its theological-political constellation, its particular history – both before and after Spinoza's usage of the term in the TTP – and its tremendous conceptually malleability. While this undoubtedly has continued relevance today, the goal of this contribution is to locate the ambiguities at play in the floating signifier of true religion as well as to trace the transformation of true religion into a floating signifier. In part 1, I establish that the formal purpose of true religion is a means to guarantee a stable or peaceful political community constituted by plurality. In part 2, I turn to the meaning of true religion, focussing on three significant ambiguities in the notion as developed by Spinoza. In part 3, I turn to the reception history of the TTP to illustrate several of the competing concerns of the floating signifier of true religion, and second consider some of the contemporary implications of each of these ambiguities.

Keywords: Spinoza, TTP, True Religion, Floating Signifier, Theological-political, Atheism

While references to “true religion” in today's European “secular” states are far and few between, the same cannot be said of true religion's floating signification. A floating signifier is a notion “nimble enough to host a number of potentially competing concerns.”²³ Similar to Claude Lévi-Strauss' analysis, which highlights the process of emptying out a concept's meaning, a floating signifier has a highly unstable meaning or referent.⁴ A floating signifier has not yet been fully emptied out, with each process of re-signification leaving its traces and new significations. According to Laclau who has theorised the political implication of empty signifiers, “an empty signifier is, strictly speaking, a signifier without a signified.”²⁵ In addition, a floating signifier is also not fixed to any particular signifier – such as the term “true religion”

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which now manifests itself in our controlled public spaces in the guise of phrases such as “Judeo-Christian” heritage or tradition. Žizek offers several examples of floating signifiers such as freedom, fascism and democracy. It is my aim in this paper to argue that the notion of true religion became a floating signifier in the wake of Spinoza’s *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus* (TTP) and to analyse how Spinoza contributes to its emptying out by probing and highlighting its fundamental ambiguities. While this undoubtedly has continued relevance today, the goal of this contribution is to locate the ambiguities at play in the floating signifier of true religion.

True religion has its theological roots in Augustine who wrote *De vera religione* in 390 CE in which he argues that only the truth of God can lead one to freedom (a claim Spinoza would agree with, although his understanding of truth and God differ radically from those of Augustine). It is then instituted in the *extra ecclesiam nulla salus* doctrine of the Fourth Lateran Council, which declares that “There is one universal Church of the faithful, outside of which there is absolutely no salvation.” While the term ‘true religion’ clearly predates Spinoza, most famously in the works of Grotius and Hobbes, Spinoza probes particular ambiguities leading to its eventual emptying out (most visible in the Spinoza reception literature) and its eventual transformation into a central concept of political theology (which is visible today). Hobbes may have sought to do what Spinoza did, yet he “durst not write so boldly.”⁶⁷ In this sense it was the boldness of Spinoza’s probing amplified by his particular identity as an excommunicated Jew in a Christian sphere that stands out in contrast to Hobbes who only refers to true religion four times in the *Leviathan*.⁸ What is clear is that by the time of the *Founding Fathers*, true religion has a clearly political meaning, although the theological trace of its original meaning remains tangible. It is within this broader historical portrait that one can clearly observe the process of the emptying out and transformation of true religion from a theological concept to a political-theological floating signifier. What I intend to establish is when – and how – this process occurred.

To do so, I turn to Spinoza’s TTP in which he discloses several fundamental paradoxes of the notion of true religion. Prior to the TTP, true religion was a fundamental theological concept albeit politically contested in the religious wars of 16th and 17th century.⁹ After the TTP, thanks to Spinoza’s exposition of true religion’s fundamental ambiguities, it becomes a political concept with theological traces. He “empties” true religion of its demanding theological content, transforming it into a floating signifier. What makes true religion a particularly interesting floating signifier is its theological-political constellation and its tremendous malleability, conceptually speaking. Its manipulability, which makes it a politically powerful signifier, has its roots in the analysis of true religion in the TTP, which I investigate. Specifically, I focus on three intertwined aporias: *first*, reason and imagination, *second*, faith and works, and *third*, theology and reason. To be clear, my intention is not to explain the actual meaning of true religion, a project that many renowned Spinoza scholars have endeavoured to complete,¹⁰ but rather to locate the ambiguities at play in the transformation of true religion into a floating signifier.

In part 1, I establish that the formal purpose of true religion in the TTP is a means to guarantee a stable or peaceful political community constituted by plurality.

In this vein, it is correct to state that true religion “as opposed to sectarian religion – is about nothing more than moral behaviour. It is not what you believe but what you do that matters”.¹¹ From a formal perspective, only deeds are a direct danger to political authority, so the question of motivation and accessibility – whether purely rational or rooted in the imagination – is not fundamental. And yet, from a substantial and historical perspective, beliefs and motivations matter a great deal. For this reason, in part 2, I turn to the meaning of true religion, which is where things begin to get messy. The reason for this is that it is not always easy to reconcile these ambiguities in the notion of true religion (which can perhaps most easily be demonstrated by the vast literature over the past three hundred years on this question). Rather than beginning from the secondary literature, I return to the text to locate the three ambiguities most at play in the Spinozan notion of true religion. It is based on a textual analysis of these three tensions that I make the step, in part 3, to the transformation of true religion into a floating signifier. I demonstrate this briefly, by way of conclusion, by considering some of the contemporary implications of each of these ambiguities.

