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Spinoza and the Collegiants

Since the publication of Meinsma's *Spinoza en zijn kring* it is considered a fact that Spinoza was friends with Collegiants such as Simon Joosten de Vries, Pieter Balling and Jarig Jelles. Fokke Akkerman and Piet Steenbakkers have subsequently shown how important Balling and Jelles were as editors and translators of Spinoza's work, and that they helped him where they could, especially after he had been expelled.¹ But when we look at their works our account may be brief: Pieter Balling's *Een Ligt* from 1662 is, first and foremost, a very short text, which is, moreover, very vague; Jarig Jelles, whose 1684 confession shows some traces of Spinozism, is no less ambiguous; and the only really outspoken Spinozist among the Collegiants, Johannes Bredenburg from Rotterdam, did not want to become a Spinozist at all, and his 'coming out' was the cause of a long-lasting schism within the movement of the Collegiants. The brothers and sisters who took Bredenburg's point of view mainly seem to have done so because they believed in the sincerity of Bredenburg's struggle with Spinoza's work.² Moreover, so far it has never been made likely that Spinoza for his part was particularly open-minded towards the theology of the Collegiants – not least because the Collegiants did not have a clearly distinct theology. Collegiants were individualists, who often felt strongly attracted to spiritualistic and chiliastic varieties of reformed Christianity which were and remained essentially foreign to Spinoza.

Nevertheless, this does not explain everything, for if one is searching for a theological impact one could overlook the fact that the Collegiants' significance for Spinoza was not so much theological as political.³ Their impact would be felt not in Spinoza's theology or metaphysics, but rather in his political theory. Before I try to explain this in further detail, I must first expressly state how much I owe to Frank Mertens's and Siep Stuurman's work as regards this insight.⁴ Briefly stated, I think Spinoza's political theory and more in particular his preference for democracy was to a major degree prepared by the debate among Collegiants about what they called the 'equality' of believers. That debate first had a political connotation in the initiatives of the Collegiant Pieter Cornelis Ploekhoj, who came from the

¹ Akkerman, *Studies in the Posthumous Works*; Steenbakkers, *Spinoza's Ethica*.

² Van Bunge, *Johannes Bredenburg (1643-1691)*.

³ This was first suggested by the Austrian professor of law Adolf Menzel in his debate with Willem Meijer. See Meijer, 'Wie sich Spinoza zu den Collegianten verhielt' and Menzel, 'Spinoza und die Collegianten'.

⁴ Mertens: *Franciscus van den Enden's Brief Account*; Stuurman, *De uitvinding van de mensheid*.

province of Zeeland. Subsequently it received a further secular turn in Franciscus van den Enden's work. But first let me discuss the Collegiant movement.

1. Rijnsburger Collegiants

The Collegiant movement came into existence at the beginning of the seventeenth century as a direct result of the Synod of Dordt, when resolute Arminians in and around Rijnburg decided they would no longer have their meetings conducted by a minister. For, they decided, rather than still be led by an – illicitly operating – Remonstrant minister, let alone by a Contra-Remonstrant, we will teach each other. The Van der Kodde brothers from then on organized church meetings on their own. In this context they invoked the early history of the Reformation and a number of texts from the New Testament. The fourteenth chapter of the first letter to the Corinthians was quoted in particular, for apparently Paul had, in his time, also told followers who had to do without a minister to go about it themselves. As soon as the brothers Van der Kodde had furnished a house for their meetings it was referred to as a 'College' and the participants as 'Collegiants'. Their aim was mutual instruction, 'not in the way of preaching or education, but by way of mutual research and study of the meaning of Holy Scripture'.⁵

'Colleges' would be established in many places in the provinces of Holland and Friesland in the course of the seventeenth century, with Rijnsburg remaining the place where the Collegiants kept meeting each other twice a year.⁶ It was, among other things, unique to this movement that its adherents refused to draw up confessional writings or other 'Formularies of Unity'. Believers were rather admonished to experience their faith on an individual basis. Thus, the colleges in Amsterdam and Rotterdam in particular turned into gathering places where the most daring forms of seventeenth-century Protestantism could flourish. Although they were, as a rule, mainly attended by Remonstrants and Mennonites, Socinians attended happily as well and a number of Spinoza's best friends were also supposed to be Collegiants.⁷ Moreover, many 'Rijnsburgers' turned out to be especially interested in chiliastic or millenarian speculation.⁸ During the 1680s Johannes Bredenburg's sympathy for Spinoza's philosophy resulted in a temporary schism within this national movement, which was, however, solved in 1700. During the eighteenth century the movement lost some of its

⁵ [Van Nimwegen], *Historie der Rijnsburgsche Vergadering*, 31.

