

Many authors have already observed that the *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus* of Baruch Spinoza was, in its time, the most discussed and most vehemently refuted book. Indeed, at the dawn of the Enlightenment, and almost until the end of the XIX century, Spinoza's *Theological-Political Treatise* was an assertive and powerful appeal to freedom of expression and thought, a bold claim of religious tolerance and freedom of conscience in a Europe that was unaccustomed to the exercise of free thought. But, what is after all the subject of the *Theological-Political Treatise*, a book maligned for so long and by so many as ultra pestilential and immoral? The present volume, collecting a bunch of essays by notable European scholars, attempts to address some of the problems created by the broad spectrum of topics included in Spinoza's *Theological-Political Treatise*.

Es ist schon oft bemerkt worden, dass Baruch Spinozas *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus* zu seiner Zeit das meist diskutierte und am heftigsten bekämpfte Buch war. Am Beginn der Aufklärung und fast bis zum Ende des 19. Jahrhunderts war Spinozas *Theologisch-Politischer Traktat* ein nachdrücklicher und kraftvoller Ruf nach der Freiheit des Redens und Denkens, eine unerschrockene Forderung nach religiöser Toleranz und Gewissensfreiheit in Europa, für das die Ausübung des freien Denkens noch ganz ungewohnt war. Doch worum geht es eigentlich im *Theologisch-Politischen Traktat*, der so lange und von so vielen als ein äußerst schädliches und unmoralisches Buch verteufelt wurde? Der vorliegende Band, eine Sammlung von Essays namhafter europäischer Gelehrter, widmet sich einigen der Probleme, die sich aus dem breiten Spektrum der Themen in Spinozas *Theologisch-Politischem Traktat* ergeben.

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RELIGION AND CIVIL SOCIETY ■

■ VOLUME 3

Revisiting Spinoza's *Theological-Political Treatise*

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&
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“That the *catholica religio* does [not] need a pontiff”

José Maria Silva Rosa

I

The power of the pontiffs (those who *act as a link* between the sacred and the profane, between the gods or God and men), its nature, legitimacy and limits are still today important topics in the *Religionwissenschaften* as well as in the History of Political Ideas¹.

The archaic idea that stems from the dawn of time, present in myths and creation narratives, is that such power derives directly from the founding hierophany as kratophany (manifestation of the sacred as *majestas*, absolute and overwhelming power, *tremendum et fascinans, totaliter alter*²: «I am dust and ashes», Abraham confesses³). Therefore such hierophany is able to sanctify, indeed, to separate and reserve spaces (by founding sanctuaries), to qualify times (by introducing calendars), to determine actions (rites, celebrations⁴) and sanctify people (priests, kings, shamans, witchdoctors) and objects (board, coffers, manna, clothing, crowns, chandeliers, temples, etc.) making them ontologically different from others.

The narratives of the Old Testament that Spinoza examines in detail are not the only ones full of this *mirabilia*, so are the narratives of all religions. Thus, in the sense of “total phenomenon” determinant of what is considered pure and impure⁵, prescribed and prohibited, *sacrum* and *prophanum*, M. Eliade says that «the

¹V.g., Mircea Eliade, *O Sagrado e o Profano. A Essência das Religiões*, Lisboa, Livros do Brasil, 2006; Id., *História das Ideias e Crenças Religiosas*, 3 vols., Porto, Res, s.d.; E. Voegelin, *As Religiões Políticas*, Lisboa, Vega, 2002; M. Gauchet, *Le Désenchantement du monde. Une histoire politique de la religion*, Paris, Gallimard, 1985.

²Cf. Rudolf Otto, *O Sagrado*, Lisboa, Edições 70, 1992.

³Gn 18, 27.

⁴Roger Callois, *O Homem e o Sagrado*, Lisboa, Edições 70, 1979.

⁵Cf. Vladimir Jankélévitch *Le Pur et l'Impur*, Paris, Flammarion, 1960.

manifestation of the sacred ontologically founds the world»⁶. In this way, religion is an interpretation of man's situation in the world and also a justification/legitimization of power, including political. In other words, the effective exercise of command by some over the others, would be in its own origin, by solidarity, theological-political. As it is known, Spinoza writes the *TTP*⁷ against this mythical fascination of creation, of a sacred cosmos, of a "golden age" to restore, or any other since lost original wisdom⁸, especially present in the Adamic Babelic myth of the superstitious Judeo-Christian complex, since «taken in itself, nothing is sacred or profane, or impious, but simply in relation to thought».⁹

It would not be proper to deepen here the metamorphoses that the priestly or pontifical ideology, according to the very ancient «order of Melquizedec» (Gn 14, 18), mythical king / priest of Salem, suffered over time. In any case, this ideology can be found symbolically in action inside both the Old and the New Testaments (in this, specifically in the *Letter to the Hebrews*, where Christ is named High Priest). Likewise, it is found in parallel and coeval religious systems, in the political religions of *Aner-Basileus* in Greece and of the *Pontifex Maximus* in Rome¹⁰.