The TTP: A manual for the institution of True Religion (TR)

Spinoza’s goal is explicitly stated in the subtitle of the *Tractatus*.

Which show that Freedom of Philosophizing can be granted without harming either Piety or the Peace of the Republic, and cannot be denied without destroying both Piety and the Peace of the Republic.¹²

While the subtitle is often overlooked it makes clear that Spinoza’s intention was to safeguard the freedom of opinion that was under threat in the 1660s in the Netherlands.¹³ Yet he also thought that this freedom to philosophize was fundamental for the faith of the multitudes and the peace of the political community. What Spinoza aims to explain in the TTP is the means to make all this possible. In this sense, the TTP is a manual for the maintenance of a peaceful political community constituted by diverse religious beliefs and philosophers (which clearly explains its popularity among political philosophers today). The greatest barrier to the peace of this community was the conflict that arose amongst theologians (and between theologians and philosophers). Thus the first step in Spinoza’s manual is a refutation of the foundation upon which theologians make claims to authority, which quickly shifts from the realm of theology to that of the political. Only after this critical process (which uses Spinoza’s methodology for rationally inspired biblical hermeneutic), can he proceed to the second step of the TTP in which the meaning of true religion is elaborated. Here he establishes that the universal message of the Scripture is limited to the promotion of obedience in terms of justice and charity as the sole means for both salvation (individual) and peace (collective). A third step provides an account and analysis of the historical institution of true religion in a political community. As this step follows logically from a correct reading of the first two steps, it is in some sense unessential for a philosopher, and yet serves to illustrate the political implications of true religion’s institution. Let us begin by considering the formal purpose of true religion.

As many a close reader has remarked, the bulk of the TTP is a close and critical reading of the Torah (First Testament), nonetheless Spinoza's target – both in terms of an audience and of his critique – is Christian.¹⁴ It was the different churches, as opposed to “the Jews, Turks or pagans”⁽⁶⁾, that were feuding for political authority, and to Spinoza's dismay, abusing this power as a means to validate their theological beliefs (and forcefully silence all opposition). Spinoza felt compelled to interrupt what we now know to be his *Ethics*, in order to try to understand and react to this censorship and abuse of power. Whether it was as Jonathan Israel claims, the specific event of the arrest of the Koerbach brothers (Adriaan and Johannes),¹⁵ or simply the decreasing lack of tolerance for philosophical freedom he experienced, as Steven Nadler suggests, or the need to explain his actions which led to his excommunication,¹⁶ Spinoza clearly felt compelled to respond to this theological-political conflict. So what solution does Spinoza propose to preserve peace?

Vera religio - true religion, a term that should be distinguished from the notion of *religio vera* which refers to an ethics or moral conscience associated with a challenge to the Catholic Church. It was common practice, among both late ancient writers and modern writers, to associate the term *religio* to the term *religare*. *Religare* means to gather together, to create bonds between, or to place a shared obligation upon.¹⁷ It is in this sense that religion is a term that is closely associated with the creation and preserving of a community. However, with Cicero, a new twist is added to the notion of *religio*. It is also derived from *religere* (*re-legere*) that means to read again (re-read) or to look over again. It is thus after Cicero that the notion of *religio* is often associated with community or with a shared text. Surprisingly given that Spinoza's aim is by no means common or theological; this is precisely what Spinoza does.

When I considered these and a great many other things, ... I resolved earnestly to examine Scripture afresh, with an unprejudiced and free spirit, to affirm nothing about it, and to admit nothing as its teaching, which it did not very clearly teach me¹⁸

Vera religio, true religion, is to read the Scriptures without bias in order to create a bond that overcomes sectarian divisions and thereby ensures peace. This binding together of subjects is, according to Spinoza, the formal role of true religion – a clearly political role albeit one that relies on his particular interpretation of theological texts. Constraining himself “to affirm nothing about it, and to admit nothing as its teaching, which it did not very clearly teach me”,¹⁹ Spinoza seeks to clarify the source of theological quarrels that has led to sectarian squabbles. He starts by clarifying what aspects of the Bible are particular to the Jewish people and what aspects are universal. While he is clearly concerned with Christian conflicts, his strategy is to address these problems in analogous Jewish terms in order to avoid directly confronting his readers. It is essential to his project that he demonstrate that the message of the Scriptures, more clearly presented by the prophets of the New Testament, is a universal one with no divine preference for any group, sect or community. “That each Jew, considered alone and outside that social order and state, possesses no gift of God which would place him above other men, and that there is

no difference between him and a gentile.”²⁰ This is not to mean that Spinoza wishes to deny external differences. Rather, just as children fight for their parents’ love, under the false illusion that the latter have a preference – different sects do so under the illusion that they must vie for God’s love. He therefore investigates the Scriptures in order to prove that what is needed for salvation is universally accessible.