⁶ Van Slee, *De Rijnsburger Collegianten*; Hylkema, *Reformateurs*; Lindeboom, *Stiefkinderen van het Christendom*; Kolakowski, *Chrétien sans Église*, Chapters 2-4; Fix, *Prophecy and Reason*.

⁷ Kühler, *Het socinianisme in Nederland*; Meinsma, *Spinoza en zijn kring*. More recently: Knijff and Visser, *Bibliographia Sociniana*; Nadler, *Spinoza. A Life*.

⁸ Van der Wall, *De mystieke chiliast Petrus Serrarius*.

energy, although it would still fulfil a star part in the sixth part (1736) of Bernard Picart's famous *Cérémonies et coutumes religieuses de tous les peuples du monde*.⁹ Only around 1800 did the Rijnsburgers cease to exist as a movement.

Definitely egalitarian tendencies arose within this movement as early as around the middle of the seventeenth century. They were, first of all, the result of strong feelings of anti-clericalism. The aversion to the 'lust for power' of ministers was great and was continuously fed by numerous collisions with local ecclesiastical authorities. De Van der Kodde brothers had already told the ministers who had tried to keep the Rijnsburgers from their *Alleingang* that they had better 'learn a good trade'.¹⁰ The Collegiant Johan Hartigveld from Rotterdam wrote in his *Schriftuurlycke Waerdeering van het hedendaegsche Predicken* (Scriptural Critique of Modern-day Preaching): 'What else is the aim of the establishment of the Free Colleges and the Rijnsburg Meeting but to destroy by this establishment that dominating style of preaching?'¹¹ The Mennonite poet Joachim Oudaen, a friend of Hartigveld's, who is characterized by his biographer as a 'herald of tolerance', also went on the offensive soon as ministers with lust for power came into his view.¹² There were just as many fierce controversies among Collegiants in Amsterdam about the question what authority ministers should have. The so-called 'Lammerenkrijg' erupted in the 1650s: various colleges flourished in Amsterdam as well and there, too, the meetings attracted Remonstrants, Mennonites, but also Quakers, Socinians, chiliasts and others. The behaviour of the Mennonite minister Galenus Abrahamsz in particular became the subject of lengthy controversies, but similar conflicts arose in Utrecht, Leiden and Haarlem. After the placard against Socinianism was made public in 1653 by the States of Holland, many local colleges fell into disrepute and struggles about Mennonite orthodoxy flared up everywhere in the Republic.¹³

The Collegiants' ideas about equality were, in addition, inspired by a pacifism which seemed somewhat Mennonite. Hartigveld argued in *De recht weerlooze Christen* (The Truly Defenceless Christian) that no Christian should ever dominate others, neither his fellow citizens, nor his servants, wife or children. In his opinion there was only one sovereign, Christ himself, whose kingdom, as is well known, is not part of this world.¹⁴ It was also fit for a Christian to try and be humble and patient when faced with injustice, and Hartigveld,

⁹ Picart, *Cérémonies et coutumes religieuses de tous les peuples du monde*, VI, 327-333. See also Hunt, Jacob, Mijnhardt, *The Book that Changed Europe*, 129-130; Sadler, 'The Collegiants'.

¹⁰ (De Fijne), *Kort, Waerachtig, en Getrouw Verhaal*, 15.

¹¹ (Hartigveld), *Schriftuurlycke Waerdeering*, 32. See for the attribution to Hartigveld: Sandius, *Bibliotheca Anti-Trinitariorum*, 161.

¹² Melles, *Joachim Oudaen*. Cf. (Oudaen), *Aanmerkingen over het Verhaal*.

¹³ Meihuizen, *Galenus Abrahamsz*.

¹⁴ (Hartigveld), *De recht weerlooze Christen*, Chapter 1. Hartigveld died in 1678. This older text was published posthumously by his Rotterdam friends. See Hartog, 'Een echte collegiant'.

the rich son of a mayor, put this into practice. He endowed the care for the poor with a large sum of money and consistently refused to be appointed in any government office.