This original convergence of all the powers inside the hieratic order was questioned here and there, but not until modernity was it ever questioned radically and systematically. Already in the Old Testament, we find the Solomonic Sentence of the *Books of Proverbs* (14, 21), further referred to by Spinoza, «my son, fears God and the king». And in the New Testament it is not only the sentence of Jesus, «give to Caesar what belongs to Caesar, and give to God what belongs to God» (Mt 22, 17-21) which questions

⁶M. Eliade, *O Sagrado e o Profano*, p. 35

⁷*TTP - Tractatus Theologico-Politicus* (n.b.: we refer the D.P. Aurélio editon, Lisbon, IN-CM, 2004, followed by Gebhardt's editon page).

⁸Cf. A. Tosel, *Spinoza ou le Crepuscule de la Servitude. Essai sur le Traité Théologico-Politique*, Paris, Aubier, 1984, pp.18.21

⁹*TTP*, XII, 293 (G. 160).

¹⁰Cf. W. Burkert, *Religião Grega na Época Clássica e Arcaica*, Lisboa, FCG, 1993; G. Dumézil, *La religion romaine archaïque*, Paris, Payot, 1966.

the root of that archaic solidarity between religion and politics, but also and above all Jesus’ stances on Priesthood (Mt 21, 1 *et seq.*), on the Temple, on the Calendar and on the legalistic minutiae of the Pharisees. In a deliberate way, consistent with his understanding of Christ, and in spite of his knowledge about the mentioned *Letter to the Hebrews* and his exhaustive critique of the Pontifical theology of the Old Testament, especially when the pontiff usurped to himself the political functions of the king in the ‘Second Temple’, Spinoza, in the *TTP*, never refers to him (Christ) as a mediator Priest, but always as a preacher of the *vera et catholica religio* and, as such, a master of the universal moral teachings¹¹.

Nevertheless, the history of the Christian religion¹² ended up joined together under a single figure, the *pontificum romanorum*¹³, the throne and the altar clearly differentiate in the words of Christ. This theological-political process, mistakenly dubbed *political Augustinianism* by H.-X. Arquillière¹⁴, since it was meant to be based on the presumptive teachings of Augustine, consisted of the complete assimilation of the natural political order (throne) by the supernatural religious order (altar) or, in other words, the complete subordination of the temporal power to the spiritual power.

There is no need to sketch the big moments of the pontifical theology throughout the Upper and Lower Ages. As it is widely

¹¹ *TTP*, IV, 186; (G. 64); V, 193 (G.70-71).

¹² After triumphing politically with the conversion of Constantine in the fourth century and doctrinally with the political theology of Eusebius of Caesarea (270-339), in *De Laudibus Constantini* (336) and the later self-serving re-readings of *De Civitate Dei* of Saint Augustine, produced by popes (v.g., Leo I, 440-461, Gregory the Great, 540-604) and politically compromised theologians (v.g., John of Orleans, IX Century; San Bernard of Clairvaux, in the XII century, Giles of Rome, 1243-1316).

¹³ Cf. W. Ullman, *The Growth of Papal Government in the Middle Ages*, London, Methuen & Co, 1955; Id., *The Church and The Law in the Earlier Middle Ages*, London, Variorum Reprints, 1975; Id., *The Papacy and the Political Ideas in the Middle Ages*, London, Variorum Reprints, 1976.

¹⁴ *L’Augustinisme politique*, Paris, Vrin, 1934; cf. también Id., “Réflexions sur l’essence de l’augustinisme politique”, in *Augustinus Magister. Congrès International Augustinien*, Vol. II, Paris, Études Augustiniennes / CNRS, 21-24 Septembre 1954, pp.991-1002.

known, Spinoza's position in the *TTP* is diametrically opposed to that of political Augustinianism. However, it is hard not to notice that, in comparison to the extent of criticism made by him to the Old-testamentary pontificalism, our author does not insist much more, as would be expected, in the criticism of neo-testamentary pontifical theology and the authoritarian ecclesiastic machine supported by it, even though his critiques, in terms of principle, are devastating.