By denying the particularity of the Jews with regard to prophecy, Spinoza seeks to disassociate the Scriptures from the election of the Hebrews. A refutation of this supposed chosenness is the basis for his claim that the message of the Scripture is universal. It also explains why prophecy is the first aspect of the Scriptures Spinoza analyses. To support this claim, he provides an account of what is the source and nature of prophecy, distinguishing between two types, one by means of the imagination – demonstrated by all prophets of the Torah, and the other by means of the mind – reserved for Jesus. This same distinction appears in the following chapter between theology, which is rooted in the imagination of the theologian and as such is limited, and philosophy, which is based in reason and is therefore universal. Having established what prophecy is and how it arises, he now asks, in chapter three, if it is in fact a gift particular to the Jews? Spinoza demonstrates that the supposed preference is a result of the fact that the book was written for and by the Jewish people and deals specifically with their society, in terms of its composition and organisation.²¹ As such, the vocation of the Hebrews is a particular contingent historical fact justified on the basis of their particular commonwealth. Having sought the origin of the supposed “election of the Hebrews” in the Scriptures, Spinoza can now conclude that its origin arises from a misinterpretation of the Scriptures, and specifically its narratives (as shown in chapter five). In chapter three, he explains that the Jews have incurred the hatred of all because “they have separated themselves from other nations” (47). It is this separation, and the implicit arrogance this entails, that is the cause of this hatred. What is worth noting is that implicitly he is drawing an analogy to the hatred and intolerance towards different Christian sects. Spinoza therefore concludes that in harmony with nature, the Scriptures cannot be read as showing a divine preference for a particular people but rather must be read as the source of a universal message. He further supports his conclusion by way of a close reading of selected passages from the Torah in chapters six through ten. While he claims to lack expertise and therefore does not engage in such a detailed reading of relevant sections of the Second Testament, he does not shy away from concluding that:

The greatest of the Prophets, Moses, did not make any argument in due form. On the other hand, I grant that Paul’s long deductions and arguments, as we find them in his Letter to the Romans, were not in any way written from a supernatural revelation.²²

This is a remarkably strong claim from someone who, just a few pages earlier, declared himself unqualified to engage in a close reading of the Second Testament. It is thus the apostles, in their writings (without external signs) who teach true religion (170, XI, 12). Why does Spinoza promote Paul’s prophetic talents and yet challenge his view on faith as taking precedence over works? This tension adds to the

ambiguities about the meaning of true religion. It is to this, and many other ambiguities with regard to the meaning of true religion, that we now turn having established that true religion's formal purpose is to create peace (collective), or salvation (individual), in a diverse community united by true religion. For Spinoza, true religion, formally speaking, is the glue that holds a political community together. Much like civic religion, which has done away with the referent to true, it is a political response to plurality. In this vein civic religion is the first of true religions floating signifiers (in which the reference to truth disappears after having been emptied out to such an extent that it is no longer considered significant).

The ambiguous meaning(s) of true religion in the TTP

We now turn to the meaning of true religion in the TTP, in which Spinoza proposes to separate true religion "from philosophic speculations and reduced to those very few and very simple doctrines Christ taught his followers."²³ In particular, I will consider the equivocity between: A) reason and imagination, B) faith and works and c) theology or philosophy. It is worth noting that, at least rhetorically, Spinoza continues to pay lip service to true religion's theological origins. It is by means of this reduction and simplification of the diverging dogmas, doctrines and narratives both between Judaism and Christianity, and, secondly, between different Christian churches (Calvin, Socinians, etc) that Spinoza can be seen to begin the process of fusing Judaism and Christianities. While both Jews and Christians were initially appalled and refuted such fusions, by the 18th century when atheism was seen as a greater threat than fusion, the idea of such fusions slowly became less controversial. Coalitions of Christian groups who previously had fought, now found themselves working together to combat the rise of atheism that Spinoza symbolically represented.²⁴ It is also in this sense that one of the contemporary floating signifiers, which arose out of the term "true religion," is the political concept of Judeo-Christianity (either as a form of supersessionism or the basis for a civic morality). "The preface of the *Treatise* both makes clear Spinoza's contempt for sectarian religions and opens the way for his reductive and naturalistic explanations of central doctrinal and historical elements of the Judeo-Christian traditions."²⁵

A. Is true religion a matter of reason or imagination?

Let us begin by examining the contents of chapter twelve in which Spinoza provides a first account of the reduction from speculation to doctrine.

Those who consider the Bible, just as it is, as a Letter God has sent men from heaven, will no doubt cry out that I have committed a sin against the Holy Ghost ... But I don't doubt that if they were willing to weigh the matter carefully, they would immediately stop protesting. For both reason itself and the sayings of the Prophets and Apostles clearly proclaim that God's eternal word, and his covenant, and true religion, are inscribed by divine agency in the hearts of men, i.e., in the human mind.²⁶

A first ambiguity surrounding the meaning of true religion is apparent. Previously in the TTP, Spinoza makes it clear that metaphorical language appeals to the imagination and as such is solely for the multitudes.²⁷ As Spinoza appeals to such language here, he must believe that true religion is meant for the multitudes but then why does he associate it with reason, and not with the imagination of the *hoi polloi*? Is true religion for the philosopher or the plebs? Should this claim be read to mean that those able to reason and philosophise don't actually need the Scriptures? Is true religion necessary for both the thinker and the people, or are there two distinct forms of true religion? This would possibly explain why Spinoza uses both metaphorical and natural language. This question is central to the different readings of true religion, still present in Spinoza scholarship today – over three centuries after the publication of the TTP²⁸, which demonstrates the fundamental ambiguity about the nature, rational or inventive, of true religion.