The Collegiant belief in equality was finally inspired by a strong feeling of human fallibility. The Rijnsburgers often quoted the work by the Remonstrant theologian Simon Episcopius, the author of the Remonstrant creed: ‘God has nowhere made known that there should always be a referee in the Church who speaks unerringly, neither did He point out who should always be this referee.’¹⁵ The roots of this Reformational realization of fallibility are old – Coornhert’s work in particular would remain popular among Collegiants for a long time.¹⁶ Proponents of Galenus regarded human fallibility especially as something that had become true in the context of the decline of the church. This was a popular subject among the ‘stepchildren of Christianity’ during all of the seventeenth century: the Reformation had not succeeded in restoring the visible church of Christ and therefore the only point was the continuation of the invisible church. Galenus argued that, as there is ‘no express authority, order or assignment of Christ the Lord himself’ to re-establish that visible church, free prophecies should be allowed, while awaiting the approaching Kingdom of Peace and living ‘in the fear of the Lord’.¹⁷

Pieter Balling, one of Galenus’ followers, who became known in particular as a confidant of Spinoza’s, wrote two pamphlets in the Lammerenkrijg. Galenus’ chiasm does not appear in those pamphlets, whereas it can be found in Hartigveld’s and Oudaen’s work. Also the more rationalist-oriented Balling felt that the lack of certainty about the organization of the true church established the necessity for tolerance: the weakness of man does not allow us to silence others.¹⁸ According to Balling, the principle of equality had always prevailed among Mennonites, too.¹⁹ The Collegiant Laurens Klinkhamer, from Leiden, in his turn, talked of the same ‘veil of ignorance’ which was supposed to encompass all believers to an equal degree: ‘it therefore follows that no-one can endow himself with any right to decide alone about good or evil, or things being true or false’.²⁰

It was someone from Rotterdam, again, who pointed out the consequences of human fallibility in the most confronting way. Johannes Bredenburg, a brother-in-law of Oudaen’s, wrote two pamphlets about free prophecy: *Een Praetje over Tafel* (A Table Talk, 1671) and *Heylzamen Raad* (Wholesome Advice, 1672). The latter title in particular is worthwhile in

¹⁵ (Episcopius), *Belijdenisse ofte Verklaringhe*, 41.

¹⁶ Voogt, “Anyone who can read may be a preacher”. See also Buys, *De kunst van het weldenken*.

¹⁷ Abrahamsz. and Spruyt, *Nader verklaringe van de XIX artikelen*, 19. The *Bedenckingen* of 1657 have been added without pagination. The quote is to be found under the tenth article.

¹⁸ (Balling), *Verdediging*, 50-51; (Balling), *Nader Verdediging*, 28.

¹⁹ (Balling), *Verdediging*, 3.

²⁰ Klinkhamer, *Verdedighing van de Vryheyt van Spreken*, 147.

this context because of the radical conclusion he draws in this text on the basis of the absence of a 'speaking judge':

The state in which we all presently are is no other than the state of collaterality or equality, which can be clearly deduced from the absence of any ultimate authority, or an acting judge, for if there were any ultimate authority, equality would be destroyed; but since there is no such thing, which is fully granted by all these Christians [that is, all Protestants, WvB], it follows that we are all on the same level, or equal.²¹

Bredenburg went so far as to put into perspective even the Collegiants' own claims to truth on the Biblical basis of their meetings: apart from God no one knows for sure what the consequences should be of texts such as 1 Cor. 14.²²

The remarkable part played by women within the Rotterdam colleges confirms that it is true that the egalitarian tendencies within the circle of Rotterdam Collegiants such as Hartigveld, Oudaen and Bredenburg had a certain emancipatory effect. Mayor Willem van der Aa's wife, a sister of Hartigveld's, was regularly seen there.²³ From the middle of the seventeenth century, women such as Maritge Soetemans organized meetings of their own, where ideas were exchanged about theological issues.²⁴ They invited guest speakers and travelled to the major meetings at Rijnsburg together. It would definitely seem that the Amsterdam college of Galenus was a stepping stone for the renowned prophet Antoinette Bourignon when she was confirmed in her own 'spiritual motherhood'.²⁵ The etiquette among the Collegiants is sometimes correctly referred to as 'democratic'. They avoided the use of titles, treasured humility, and addressed each other as 'brother' or 'sister'.²⁶

2. Plockhoy, Van den Enden and the brothers Koerbagh

Pieter Cornelis Plockhoy, an activist from Zeeland, was the best known Collegiant who turned out to be willing to see social-political consequences resulting from the thought that all believers are really equal and that all 'lust for power' is therefore evil.²⁷ Much in his

²¹ Bredenburg, *Heylzamen Raad tot Christelyke Vrede*, 4.