II

The expression that is used as the title of this text appears in the seventh chapter of *TTP*, a key chapter in terms of understanding the method and the exegetical principles followed by Spinoza. The context in which it emerges is the examination of the «opinions of those who disagree with us»¹⁵ about the «true method of interpreting the Scripture». Is to say, on one hand, the rationalist-dogmatic method of Maimonides which adapts the Scripture to reason, forcing it to say what it does not say and ascribing to the prophets what they never meant to say and, on the other hand, the fideistic skeptical of Alpakhar, which adapts and coerces reason in order to be coincident with the Scripture¹⁶. It is clear, notwithstanding, that the criticism also concerns many authors in the Christian tradition that Spinoza could not ignore, but never refers to (maybe because of the fact that his direct target are Christians?).

Thus Spinoza maintains that

«in what concerns to the authority of the Roman pontiffs [*to interpret the Scripture*], it is necessary a more evident proof: this is the only reason why I refuse (...) But since the Roman Pontiffs did not present any evidence of this kind [i.e., *an evidence from the Bible*], their authority remains highly suspect. And to prevent anyone from thinking, led by the example of the pontiff of the Hebrews, that the *Catholic religion too necessitates a pontiff*, he should bear in mind

¹⁵ *TTP*, VII, 236 (G. 112).

¹⁶ Cf. *TTP*, XV, 315.319 (G. 180-181.184)

that the laws of Moses, constituting the laws of the country, necessarily required some public authority to insure their observance.»¹⁷

In contrast with the nationalist particularity of the Jewish religion, where the public law of the state and the religious tenets are identified, it is said that the Roman Catholic religion does not need of a pontiff since, according to the author of *TTP*, it is a universalist religion without any countrywide laws to be upheld and sanctioned by the religious interpretation of a sovereign pontiff.

But is the meaning of the expression *catholica religio* in this context that invites further reflection. Were Spinoza to be talking in this passage, as he often does in others, e.g., in the entire chapter XIV, about the Catholic religion as a universal religion, there would be nothing to say since, as he declares soon after, it merely consists of «the simplicity and authenticity of mind»¹⁸, without the requirement of a particular confession or integration in any visible church. Sent to the intimate venue of the beliefs and intimate convictions of each person, the Catholic religion is not, and cannot be, «subjected to any right or any public authority»¹⁹, being its content a moral and practical *minimum credo*: to believe in the existence of God as «the one and the only exemplar of the true life»²⁰, this is,

«a Supreme Being, who loves justice and charity, to whom, in order to be saved, all must obey and adore through the practice of justice and charity towards the neighbour.»²¹

Furthermore, we have to add the belief in a future reward or punishment, i.e., in salvation or condemnation in accordance with deeds carried out, which is to say the common principles of ethical

¹⁷ *TTP*, VII, 240 (G. 116): «et ne quis exemplo pontificis Hebraeorum deceptus putet religionem catholicam etiam indigere pontifice, venit notandum, quod leges Mosis, quia publica jura patriae erant, indigebant necessario, ut conservarentur, autoritate quadam publica.» (*italics ours*)

¹⁸ *TTP*, VII, 241 (G. 116).

¹⁹ *Ibidem*.

²⁰ *TTP*, XIII, 305 (G. 171).

²¹ *TTP*, XIV, 311 (G. 177); XIX, 372 (G. 319)

order: to defend the justice, to help the needy, to do not steal, to do not kill, to do not do upon others what we do not want for us, etc..²² In short, to sincerely practice the justice and charity since, to use a famous expression of Saint Augustine to which Spinoza would have subscribed (!), «non autem praecipit scriptura nisi caritatem.»²³

Therefore, the *catholica religio* therefore, closely informs the books of both Testaments, although in different ways²⁴. As himself explains in another passage,

«we may know the reason why the Bible is divided into the Old and the New Testament books: it is that before the advent of Christ, the prophets were used to preach the religion as the national law in virtue of the covenant entered into under Moses; while the Apostles preaching later to all men as Catholic law in virtue only the Christ's Passion. It is not that they [*the books*] are different in doctrine, nor that they were written as original books of the alliance, or even that the *catholica religio* (which is very highly natural) was new... »²⁵