Spinoza only adds to this controversy by arguing that the word of God (*dabar jehova*) is not confined to any particular set of books, sacred or otherwise. While this follows from his arguments in the first half of the TTP, it implies that true religion is not blessed. Is true religion purely rational and completely disconnected from faith? How can true religion be sacred if it can be found in any book and is not limited to sacred texts? And, if it is not blessed, how can it lead to salvation? According to Spinoza, this can be explained as follows. If “the word of God” is predicated of some subject which is not God himself, it means properly that Divine law which we treated in Ch. 4, i.e. that is, the religion common to the whole human race, *or* universal religion.”²⁹ The problem arises from the ambiguous language of the Scriptures, and more specifically, due to the diction of the particular author who according to Spinoza is not speaking from natural light. Only when the phrase *dabar jehova* is used without reference to God, should it be read as true universal religion for all peoples. The true way of life, which is inscribed in our minds and not exhibited by means of external ceremonies, is true religion “whose eternal author is God.”³⁰ In other words, true religion, often confusingly labelled “word of God” in the Scriptures, is a universal lesson concerning the true way of life. Spinoza seemingly resolves this problem by clarifying a formal semantic ambiguity. And yet, the problem is not one of form, but of content – why does Spinoza keep shifting away from the meaning of true religion towards its form?

This same shift, from content to form, arises in Spinoza's warning concerning the confusion between the word of God (*davar jehova*) and the mind of God. He does not explain what the mind of God is as this would require a substantial debate Spinoza engages with in the *Ethics* (published posthumously). Instead, he draws further formal distinctions in order to better classify and categorise “the mind of God”. Whereas “the word of God” is limited to the realm of morality, “the mind of God” is part of the realm of truth. This raises a further ambiguity, as concerns the meaning of truth in relation to reason. How can true religion actually be true if it, unlike the “mind of God” is not located in the realm of truth? If, as Spinoza claims in the first paragraph of chapter twelve, true religion is not in opposition to reason, then why is it now opposed to truth? Again, while several renowned Spinoza scholars are able to make sense of this contradiction, many others challenge any such

reconciliation attempts.³¹ Thus while it is clearly possible to explain these ambiguities, the need to do so is evidence of Spinoza's emptying out of this concept which allows for radically different interpretations.

It might be the case that Spinoza's desire, prudential or conceptually motivated, not to engage in a substantial debate, which he was concomitantly developing in the *Ethics*, leads to this repeated shift away from meaning; a shift that is the source of true religion's equivocity. If this were the case, it would be ironic in that Spinoza criticises those theologians who squabble about differences in letters, markings etc., clearly criticising not only the theologians in his time but also the squabbles between the Sadducees and Pharisees during the second Temple period. These latter debates, like those in the Netherlands in the 17th century are theological squabbles with political motives, specifically concerning leadership of the Jews, squabbles taken up in the second testament in terms of Paul's critique of the Pharisees.³² Spinoza is critical of these petty theological squabbles and yet he uses a similar semantic strategy to avoid defining true religion either in terms of reason or imagination.

B. Is true religion a matter of faith or works?

This second ambiguity concerning true religion's internalisation situates itself in a much broader debate between faith and works, central to the entire project of the Reformation. Painting in broad brushstrokes, the Pauline inspired Protestants sought to define true religion in terms of faith alone whereas the Petrine (or James) inspired Catholics sought to define it in terms of acts. Spinoza, perhaps unsurprisingly, seems to want it both ways. As we saw above in his critique on Judaism, he clearly wants to free true religion from all rules, and rituals. This would imply that he sides with the Pauline definition of true religion as a matter of faith alone. Yet, by the conclusion of chapter twelve, Spinoza's definition of true religion is reduced entirely to the notion of justice and charity, an entirely external matter, which would position his notion of true religion within the Petrine interpretation. Let us now consider this latter account of true religion in terms of works, before either accepting yet another inherent ambiguity of true religion or finding a means to reconcile this tension.

Continuing where he left off, in terms of true religion as the universal teaching or moral contained in the scriptures, Spinoza offers this first substantial definition.

To love God above all else, and to love your neighbor as yourself. For if Scripture ever taught anything other than this, it would also have had to teach everything else differently, since this is the foundation of the whole religion.³³ ... The remaining moral precepts must be held to be no less uncorrupted, since they follow with utmost clarity from this universal foundation: to defend justice, to aid the poor, to kill no one, to covet nothing belonging to another, etc and so on.³⁴

True religion is intended to encourage one to love God and the other, expressed in terms of justice and charity. How is this definition of true religion to be

squared with the “Pauline vision” of an entirely private and internalised faith? Spinoza is correct to acknowledge that “both Testaments commend [justice and charity] everywhere, in the strongest terms”³⁵, yet this does not resolve the tension between faith and works. Given that Spinoza’s goal is to prevent conflict, he reduces true religion to obedience fundamental for peace and tolerance. Furthermore, as justice and charity are easy to emulate, it minimalizes obstacles to obedience for the multitudes. This, as chapter thirteen explains, is exactly the purpose true religion serves; its simplicity assists its audience as its simple message ensures that it is accessible to those without any philosophical abilities (which points towards the first ambiguity).