²² *Ibid.*, 14.

²³ See, for instance, *Vriende-Praetjen over het Eeuwig Edict*, 5 and *Een Sociniaensche Consultatie tusschen Jan en Arent*, 4.

²⁴ Zijlmans, *Vriendenkringen in de zeventiende eeuw*, 99-126.

²⁵ De Baar, *'Ik moet spreken'*, Chapters 3 and 15.

²⁶ Hylkema, *Reformateurs*, II, 21.

²⁷ Horst, 'Pieter Cornelisz Plockhoy'; Harder, *Plockhoy from Zurik-Zee*; Séguy, *Utopie Coopérative et Œcuménisme*; Harder, 'Pieter Plockhoy Revisited'. See also Frank Mertens' website on Franciscus van den Enden: <http://users.telenet.be/fvde/index.htm?Works1>.

biography remains hidden, but it seems that he had his roots among Mennonites in Zeeland. He possibly departed from Zeeland with Galenus to Amsterdam. It is a fact that he was seen as a ‘Galenist’ there, but he also tried to get in touch with Oliver Cromwell in England in the course of the 1650s. Cromwell seems to have been seriously interested in Plockhoy’s utopian project to establish co-operative communities for the poor in puritan England. The main source for Plockhoy’s enterprise is the two pamphlets that he published in England. Although there seem to be millenarian incentives in his work, his main worry is likely to have been of another nature. He was concerned with ‘the great inequality and disorder of men in the World’.²⁸ To start with, complete freedom of conscience should be declared: the colleges in Holland were a clear model of the theological practice that he envisioned for England. Moreover, as he concluded: ‘to deal equally in matters of Religion towards subjects, is not only good and pious, but is also the foundation of a good Government.’²⁹ Equal Christians should, in other words, be treated as equal subjects, that is: citizens of equal standing.

It may be useful to give this some further thought, because we, living in the twenty-first century, are not surprised by the thought that people are essentially equal. The famous first sentence of Thomas Jefferson’s American Declaration of Independence says: ‘We hold these Truths to be self-evident, that all Men are created equal’, but in the seventeenth century this was still anything but ‘self-evident’.³⁰ On the contrary, it was a completely revolutionary insight, an insight that, I think, is still completely counter-intuitive even today: it is a fact that people have always lived everywhere and in circumstances that *make* them unequal. There are tremendous *differences* between people everywhere and at any time, and those differences are of a physical, economic, social and political nature. Siep Stuurman has therefore called his recent history of the ideas about equality *De uitvinding van de mensheid* (The invention of mankind). Mankind as an association of equal individuals could not be *discovered*, it had to be *invented*.³¹

To return to the Collegiants: Plockhoy’s plans came to nothing, as Cromwell died suddenly in 1658 and the Restoration was approaching. Nevertheless, his efforts would earn him a place in the historiography of socialism in England and the Netherlands.³² Back in Amsterdam the local authorities of that city in 1662 allowed him to set up an establishment on the banks of the Delaware. He had described his relevant plans in the *Kort en klaer ontwerp* (Brief and Clear Design). His idea was to establish – again – a co-operative community with

²⁸ Zurik-Zee [Plockhoy], *A Way Propounded*, 1.

²⁹ Zurik-Zee [Plockhoy], *The Way to the Peace*, 8.

³⁰ http://en.wikisource.org/wiki/United_States_Declaration_of_Independence.

³¹ Stuurman, *De uitvinding van de mensheid*.