From a substantive point of view, therefore, there is no difference for Spinoza between the *catholica religio* of the Old and New Testament. In essence it is the same, once

«the eternal word of God, his pact and the true religion are written by the divine hand in the heart of men, that is to say, in the human mind: this is the real original document of God, the one which He himself authenticated with his seal, which means, the idea of himself, that one as if the image of his divinity.»²⁶

So, the difference will lie in the types of knowledge apparently gather and in the way it is introduced. The prophets *before* Christ proclaimed such knowledge concretely as a national law, directed to particular people in a certain geographical area. The apostles, *after* Christ, while doctors and *ex sola vi passionis Christi*, are

²² *TTP*, XII 298.299 (G. 165). See the «seven fundamental dogmas of universal faith» *apud* A. Tosel, *Spinoza ou le Crepuscule...*, pp. 252 e ss.

²³ *De Doctrina Christiana* 3, 15 (cf. *De Trinitate* VIII, 14; *Enarrationes in Psalmos*, 140, 2).

²⁴ *TTP*, XII, 296 (G. 163).

²⁵ *Ibidem*.

²⁶ *TTP*, XII, 291 (G. 158).

called to teach to all nations, aiming no longer for one single country but instead the whole of humankind. In this respect, S. Breton in his book *Spinoza. Théologie et Politique* sums up:

«The religious substance of the New [Testament] is the same essence [of the OT], but in its state of universality: in other words, it is the universal as universal.»²⁷

In what concerns the types of knowledge involved, we could say that the announcement of the Old Testament reveals the first kind of knowledge, since it exclusively employs images and appeals primarily to the imagination, being sustained by fear. And the ethical teachings of the New seem to be recorded *prima facie*²⁸, under the second kind of knowledge, discursive, once it relies upon natural light, upon ideas and demonstrative procedures, demanding from the receivers a personal judgment that will lead them to adhere, with conviction, or otherwise reject, the message²⁹. In spite of this, it is not yet a genuine knowledge of the second kind, but rather a type of mixed regime, although without its passionate basis. Then there is no love or hope for scatological happiness.

As for the figure of Christ, or rather the «theological-philosophical fiction of Christ»³⁰, that has taught the *catholica religio* in a certain point in space and time, we already know that Spinoza attributed him the intuitive science, typical of the third kind of knowledge, although it has complied towards the ignorance and lack of understanding of its recipients, therefore presenting, in this way, as revealed what was extremely natural.

Additionally, we may also underline that when Spinoza states that the *catholica religio* is extremely natural, he does not appear

²⁷S. Breton, *Spinoza. Théologie et Politique*, Paris, Desclée, 1977, p. 74.

²⁸*At first sight!* Regarding it closely is not so, since this kind of knowledge resorts to the imagination and is also cause of the confusion between idle theological speculation (superstition) and philosophical reflection (cf. A. Tosel, *Spinoza ou le Crépuscule...*, pp. 236-237).

²⁹As is well seen in the episode of Paul at the Aeropagus in Athens, arguing with philosophers, and other passages in the NT, for instance the *Letter to the Romans*.

³⁰A. Tosel, *Spinoza ou le Crépuscule...*, p.264.

to be thinking about the universality of the *naturalis religio* the way his *Collegiants* friends from Rijnsburd or other later illuminists did, includevely in the way of *a religion within the limits of the simple reason*. If its content is the sum of what is written by the *digitus Dei*, not in the stone tablets of the Sinaitic Covenant but in the human heart³¹, the sense of ‘catholicity’ here comes from other

«meaning, the most common one, [that of] a pragmatism that prescribes behaviors of faith, of obedience and of charity, both compatible with the freedom of thought as well as with the *praxis* of a political community.»³²

It is therefore evident that, as a «natural divine law», the «universal or catholic religion, common to all mankind»³³ does not require any pontiff, since the pontifical function only has relevance only within a supernatural conception of revelation, counterpoising two opposite natures, God as a creator and man as a creature, amidst the sacred and the profane, conceived as poles or opposite edges between which it would be necessary to build up a bridge. But such break does not exist because, already pre-announcing the *substantia actuosa* or *Deus sive natura* in *Ethica* (the editing of which he interrupted to write the *Tractatus*), Spinoza states that God is infinite and acts solely by the requirements of his nature³⁴. Thus, there is no *other* to be linked with, instead everything is the *same*.