For this it’s necessary to show, before anything else, that the intellectual, *or*, exact, knowledge of God is not a gift common to all the faithful, as obedience is. Next, we must show that the knowledge God, through the Prophets, has demanded of everyone, without exception, the knowledge everyone is bound to have, is nothing but knowledge of his Divine Justice and Loving-kindness. Both these things are easily demonstrated from Scripture itself.³⁶

While knowledge of God is limited to the few, obedience is imitable and accessible in non-philosophical terms in the scriptures for everyone. This definition of true religion restates the gap between reason and the imagination but further problematizes the ambiguity between faith and works. Whereas Spinoza criticises Judaism for not internalising true religion, he now defines it solely as a matter of works and obedience. This is precisely what he states in the preface:

I show [chs. 12 & 13] that the revealed Word of God is not some certain number of books, but a simple concept of the divine mind revealed to the Prophets: to obey God wholeheartedly, by practicing justice and loving kindness.³⁷

True religion is the act of obeying God by practicing justice and charity. And a few lines later he states: “we must judge the piety of each person’s faith from his works alone.”³⁸ This claim affirms Spinoza’s preference for works over faith and yet an important ambiguity remains as he also claims that true religion must be internalised, as is faith according to Paul. While it is possible to make sense of this ambiguity, it is my contention that Spinoza’s analyses serves more to empty this signifier of its contents than to clearly choose sides. As such, the ambiguity between faith and works, like that between reason and the imagination, is inscribed into Spinoza’s definition of true religion.

C. Is true religion a matter of philosophy or theology?

A third ambiguity concerning the meaning of true religion lies in the relationship between revealed religion and reason. While Spinoza clearly separates true religion from revealed religion in the first part of the TTP, he only addresses true religion’s relationship to faith in the second part, and specifically in chapter 14 (as

announced in the preface). “Having shown the fundamentals of faith [in ch. 14], I conclude finally that revealed knowledge has no object but obedience, and indeed that it is entirely distinct from natural knowledge.”³⁹ Thus, while Spinoza is able to draw a sharp distinction between revealed and natural knowledge, this does not help clarify where to situate true religion. On the contrary, it simply adds to its ambiguity and cryptic character. However, as some of his readers have suggested it might be necessary to consider the meaning of the term “faith” here as an alternative to true religion.⁴⁰

From all this we conclude that the intellectual knowledge of God, which considers his nature as it is in itself (a nature men cannot imitate by any particular way of life and cannot take as a model for instituting the true way of life), does not in any way pertain to faith or to revealed religion.⁴¹

The question we must now consider is what is the relationship between faith and true religion (as opposed to revealed religion). In the 17th century, it was faith, and not religion, that was the term most used in public discourse and pamphlets.⁴² Religion was the righteous practice of faith (as opposed to faith being the virtuous practice of religion). Furthermore, “the term *religio* was also beginning to be employed politically to distinguish Protestantism from Roman Catholicism,”⁴³ with true religion being opposed to the false religion of the Church defined by its superstition, rituals and dogma. This helps us to situate Spinoza’s usage of true religion as a critique of prophecy, rituals, miracles and other superstitions. It also explains why Spinoza is obliged, as he himself states, to deduce from true religion the doctrines (or tenants) of faith. One of the meanings of religion, in the 17th century, was the virtuous practice of these beliefs.

For Spinoza, the tenets of faith serve to motivate, and ensure, that all obey and interact with others in accordance with both justice and charity. In this vein, he states, it is important to appreciate that different persons, communities etc., with their particular geographical, historical and cultural specificities must each be able to develop their own practices with regard to the true way of life and pleads for freedom of belief. This is what he refers to in the preface as “freedom of judgment” with regards to the foundation of one’s faith. What logically follows from this position would be a refusal to establish a “true” set of beliefs. And yet isn’t this precisely what Spinoza does in chapter 14? Yet again, we are forced to ask: why? If there is only one requirement to obey God and thereby act in accordance with justice and charity, why does it matter what one’s motives are? How can Spinoza expect a philosopher to be motivated in the same fashion as a theologian or a Jew in the same manner as an atheist? This seems to suggest that true religion is necessary for both philosophers and the faithful. But then what happens to the distinction between reason and the imagination? It seems that every time we resolve one ambiguity regarding the meaning of true religion, we re-open another. Was this what Spinoza intended? Regardless of intention, the result of this intertwined series of ambiguities is a roadmap towards the emptying out of true religion’s theological meaning.

So this command itself is the unique standard of the whole universal faith. Only through it are we to determine all the doctrines of that faith, the beliefs everyone is bound to accept. Since this is very plain, and since everything can be deduced legitimately from this foundation alone, by reason alone, everyone may judge for himself how so many disagreements could have arisen in the Church.⁴⁴

This shifting equivocity resurfaces in this explanation of the relationship between true religion and the doctrines of faith. Can the beliefs necessary for true religion be legitimately deduced by reason alone? The theologians, who have made recourse to the imagination and not reason, have clearly failed to deduce the correct sets of tenants of faith. To avoid further violence, which arises from this limitation of the imagination with regard to the deduction of these doctrines, Spinoza feels obliged to do so. The problem of course is that as soon as he does so, he closes the door to freedom of judgment – which is precisely what he did not intend to do – and seems to re-open the door to a form of faith as the internalisation of a list of doctrines.

Is true religion internal or external, is it something invisible – an inner spirituality, or is it something visible – by means of public ritual or distinct appearances? Spinoza states that the early Jews were like children, implying that they need imaginative bedtime stories to quell their irrational fears, since the divine law had not been internalised. This suggests that external practices, such as those of the Jews, are gratuitous for true religion. True religion is for adults, and adults do not need to publically parade their beliefs, which are meant to be private and internalised. This interpretation is in line with readings of Spinoza that associate his TTP with a Protestant project of privatising faith, separating belief from praxis and works. This is precisely the claim Emmanuel Levinas counters in his essay “A Religion for Adults,”⁴⁵ in which he questions a freedom that relies on the disappearance of differences. In this manner of interpreting Spinoza, Levinas follows precisely in the Judaic line of Hermann Cohen and Leo Strauss. While it is clear that true religion must be detached from the public performance of rituals, and that Spinoza wishes to dissociate it from the dogma or legalism stereotypically associated with Judaism – it is not clear that true religion can be gauged other than by means of its external expression.