³² Beer, *A History of Socialism in Britain*, vol. I, 74-75. See also Quack, *De socialisten*, I, Chapter 8; Davis, *A Study of English Utopian Writing*, Chapter 11; Israel, *Radical Enlightenment*, 177-180.

sailors, fishermen, farmers and craftsmen in the New Netherlands. These people would build up a new existence on an equal footing. Obviously there would be complete freedom of religion. Just as he had proposed in England at an earlier stage, church meetings would have to follow the example set by the Collegiants. Again, Plockhoy's egalitarianism is remarkable. The inhabitants of his community would share all common yields and have to treat each other as equals. There could not be any social differences: 'The names of servant or maid are not in use among us (where each expects their share of the profit on an individual basis).'³³

The new establishment fared badly; only one and a half year after forty-one emigrants had set foot ashore the Hoerenkil in July 1663, the British army destroyed the establishment completely. A few Dutchmen seem to have survived the English attack, but there have been no traces of Plockhoy himself since. At home in Amsterdam, he had in the meantime become renowned. There were not only rumours that in America he had pleaded in favour of polygamy, but also Franciscus van den Enden, who was writing radical pamphlets, became one of his followers. And this Van den Enden in his turn was part of the same circle of which Pieter Balling too was a member, namely Spinoza's circle.³⁴ Even before Plockhoy and his followers left for the New World, Van den Enden had described Plockhoy's project in great detail. Apparently he had become closely involved.

For as early as 1662 he published – although anonymously – a quite detailed *Kort Verhael* (Brief Account) about the special opportunities that Plockhoy's establishment offered.³⁵ The local authorities saw nothing in his ideas and there was also a rift between him and Plockhoy, but Van den Enden's plans were, it is true, far-reaching. It had been known for a longer period of time that he played a main part in Spinoza's circle in the early 1660s, but thanks to Mark Bedjaï and Wim Klever we can attribute both the *Kort Verhael* and the *Vrye Politijke Stellingen* (Free Political Theses, 1664) to him.³⁶ The Collegiants' focus on the 'equality' of believers certainly took a secular turn in Van den Enden's work. His anti-clericalism must have shocked his contemporaries. Plockhoy at least acknowledged Christ's authority, but Van den Enden went a few steps further: the *Opdracht aen den vertrouwden Lezer* (Dedication to the Trusted Reader) started with the warning that what followed was solely meant for readers who 'have no clerical interests' nor any interest in 'vain and pedantic

³³ Plockhoy van Zierikzee, *Kort en klaer ontwerp*, n.p.

³⁴ Meinsma, *Spinoza en zijn kring*, Chapter 5.

³⁵ (Van den Enden), *Kort Verhael*. I use the edition made by Mertens: *Franciscus van den Enden's Brief Account*. In the introduction to *Vrye Politijke Stellingen* Van den Enden claims to have been asked to write the *Kort Verhael*: Van den Enden, *Vrije Politijke Stellingen*, 125. He also claimed never to have considered political philosophy before.

³⁶ Bedjaï, 'Métaphysique, éthique et politique'; Klever, 'Proto-Spinoza Franciscus van den Enden'. See, however, Mertens, 'Franciscus van den Enden: tijd voor een herziening van diens rol in het ontstaan van het spinozisme?'.

pseudo-learning'. He proposed not to allow any ministers at all in the colony that would be established. Ministers would not serve the peace and unity within this 'Society'; it was much more in need of good schools and capable doctors.³⁷

According to Van den Enden, too, 'equality' served as 'a major foundation' of the colony, but just as Ploekhooy did not doubt the right to private ownership, Van den Enden did not deem it desirable to take away 'every distinction between persons'. It is clear that people are different and as long as the general interest does not suffer, 'everyone's individual and natural equal freedom' must be respected as well.³⁸ According to Van den Enden people are therefore by nature equal but not the same, and they are moreover free:

And this alone is what we wish people to understand by our principal foundation of equality, namely, that in order to establish an orderly society, republic or commonwealth of Christian citizens, such an even balance (between more and less sensible people, more and less wealthy ones, male and female, the ruler and the ruled, etc.) must be found, through reason and experience, in all matters (...) ³⁹

In brief, the colony in America should become a *republic*, and more in particular, a 'popular government' or a 'free state of equals',⁴⁰ a community governed by and for the people. In the Preface Van den Enden had already expressed his appreciation for the *Consideratien van Staet* (Political Considerations, 1660) by the De la Court brothers, one of the key texts of Dutch republicanism.⁴¹ That is: for the first edition of that work, for that original version still outlined the ideal of a democratic republic. In the second edition, which was published after Johan de la Court's death, his brother Pieter expressed his preference for an aristocratic government. Van den Enden would have none of this.⁴² Anyone wishing to be part of Van den Enden's republic would have to take a solemn oath never to aspire to dominance.⁴³

Van den Enden's opposition to slavery and the warm words he bestowed on the original inhabitants of the New Netherlands, the so-called 'naturals', were absolutely revolutionary. More than one century before Rousseau, Van den Enden defined the contours of the 'noble wild'. Slavery is truly un-Christian 'in so far as the Christian religion is a reasonable

³⁷ (Van den Enden), *Kort Verhael*, 28-29.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 29-30. See also 69: 'The worst thing in a state is that no decent liberty is allowed ...'