Finally, as declared in the final chapters of the *TTP*, the *catholica religio* is one of the decisive instances of civil peace and security since it does not invite dissension, in contrast to the particularistic confessional religions that destroyed the Republic. Really its nature is not theoretical and does not concern itself with speculations or true dogmas (just pious dogmas³⁵). The fundamental

³¹ *TTP*, XII, 294 (G. 161); 2 Cor 33; Ez 36, 26.

³² S. Breton, *Spinoza. Théologie*, p.73.

³³ *TTP*, XII, 295 (G. 162); IV, 163 (G. 165).

³⁴ *TTP*, VI, 215 (G. 93); IV, 187 (G. 65).

³⁵ Cf. *TTP*, XIV, 310 (G. 176).

criteria that certify it are the good works (“the fruits”), the obedience to civil laws that promote peace and charity, as affirmed by a Spinoza-reader of the *Epistle of Saint James*. Thus, since «to the catholic faith, that is to say, universal faith, does not belong any dogma of which could create any controversy among honest men»³⁶, it is clear that it does not need a pontiff.

III

However, the text above, as it becomes obvious, was not referring this sense of the universal catholic religion, non confessional, common, etc., but directly to the Roman Catholic religion – *catholici romani* –, expression that would not only establish a *contradictio in adjecto* if it were used in the sense of the conventional designation of *romana ecclesia*. Indeed, Espinosa says there, in an apparently concessive way, that he would even be able to accept the authority of the Roman pontiff in what concerns interpretation, if «more evident proof» existed.

It is obvious that, in the light of the whole *TTP*, we should not take this concession seriously, but simply in the way of a dual mode of writing, subtle, seriously ironic, intentionally contradicting itself, working in many levels, fruit of his personal style, towards both the context and the receivers of the work, as claimed by L. Strauss and A. Tosel³⁷, since here the *catholica religio* can only be synonymous of *vana religio* and *superstitio*.

And, in any case, what sort of proof would that be in any case? It has been already advanced before, but simply to preliminarily reject its plausibility.

«I admit, [*Spinoza said at the very beginning of Chapter VII*] that those persons – if any such there be – would be more absolutely certainly right [i.e., *about the real meaning of the Scripture*], who have received either a trustworthy tradition or an assurance from the

³⁶ *TTP*, XIV, 311 (G. 177).

³⁷ Cf. L. Strauss, *Le Testament de Spinoza. Écrits de Leo Strauss sur Spinoza et le Judaïsme*, Paris, Cerf, 1991, p. 192; A. Tosel, *Spinoza ou le Crépuscule...*, pp. 257-266.

prophets themselves, such as is claimed by the Pharisees, or who have a *pontiff gifted with infallibility in the interpretation of Scripture, such as the Roman Catholics boast*. But as we can never be perfectly sure, either of such a tradition or of the authority of the pontiff, we cannot found any certain conclusion focused on those bases.»³⁸

In the absence of that genuine and unbroken tradition, and without knowing the original thought of the authors, it remains that both the *liber naturae* and the *liber scripturae* must be interpreted by the same method: «the method of interpreting the Scripture does not differ from the method of interpreting the nature; indeed it entirely agrees with it.»³⁹ The Scripture, therefore, interprets itself and we should not accept any foreign body claiming to give its ‘true’ significance⁴⁰.

«The knowledge (...) of almost everything that is in Scripture, must be solely extracted from Scripture itself, in the same way that the knowledge of nature must be extracted from the nature itself.»⁴¹

From Spinoza’s point of view, a certain traditional interpretation of the verse from the *Second Letter of Saint Peter*, according to which *no prophecy of the Scripture is of any private interpretation*⁴², is gratuitous, greedy and, in all respects, unacceptable, since it necessitates the authorized word of a pontiff, even though in early Christianity this could not be the meaning of the apostle’s verse.

IV

At this point, we face some difficulties. Firstly, whether the reading method proposed by Leo Strauss in “Comment lire le

³⁸ *TTP*, VII, 229 (G. 105) (*italics ours*).

³⁹ Cf. *TTP*, VII, 222 (G. 98).

⁴⁰ Cf. S. Zac, *Spinoza et l’interprétation de l’Écriture*, Paris, PUF, 1965, pp. 42 e ss: «Critique externe et critique interne».

⁴¹ *TTP*, VII, 223 (G. 99).

⁴² Pe 1, 20: «Hoc primum intellegentes quod omnis prophetia Scripturae propria interpretatione non fit.»