Although it has been argued that these doctrines are intentionally vague enough to leave space for all views ranging from those of believers to those of non-believers,⁴⁶ the reference to Christ according to the Spirit (*christus secundum spiritum*) in the seventh tenant makes this claim more difficult to support.⁴⁷

According to Spinoza, these doctrines are necessary to ensure obedience which implies that any beliefs that contradict, or put these into question, should not be permitted as they pose a risk to the guarantee of obedience – a dangerous path for someone seeking to pursue peace. So again, why does he do it; and specifically, why include the final doctrine, particular to Christianity, concerning salvation? How are we to understand this contradiction? Is the purpose of true religion salvation or peace (one is forced to ask as it no longer seems possible to have both)? How, as he states in the title, can both piety and philosophy be fundamental to the peace of the Republic? Or, phrased otherwise, in what sense is true religion either true or religion? Has it, by

means of the reduction of theology/faith to true religion, not been emptied out (and thereby transforming it into a floating signifier)?

This fundamental question remains unresolved in the *Tractatus*. Spinoza, in the end, refuses to risk fully disclosing his own “faith”, or as others have suggested, perhaps he himself had not yet fully developed his own position. This is patently evident in chapter 15 in which he avoids conclusively answering the handmaiden question – who has the final word: reason or theology? While he dedicates two-thirds of the TTP, and the first 27 paragraphs of chapter 15, to significantly limiting theology, and religious authority, he concludes by making a radical concession to theology:

I maintain unconditionally that this fundamental tenet of Theology cannot be tracked down by the natural light - or at least that there has been no one who has demonstrated it - and therefore that revelation has been most necessary. ⁴⁸

While this is clearly a concession, it is a source of contention whether it is a concession to theology or to reason. Has Spinoza just undermined all that comes before this claim or was he simply acting prudently? It is this puzzle that, in the end, empties out the notion of true religion. By leaving such fundamental ambiguities unresolved, Spinoza creates a space for a diverse array of interpretations of true religion. While true religion was, prior to Spinoza, of great theological import, it has now become a political charged floating signifier. Moreover, lest one think that the continuation of this age old struggle between reason and theology is the final word on true religion, let us recall that this struggle is fundamentally connected to the two other ambiguities investigated here, those between reason and imagination and between faith and works, with all of the theological and political implications each entails. Each of these three ambiguities, in its own way, acts as a linchpin for the transformation of true religion into a floating signifier.

2. True Religion's Ambiguities: The Birth of a Floating Signifier

By analysing these intertwined ambiguities embedded in Spinoza's notion of true religion, I have identified three sites of contestation that have, both in the Spinoza reception literature and in the public sphere, led to many diverse and opposing interpretations. By probing these tensions, Spinoza began the process of emptying out the signifier “true religion.” While this emptying out was by no means direct – it was surprisingly quick; this swiftness was certainly amplified by the changing cultural context of the 18th century and the rise of atheism. In this third part, I would like to dwell on the contemporary philosophical and political spectres of true religion as a floating signifier of theological-political significance. What remains, often only as a trace, of true religion after it has been emptied out is not any particular theological content (its original meaning) but rather its political purpose. The floating signifier is one that serves a particular political community, both its rulers, whom it helps in terms of organisation, and the ruled, whom it comforts. “The hermeneutic exercise of the TTP aims at expounding theology as a non-cognitive but distinctly cultural and political practice of securing social control.”⁴⁹ And it is perhaps this

advantage, above all else that has made the theological-political floating signifier of true religion survive and thrive since the publication of Spinoza's TTP.

In Spinoza's time, different religious groups were constantly vying for political authority, each claiming to be the followers of the one *true religion*. It seems that at least from the Reformation onwards, true religion" was embedded in a culture of violent hatreds."⁵⁰ By analogy, today's political communities – regional, national and trans-national – are all hunting for "the true religion" necessary to construct, and conserve, their particular political communities. That a political community needs such a bond has rarely been contested, but the nature of this bond remains one of the most contested political questions. Given the context of contemporary communities marked by diversity and conflict, the question of "true religion" is never far from the surface although its phrasing has taken on a non-theological mask, first enabled by Spinoza's secularisation of true religion. After considering some of these masks, by way of a survey of the TTP's reception history, I consider the contemporary political implications of the floating signifier of true religion.

A. True Religion's Floating Significations

While the political power of true religion remains, its theological content has now been emptied out. This in turn creates what we might refer to as an ideological amphitheatre. Historically and conceptually, the competing concerns, or most famous productions, staged in this theatre began with:

The polemics on atheism during Spinoza's lifetime, to the pantheism debate, which was a prelude to German idealism, from the debate between neo-Kantians and post-Hegelians during the second half of the nineteenth century, to the late twentieth-century Marxist-inspired French and Italian Spinozisms.⁵¹

As Spinoza's reception history closely parallels the different interpretations of true religion, I now connect each debate in the literature to one of the three ambiguities identified above.