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 30-31.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 69. See on 'democratic republicanism': Israel, *Enlightenment Contested*, Chapter 10.

⁴¹ V.H. [Johan and Pieter de la Court], *Consideratien en exempelen van Staet*.

⁴² See Kossmann, *Political Thought in the Dutch Republic*, 60-74; Haitsma Mulier, *The Myth of Venice*, Chapter 4 and 'The Languages of Seventeenth-Century Republicanism' in the United Provinces'; Velema, "'That a Republic is Better than a Monarchy.'"; Malcolm, *Aspects of Hobbes*, Chapter 2.

⁴³ (Van den Enden), *Kort Verhael*, 50.

religion'.⁴⁴ And the Dutch could use the minor social differences between Indians as a model: they do acknowledge a sort of nobility but do not care much about this. Adultery is not punished and even the mutual wars remain civilized – they let women and children be in peace – and as far as there is any sort of government, it seems to 'be free and quite democratic': tribal chiefs reach the most important decisions in mutual agreement.⁴⁵

After Ploekhoy's project in the New World failed, Van den Enden did not leave it at that. Van den Enden's biography still shows, just like Ploekhoy's, major gaps. We know that he possessed a Latin school in the fifties of the seventeenth century and that Spinoza was one of his pupils, probably from 1657 until 1659. We also know that he played an important part in Spinoza's circle in the beginning of the sixties, when he got involved in Ploekhoy's plans. Rumour had it that he was an 'atheist'.⁴⁶ Fact is that he moved to Paris in 1670 and would be hanged in 1674 due to his involvement in a conspiracy against Louis XIV. Before he left for France, he deemed it his duty to provide his native country with good advice. Again, he published a work anonymously, but the title page left little to be guessed about the author's intentions. The fact is that these *Stellingen* were said to be *Gedaen na der ware Christenens Even gelijke vryheids gronden* (drawn up according to the true Christians' equal claims to freedom) and to have been written by *Een liefhebber van alle der welbevoegde Borgeren Even gelyke Vryheit* (a lover of the equal freedom of all competent citizens).⁴⁷

Van den Enden argued that all people, both men and women, are born free and that they are not obliged to do anything else than advance their own well-being.⁴⁸ Societies are shaped on the basis of the insight that harmonious co-operation benefits that state of well-being more than anything else. Differences in talent will as a matter of course give rise to differences in well-being. As long as they do not endanger the individual members of the community, they are harmless. But to express social differences by means of academic titles, for example, is harmful. The original equality of all citizens must consistently be held in esteem.⁴⁹ Based on this realization only can the commonwealth remain what it must be: a gathering of free and equal people to the advantage of each individual member.⁵⁰ The form of government which is most suitable to keep that commonwealth intact is democracy.⁵¹ This goes, in principle, for all

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 26.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 21. For a detailed commentary, see Mertens, *Franciscus van den Enden's Brief Account*, I, Chapters 5 and 6.

⁴⁶ See Wim Klever's introduction to Van den Enden, *Vrye Politieke Stellingen*, 27-28.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 137.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 138.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 152 ff.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 146.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 162.

people, because all people are rational beings endowed with a natural sense of community.⁵²

Moreover, the two dangers that threaten a free commonwealth, ambition and superstition, can best be met by a popular assembly, for the people know what is in their interest and what is not. It is, however, important, to keep the people well-informed, and, in particular, not to make the mistake of regarding religion as ‘a first foundation of the republic or commonwealth’.⁵³ The ‘atheist’ that Van den Enden was supposed to be clearly had a keen eye for the abuse made of religion throughout the ages. Cunning and guile effected that superstition, in particular, was fostered and Christian churches arrogated to themselves power that was not rightly theirs. Collegiant echoes can be heard when Van den Enden argues that the visible church has nothing to do anymore with true faith:

The Christian faith, being altogether reasonable, does not consist in adherence to any external church ritual, nor absolutely in the incomprehensible, mere groundless assent to any authoritative tenet, whether of great or small authority; but it uniquely consists in a clear and distinct conviction of reason whereby something is accepted that doubtlessly enhances our knowledge and love of God and of our fellow men: for the whole sum of the Law and the Prophets is to love God above everything and one’s neighbour like oneself.⁵⁴

With the political turn given to the Collegiant emphasis on the equality of believers in Ploekhoof’s and Van den Enden’s work we find ourselves in the heart of the so-called radical Enlightenment.

Van den Enden’s responsibility for the *Kort Verhael* and the *Vrye Politieke Stellingen* long remained a secret. In view of the stinging criticism of the regents that Van den Enden had expressed in the Afterword of his *Kort Verhael*, that was just as well. The Koerbagh brothers would become much more famous, if not infamous. They were born in Amsterdam and frequently seen at the Amsterdam colleges, and just like Balling and Van den Enden they were supposed to have become members of Spinoza’s circle at an early stage. They were also closely watched by the Amsterdam church council, even if only because Johannes had studied theology and was a *proponent*, that is, was eligible for a position as minister of the Dutch Reformed Church. Johannes was an ardent Collegiant and it was, probably rightly so, suspected that he was propagating resolutely ‘Socinian’ ideas.⁵⁵ There is no knowledge of any writings by this Johannes, but Adriaan would grow into a prolific author, who wanted to achieve nothing less than the true enlightenment of the people.⁵⁶ Just as Van den Enden

⁵² *Ibid.*, 174-175.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 194-195.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 201.

⁵⁵ See my introduction to Koerbagh, *A Light Shining in Dark Places*.

⁵⁶ Wielema, ‘The Two Faces of Adriaan Koerbagh’ and ‘Adriaan Koerbagh: Biblical Criticism and

had argued, the first priority, according to Koerbagh, was to abolish Latin as the *lingua franca* of scholars and more in particular of lawyers and theologians.⁵⁷ With this in mind he first published a legal manual in 1664 and the infamous *Bloemhof* (Flower Garden) four years after that.⁵⁸ Adriaan, as is well-known, would meet a dreadful end; when he wanted to publish his *Ligt*, still in 1668, he was arrested, convicted by the Amsterdam magistrate and put in jail. Some months later he would die there. Although Adriaan was mainly interested in metaphysics and in the critique of religion, he left little doubt about his political sympathies, in *Bloemhof* especially. Read his explanation of the word ‘Ignoble’:

A distinction is made among men, some being called noble, others ignoble. But I need to explain briefly who in my opinion is noble or ignoble. Ignoble is he who is without learning and understanding, even if he were born of the greatest king; noble is he who is wise and learned, even if he were born of the poorest beggar.⁵⁹

Also read his entry ‘Democracy’: ‘a government by the people’, in which every true citizen can speak up. Unfortunately, as Koerbagh had to acknowledge, the people’s impact on the governing of the Dutch Republic had increasingly diminished.⁶⁰ In this way, the democratic wing of Dutch republicanism became gradually more critical about the oligarchic rule of the regents, which in the second half of the seventeenth century began to look more and more like an aristocracy.

3. Conclusion

It would go too far to treat the preference for democracy as a form of government here in the way Spinoza would subsequently describe it in his *TTP* (1670) and his *TP* (1677). Spinoza’s political ideas also owe much to authors such as Machiavelli, Hobbes and the brothers De la Court. Let us not forget that what Hobbes had written in *Leviathan* (1651), about the great similarities between people, is generally seen as the most important source – through Locke – of Jefferson’s creed ‘that all men are created equal’.⁶¹ Even earlier, Descartes’ conviction that

Enlightenment’. See also Meinsma, *Spinoza en zijn kring*, 273-287; Vandenbossche, ‘Adriaan Koerbagh en Spinoza’; Israel, *Radical Enlightenment*, 190-192; Den Boer, ‘Le Dictionnaire libertin d’Adriaan Koerbagh’.

⁵⁷ Van den Enden, *Vrye Politieke Stellingen*, 155.

⁵⁸ Koerbagh, *’t Nieuw Woordenboek der Regten*; Koerbagh, *Een Bloemhof*.