Traité Théologico-Politique”⁴³ could be applied in order to verify the contradictory and deliberate use of the expression *catholica religio*. Strauss, as it is known, holds that the *TTP* is intentionally built as a coded and cryptic text where the dialectic is broken, with a level that speaks *ad captum vulgi* (or *ad captum hodierni vulgi*) and a higher level that only philosophers, or Christians given to Philosophy, would understand. Both levels are separated by a set of deliberated contradictions – which Strauss lists as: the impossibility of the supernatural revelation, but its affirmation nonetheless; on the one hand the unconflicted separation between Philosophy (science) and Theology (obedience), since they address different realms, and on the other hand a full contradiction arises between them; the biblical providence being equal to the philosophical providence, but with Philosophy solely revealing the truth about the providence; a totally intelligible and, on the other hand, hieroglyphic Bible, etc.⁴⁴ – finally arriving (Strauss) to what he considers *the golden rule* to fully understand Spinoza’s thinking: the subtle expression of contradiction, the expression said *en passant*, obliquely and almost incidentally, must be taken by us as the more likely expression of what Spinoza used to think, instead of the obvious, openly and repeatedly stated one, since he «speaks in such a way that ordinary folk would not understand what he means. This is the reason why he expresses himself in a contradictory way.»⁴⁵

If the rule presented by Strauss is correct, then we can notice that it applies in this case, since the expression *catholica religio* as applied to the Roman religion is obliquely expressed, in passage, as if Spinoza did not give it too much importance, while we see in other passages that this is not true. In fact, by employing and maintaining the common designation of the *catholica religio* when referring to *roman ecclesia*, Spinoza, *ad captum vulgi loqui*, only barely adheres to the usual merely identificatory sense, sociolog-

⁴³L. Strauss, *Le Testament de Spinoza*, pp. 191-257.

⁴⁴A. Tosel, *Spinoza ou le Crépuscule...*, pp. 222 e ss.

⁴⁵L. Strauss, *Le Testament de Spinoza*, p. 238.

ical, known by all. But in the same way Spinoza is sufficiently skilled and subtle to show to the readers of the *TTP*, particularly those capable of philosophy, his intended receivers, the contradiction involved in designating the Roman Church, confessional and Papist, as *catholica religio* (especially in the divisive context of Reformed Churches and the Counter-Reformation, where one of the points of contention was precisely the authority of the Pope as the ‘true and infallible interpreter’ of Scripture). Spinoza, obviously, as he would to any other person, concedes to the pontiff the *libertas interpretandi*, under the condition that he also recognizes that right in others without just trying to impose his.

Another problem arises: once we admit that the conceptual contradiction is deliberate, how are we to read the entire history of Christianity, is to say, the passage of Christ and the Gospel to the concrete history of the Church? Was the absolute power of the Roman pontiff a sham, an equivoque? Being clear *de jure* that the Roman *catholica religio* does not need a pontiff, why has the Catholic religion organized itself precisely as Catholic Church, i.e., a political body in history? Why along the centuries did it need *de facto* a sovereign pontiff to make a realistic management of passion, fear, desire and hopes? Really, the political realism of the last chapters of the *TTP* concludes that *men can be saved only by obedience*⁴⁶. Being *politics suspended from facts*⁴⁷, how to evaluate that historical process?

A reply can be given simply in Spinoza’s own words, from the brief essay of critical history in Chapter XIX, where he reverses once and for all the essence of “political augustinism”, defending in a forceful and irrevocable manner the right of the civil sovereign to call upon itself the sacred right of the pontiffs and thus submitting religion to politics, in order to avoid division, disharmony, wars, deaths and finally the annihilation of the State. Spinoza says that

«examples of this [*i.e.*, *situation where the pontifical right escaped to the sovereign right of the prince*] are to be found in all ages, but I

⁴⁶ *TTP*, XIII, 306; XV, 324 (G. 188).