Spinoza, as is clear from his correspondence with Oldenburg following the publication of the TTP, was not surprised that true religion was interpreted to be masked atheism (Letter 30 to Oldenburg, 1665). He refers to concern within the TTP itself.⁵² It is well known that Spinozism was a synonym for atheism. The German theologian Jacob Thomasius, writing in the spring of 1670, declared the TTP a "godless document."⁵³ Other well known responses to the TTP were that it was "forged in hell," "harmful to all religions," "an atheistic book full of abominations," and that its goal "was to destroy all religions and particularly the Jewish and Christian ones."⁵⁴ This reading of the TTP was further confirmed with the posthumous publication of the *Ethics* as "The first words of his *Ethics* are: *De Deo*. But this is no longer the Jewish or Christian God."⁵⁵ At the end of the 17th century, it seemed clear to all, true religion was neither true nor religion – it was the enemy of *all* religions. While this is perhaps stating the obvious, this relates clearly to the third ambiguity, the handmaiden question. There was no doubt in the mind of the readers at the end of

the 17th century that Spinoza's supposed concession to revelation was without any earnestness.

While the current intellectual wind seems to be sweeping once again in the direction of true religion's fundamental atheism (this is not to suggest that the atheism of the 17th century can be equated with atheism today), this may be more because of our own need to justify the ideological project that is secularism (rather than due to revolutions in Spinoza scholarship). In this vein, could today's Judeo-Christian tradition, often cited in support of today's secularist political agenda, be a contemporary example of Spinoza's true religion? After all, the French cite Spinoza as the foundational thinker of their national true religion – *laïcité*.⁵⁶

Yet, less than a century later, this conclusion was radically put into question during the *Pantheismusstreit*, an event that played a pivotal role in European intellectual history. Sparked by Jacobi's 1785 critique of Lessing as a closet Spinozist, a debate began between the former and Moses Mendelssohn in which the meaning of true religion is drastically altered. In his lectures on Lessing, Mendelssohn redefined Lessing's interpretation of Spinoza's true religion in terms of a purified pantheism, that is, a natural religion or rational religion. In response to conventional charge against any thinker espousing Spinozistic positions, Mendelssohn argues that Spinozism, and more specifically the refined pantheism of his dear friend Lessing, was not atheism.⁵⁷ He claimed that Spinoza himself was partially to blame, because of the lack of clarity with regard to such fundamental terms as substance and true religion but also that many "Spinozists" had not paid close enough attention to his intended meaning and motivation.

So, too, with words and concepts. The slightest deviation in the determination of a fundamental term leads in the end to completely opposite consequences, and if one loses sight of the point from which one set out in common with others, then in the end one no longer disputes about words, but about the most important matters. We must, therefore return to the crossroads where the Spinozist leaves us and takes his own route, in order to see whether we cannot settle our dispute before we go our separate ways.⁵⁸

Mendelssohn returns to Spinoza in order to explain that his system is incomplete without "the spirit world" and as such the motivation is a deistic one. While he concurs that pantheism is not the proper path for believers, it is still a form of true religion and not to be confused with atheism, and that the proof of this was that it strengthened the political community by promoting tolerance and virtue.⁵⁹

It is thus during the second round of Spinoza reception history that the third ambiguity returns to centre stage but this time lacking the certainty of the previous debate. True religion, according to Mendelssohn, can be understood as a bridge between theology and reason, a natural religion or rational theological. While the *Pantheismusstreit* may have begun as a debate regarding the third ambiguity in the concept of true religion, the pivotal role it played in European intellectual history actually relates to the first ambiguity between the imagination and reason. It is in fact the debate about the three kinds of knowledge from the *Ethics* (Book 2, P 40, S 2),

which first appears in the TTP, that is a central debate in German Idealism.⁶⁰ According to Goethe, Jacobi's fundamental error is to fail to appreciate the difference between these three kinds of knowledge.⁶¹

It was perhaps the *Pantheismusstreit*, more than any other event that paved the path for the transformation of Spinoza's true religion into a floating signifier. At the end of the 18th century, for many European intellectuals, the true religion was deism, a true religion that would greatly inspire the leaders of both the American and French revolutions. Interestingly, while it might be said that the French have gone the route of true religion's 17th century interpretation,⁶² the Americans – according to sociologist of religion Christian Smith – have followed the path of this 18th Scottish century interpretation. His research defines the current true religion in America as “moralistic therapeutic deism”, which consists of the following beliefs:

1. “A god exists who created and ordered the world and watches over human life on earth.”
2. “God wants people to be good, nice, and fair to each other, as taught in the Bible and by most world religions.”
3. “The central goal of life is to be happy and to feel good about oneself.”
4. “God does not need to be particularly involved in one's life except when God is needed to resolve a problem.”
5. “Good people go to heaven when they die.”⁶³

It is however during the third wave, in the debate between neo-Kantians and post-Hegelians that one can best observe the entire range of competing concerns, an antagonism that was both philosophical and political. This range spans from Hermann Cohen's vitriolic denunciation of Spinoza's Judaism as all things Spinozist, to the Christian Right Hegelians' Protestant account of true religion, most evident in David Strauss's account of the historical Jesus (Strauss was also a member of the Tübingen School of F.C. Baur), all the way to the political project of a purely immanent historical materialism of the left Hegelians. It is also during this third debate that the controversy between works and faith, between religion as public or private (which rages on today in Europe as is clear from the rhetoric of Islamophobia), returns. The form this controversy takes concerns the need for transcendence in the political realm. Is it possible to have a purely immanent true religion, a purely material, political community or is it necessary to make redress to a higher spirit or transcendence – to a higher source?