⁵⁹ Koerbagh, *Een Bloemhof*, 346.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 230.

⁶¹ Hobbes, *Leviathan*, 183: ‘Nature hath made men so equall, in the faculties of body, and mind: as that, though there bee found one man sometimes manifestly stronger in body, or of quicker mind than another: yet when all is reckoned together, the difference between man, and man, is not so considerable, as that one man can thereupon claim to himself any benefit, to which another may not pretend, as

people have, in principle, the same rationality, had definitely had an emancipatory effect.⁶²

Nevertheless, Spinoza's political theory may of course also be seen as the pinnacle of the egalitarian tendencies as they arose in the 1650s and 1660s in the Collegiant circles which aided him after his expulsion, in 1656, from the Portuguese synagogue. It is a fact that Hobbes was certainly no democrat. When Ploekhoy and Van den Enden added a political dimension to the Collegiant notion of equality in the early sixties of the seventeenth century, Spinoza was working on the first parts of the *E*: he thought about God and the human mind. Nothing suggests a great political interest at that time in Spinoza's life. His earliest texts, the *TIE* and the *KV*, do not indicate this either. Only from the middle of the 1660s, when he starts writing the *TTP*, does he deal with political problems.

A hundred years before Rousseau, Spinoza arrived in the *TTP* at the revolutionary conclusion that democracy results in the best form of government. Siep Stuurman has rightly pointed out that, nevertheless, Spinoza and Van den Enden exclude women from all political decision-making.⁶³ But whether that means that Spinoza became unfaithful to the idea that all people are by nature equal, is questionable. It is a fact that Spinoza does not regard democracy as the 'ideal' form of government from any normative perspective. According to Spinoza, a government for and by the people is, as a fact, the most natural form of government. The following passage from the sixteenth chapter of the *TTP* has become a classic example:

For in a democratic state nobody transfers his natural right to another so completely that thereafter he is not to be consulted; he transfers it to the majority of the entire community of which he is part. In this way all men remain equal, as they were before in a state of nature.⁶⁴

Democracy, from Spinoza's point of view, is a regime that is closest to human nature and that offers the best safeguards to protect the interests of as many inhabitants as possible. According to Spinoza, this makes democracy in principle also first and foremost a rational and stable form of government – a beautiful illustration of how an originally theological idea

well as he. For as to the strength of body, the weakest has strength enough to kill the strongest, either by secret machination, or by confederacy with others, that are in the same danger with himselfe. And as to the faculties of the mind, (setting aside the arts grounded upon words, and especially that skill of proceeding upon general and infallible rules, called Science; which very few have, and but in few things; as being not a native faculty, born with us; nor attained, as prudence, while we look after somewhat els), I find yet a greater equality amongst men than that of strength.' Cf. Zagorin, *Hobbes and the Law of Nature*, Chapter 2.

⁶² Stuurman, *François Poulain de Barre*, Chapter 3.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 296. See also Matheron, 'Femmes et serveurs dans la démocratie spinoziste'; Kerkhoven, 'Spinoza's clausules'; Van Reijen, *Spinoza*, 207-220.

⁶⁴ Spinoza, *Tractatus theologico-politicus*, 243.

could get a completely new meaning. And please note that this happened in the context of the Radical Enlightenment.

Spinoza's preference for democracy therefore is not so much based on an ideal, but on a fact, which he found confirmed empirically in the history of human communities. It also is a fact that women in the seventeenth century could hardly act on their own authority, if only because they were economically dependent on men – be it that women could operate relatively independently precisely in the Republic.⁶⁵ Whether Spinoza's political philosophy is truly 'modern' is questionable.⁶⁶ But nothing in Spinoza's philosophy justifies that women *must* be dependent on men. On the contrary, his ultimately Cartesian recognition of the existence of a single 'human nature' – which is then taken in an anti-Cartesian sense, because people according to Spinoza are not autonomous substances but modifications of a single substance, which all naturally strive to maintain their existence – offers the opportunity to accommodate the ambitions of *all* people.⁶⁷

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⁶⁵ See, for instance, Van den Heuvel, *Women and Entrepreneurship*.

⁶⁶ Van Bunge, 'The Modernity of Radical Enlightenment'.

⁶⁷ Cf. Steinberg, 'Spinoza's Ethical Doctrine and the Unity of Human Nature'.

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