⁴⁷ *TTP*, port. ed. D.P. Aurélio, n.1, p. 438.

will mention just one that is paradigmatic. Since this right was absolutely invested in the Roman pontiff, he started to submit, gradually, all the kings to his power, until he also ascended to the top of the sovereignty ladder. All later attempts by the monarchs, especially the German emperors, to decrease his authority even just a little, were unsuccessful; on the contrary, they increased it even more. And the truth is that what no monarch had been able to do by the iron and the fire, the ecclesiastics did only by the quill, what reveals the force of this authority and, at the same time, the necessity of the sovereigns to reserve it for themselves.»⁴⁸

The issue exposed here is not anymore about biblical hermeneutics, but it respects the exercise itself of a political power. And the author of *TTP* recognizes, in this passage, that such “right” was not usurped, as in episodes of the Old Testament, but “recognized [*de facto*] to the Roman pontiff”. If we understand such recognition as just as a factual situation we would have to admit that, with historical retrospect, it was the context of the barbarian invasions and the fall of the Roman Empire which gave to the *catholica ecclesia* and its chief an effective power – and therefore a *right* – to achieve the *effective management of the passions and the fear*. Fear of, in fact, not just the temporal punishments but of the eternal punishments especially, since, according to the argument of Pope Gelasius, in 494, in a letter to the Emperor Anastasius, he assumes responsibility for the salvation or damnation of souls, even the soul of the Emperor. This is considered as one of the founding texts of the “political Augustinism”, which Spinoza inverts.

«Two powers were established to govern the world: the sacred authority of the pontiffs and the royal power. But the weight of the priestly

⁴⁸ *TTP*, XIX, 378 (G. 235): «Cujus rei exempla omnia viderunt saecula, quorum unum tantum, quod instar omnium est, adferam. Quia Romano Pontifici hoc jus absolute concessum fuit, tandem omnes paulatim Reges sub potestate habere incepit, donec etiam ad summum imperii fastigium ascenderit; et quicquid postea monarchae, et praecipue Germaniae Caesares conati sunt, ejus auctoritatem vel tantillum diminuere, nihil promoverunt, sed contra eandem eo ipso multis numeris auxerunt. Verum enimvero hoc idem, quod nullus Monarcha nec ferro, nec igne, Ecclesiastici solo tantum calamo facere potuerunt, ut vel hinc tantum ejusdem vis, et potentia facile dignoscatur, et praeterea, quam necesse sit summis potestatibus hanc sibi auctoritatem reservare.»

responsibility is more serious since the pontiffs must have to answer in the name of the kings themselves at the Supreme Judgment.»⁴⁹

This is considered as one of the founding texts of the “political Augustinism”, which Spinoza inverts.⁵⁰

V

5. Finally, the opposition between the meanings of *catholica religio* invites the most decisive question: what kind of relationship exists between the *catholica religio* preached by Christ in the Gospels and the Church as an undeniable historical and political body manifesting itself over time, and headed by a pontiff?

In other words, we ask ourselves how did a transition come about between the *intuitive science* of Christ – *os, vox et sapientia Dei* – for the teaching of the apostles and to the ecclesiastical institution. The position of A. Tosel in this regard is categorical:

«The whole of the concrete history of Christianity from the Apostles is that of a moral teaching unable of updating itself, since from the start there is a confrontation with the political order. Christianity, for Spinoza, is just this incomprehensible contradiction.»⁵¹

Throughout history, Christianity as *vera religio*, as preached by Christ, has never existed yet; it is still waiting for an update, way that, at last, the *TTP* would come to open to the “Christians without church” to which it was directed. Therefore, «it is necessary to distinguish between effective or historical Christianity, and

⁴⁹PL, 60, col. 42: «Duo quippe sunt, imperator Auguste, quibus principaliter mundus hic regitur: auctoritas sacrata pontificum, et regalis potestas. In quibus, tanto gravius est pondus sacerdotum, quantum etiam pro ipsis regibus hominum in divino reddituri sunt examine rationem.»

⁵⁰Nevertheless, such inversion had already begun, albeit from different viewpoints, with Marsilius of Padua (*Defensor pacis*, *Defensor Minor*, *De Translatione Imperii*), John Wyclif (*De Ecclesia*, *De Officio regis*), Peter d’Ailly, John Gerson, Jan Huss... See José Antônio de C. R. de Souza, *As Relações de Poder: do Cisma do Ocidente a Nicolau de Cusa*, EST Edições, Porto Alegre, 2011.

⁵¹A. Tosel, *Spinoza ou le Crépuscule...*, pp. 240.241.

“real” Christianity, the one that Spinoza proposes as the current standard.»⁵²

On the other hand, S. Breton, in his work *Spinoza: Théologie et Politique*, considers that it “is necessary to approach the Spinozist meditation about the Church as the destiny of Christianity”, and wonder how a historical church, in the case of the Roman Catholicism, may or may not be the “moral expression of the Gospel”⁵³. In effect, the *catholica* nature of the New Testament’s preachings – based on the teaching of doctors and not the words of the prophets –, allows for speech of a pedagogical dimension. Hence the difference between Gospel and Church, even though a duality might not necessarily constitute an abysmal rupture.