While the above is just a snapshot (of the many) competing concerns that the floating signifier of true religion had come to mean in the 19th century, it more than sufficiently displays true religion's political equivocity and plasticity. On the one hand the theological evacuation of true religion completed by Spinoza paved the path for a purely immanent true religion, a binding together of a political community without recourse to an outside. On the other hand, by separating theology from politics, Spinoza can be said to have saved it, and thereby paved a path to the laïc state in which citizens were free to hold any beliefs as long as they obeyed the sovereign and acted justly and charitably towards their fellow citizens. Still for others, Spinoza freed revealed religion from its medieval chains, preparing it for modernity and the need for

a true religion that could act as an overlapping consensus for the diversity of faiths that characterise the modern nation-state.

B. The transformation of true religion into a floating signifier

The question I hope to have provoked by providing a sampling of the wide array of competing concerns that have been hosted by the floating signifier that once was true religion relates to the political implications of such a malleable and politically charged floating signifier. In order to demonstrate how each of the ambiguities identified and teased out by Spinoza in the TTP, and further “emptied out” in its reception history, enables its transformation into a floating signifier; I consider one implication that corresponds to each tension. The point of course is not to be comprehensive; an impossibility given that there is no end imaginable to signification but rather to demonstrate how Spinoza’s bold exposition of true religion, and specifically with regard to the three ambiguities defined above, enables its partial evacuation and translation into a contemporary political floating signifier.

The first of these three ambiguities, that between reason and imagination, points towards the “who” of the political community. Who is the “we” that defines a political community? One extreme, that of reason, sees the who as defined by a small elite. On the other extreme is the “who” defined by imagination, by all regardless of their status. Is the peace or freedom central to Spinoza’s true religion that of the few or the many, the elite or the multitudes? If true religion is only the possession of the few capable of reason, then inclusion in the political community is very restricted. By contrast if true religion finds its origins in the imagination, the people are the political sovereign, a vision put forward by the fourth wave of Spinoza scholars such as the Marxist-inspired French and Italian Spinozists such as Matheron, Balibar and Negri. This question is even more controversial today – who is a political subject? Who is a citizen? Who is permitted to participate? Is it, as some theorists content, only those capable of rational speech or economic contributions to the state?

A second implication, which arises from the ambiguity between faith and works, raises the equally fundamental political question of the role of religion with regard to the public and private realms. The larger context of this debate is the question of whether the true foundations of Christianity are to be found in Paul or James/Peter.⁶⁴ While mainstream Protestantism take the path paved by Paul by defending the claim that man is justified by faith alone, Catholics take the path laid out by James in defending man as justified by works. This remains a fundamental concern today when we debate whether religious expressions, such as the skullcap, cross or veil, are acceptable in the public sphere. If, as Jews and Catholics claimed in Spinoza’s time, religion is a matter of works – it cannot be limited to the private sphere. By contrast, if it is a matter of faith, an internal commitment, there is no need for religion in the public sphere.

Yet another implication of this second tension plays itself out in political struggles with regards to the debate on citizenship. Is one a member of a particular political community because of an intrinsic or extrinsic quality? To elucidate this contrast crudely, consider the difference in citizenship criteria in France vs. Germany. While the former is based on works, that is obedience and participation (albeit

reduced to a trivial level in the form of elections), Germany has a *jus sanguinis* (blood-based) conception of citizenship.⁶⁵ One answer to this question is Habermas' true religion – constitutional patriotism. Habermas' notion of constitutional patriotism contends that a common constitution is necessary for the formation of a political community. In this manner, a common constitution plays the role of the floating signifier of true religion by being the shared basis for the bond between members.

The citizens of Europe will not be able to consider themselves as members of a single political body until they vote for a common Constitution. Only then will they be able to accept that the responsibilities are distributed more evenly beyond the borders.⁶⁶

As for the third, and most defined, paradox in Spinoza's notion of true religion – the handmaiden question – this has had some very adverse affects for the meaning of democracy. If I may be permitted to speculate, one of the theological-political effects of true religion is the expectation of the silent majority that their leaders, who have symbolically taken up the role of God, “save them,” that is, provide them with a clear path for “the good life.” This is the trade-off for the obedience, and non-interference, of the multitudes. This is visible in terms of today's democratic deficit and the decreasing tolerance (and increasing criminalisation) for civil disobedience (with “science” often playing the role religion did in the past). The alternative, close to the vision shared by thinkers in the line of radical democracy, demands an active and critical political agency as opposed to passivity.

Conclusions

While there is undoubtedly no direct link between these contemporary debates and Spinoza's TTP, if one grants my argument that true religion has been transformed into a theological-political floating signifier, then it is possible to 1) establish an indirect link between these debates and Spinoza's true religion, and 2) recognise how some of the conflicts exposed by Spinoza continue to reappear today in our polis. It is this that I hope to have demonstrated by means of a textual analysis of true religion in the TTP, in part one and two of this paper, in which I locate and analyse the ambiguities at play in the concept of true religion; and, in part three, in which I trace and develop the implications of such a floating signifier of true religion.

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