The fact remains that, according to a principle of accommodation or of “pedagogical adaptation”, a temporary institution, such as the church, need the contribution of all «the sensible means of imagination»⁵⁴ in order to preserve itself in history. But it is precisely here where the duality entrenches itself, because in that historical process of «pedagogical suitability» and of «subordination to the pragmatic needs of a social body» as the Church, the bishop of Rome, successor and heir of Peter and of the Power of the Keys, quickly invested in the title of *Pontifex Maximus*, declared himself his primacy *inter pares*, canonically assuming the right to call councils and to sanction the orthodoxy and heterodoxy, is to say, the *veritas sub specie aeternitatis*. And so, ‘pedagogically’, anthropomorphisms are being introduced in the very dogmatic definitions: all-seeing God legislator; right and almighty God Judge; merciful God Father; God Person; God Emperor, who loves and punishes, etc., as a response to the

«illusions of the imagination and of desire” of the folk. Suddenly the pedagogical need for the “socio-political adaptation finds in the feelings or in “passions” of the crowd a complicity that seemed to justify it.»⁵⁵

⁵² *Ibidem*.

⁵³ S. Breton, *Spinoza. Théologie et Politique*, p. 91

⁵⁴ S. Breton, *Spinoza. Théologie et Politique*, p. 90

⁵⁵ S. Breton, *Spinoza. Théologie et Politique*, p. 92

In this way the dogmatic theology, «expression of the ecclesiastical pedagogy», ends by codifying «a set of common sense representations that, based in propositions that are supposedly true, will constitute the axiomatic of theology.»⁵⁶ Thus the «*catholica religio* somehow reneged its own catholicity by becoming Catholicism», which is to say, a «particularization and regionalization of the Gospel.»⁵⁷

It was at the level of those representations, *ad usum vulgi*, where the figure of the pontiff became effectively indispensable in order to understand the way that the ecclesial institution was structured and consolidated. In this historic reading, the *catholica religio* as *romana ecclesia*, always requires the pontiff inclusively reproducing

«in its structure, the system of external relations that characterizes a set of the [mentioned] representations. We can talk (...) about a real circularity. The institution makes in its own image the body of its dogmatic expressions which in its own way maintains, reproducing an institutional complex. (...) Since the authority represents God, the ecclesiastical relations that join the sovereign pontiff to the faithful of the church repeat, in their own way, the dichotomies of the creator and creature, of soul and body, of mind and matter, etc., in such way that «the alleged truth of dogmatic proportions is just a verification of a socio-political situation that they should reflect about.»⁵⁸

Such situation is specially polarized in the opposition between the temporal and the spiritual, which

«not only summarizes but provides the key and the tone for all the other dualities. It provides us with its deepest meaning. We arrive here [to the] most serious insinuation of the Spinozist critique. The Catholic Church to him, at least considered in the stronger periods of its history, i.e., in the time of Constantine and in the Middle Age, is, above all, driven by a desire of power and domination. The Christian “religious” that the church wears as disguise is just a game of appearances, more precisely the most secure and popularly adapted way to practice without any opposition and under high grounds, the tricks of power.»⁵⁹

⁵⁶S. Breton, *Spinoza. Théologie et Politique*, pp. 92.94.

⁵⁷S. Breton, *Spinoza. Théologie et Politique*, p. 92.

⁵⁸S. Breton, *Spinoza. Théologie et Politique*, p. 94.

⁵⁹S. Breton, *Spinoza. Théologie et Politique*, p. 95.

With the pretext of teaching the *catholica fides* to Kings and Emperors, the Roman Pontiff usurped state functions, allegedly on behalf of a “universal human community” which in the end was never more than a private community of believers,⁶⁰ trapped within its own imaginary representations. Under the disguise of *catholica religio*, the Roman Church partook in politics. But is that not precisely a reason to acknowledge that the Roman Church is in the need of a pontiff? And conversely, could the *TTP* not work today for the *romana catholica religio* as a program of «reform of religious imagery» and as an «organon of purification of faith?»⁶¹ We sincerely think so.

⁶⁰Cf. A. Tosel, *Spinoza ou le Crépuscule...*, p. 244

⁶¹A. Tosel, “Que faire avec le *Traité Théologico-Politique?*”, in *Kairós*, 11 (1998), pp. 166-167.