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## Spinoza on Miracles and Superstition<sup>1</sup>

That religion is superstition, a ready tool by which the ruler controls the masses, and that reason must free people's minds from it, sounds familiar to modern ears. The rationalists have been so keen to criticize superstitious belief as a human vice that religion has undergone pressure to cleanse itself of suspected superstition. Miracles, for instance, are they not a form of superstition too? If the answer is positive, it is in line with the criticism of religion that blazed during the Enlightenment. Spinoza's *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus* (*TTP*) has been considered the most radical attempt among these rationalist criticisms of religion. In fact, soon after its publication in 1670 the treatise was condemned as a hideous book of atheism, and banned by the church and civil authorities. At first glance, its opening confirms this reputation, by starting with a high-toned criticism of superstition.

If men were able to exercise complete control over all their circumstances, or if continuous good fortune were always their lot, they would never be prey to superstition. But since they are often reduced to such straits as to be without any resource, and their immoderate greed for fortune's fickle favors often makes them the wretched victims of alternating hopes and fears, the result is that, for the most part, their credulity knows no bounds....<sup>2</sup>

This fairly long Preface is followed immediately by *Index Caputum*, where there appears a series of critical chapters on revealed religion—prophecy, miracles, theology—and on the political issue of freedom and state power. This may give the impression that the book undertakes a harsh critical line that rejects religion as a set of superstitious beliefs adopted by the ruling powers for their own ends. In fact, many people have believed precisely this<sup>3</sup>. But is this Enlightenment reading sound? Does the *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus* aspire

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<sup>1</sup> Based on Osamu Ueno, "Spinoza no kiseki meishin ron" [Miracles and Superstition in Spinoza's *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus*], *Spinozana*, No.2, 2000, pp.3-15, and revised for the present English version. The original paper was read at the conference of the Spinoza Society of Japan, held in Kyoto in Nov. 1999. The text followed is Benedictus de Spinoza, *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus*, Künrath, 1670; in *Spinoza Opera*, Im Auftrag der Heiderberger Akademie der Wissenschaften hrg. von Carl Gebhardt, Carl Winter, 1925; 2. Auflage, 1972, Bd.3. For citation I consulted mostly the *Complete Works / Spinoza*, translated by Samuel Shirley and others; and edited, with introduction and notes, by Mishael L. Morgan, Hackett, 2002.

<sup>2</sup> *TTP*, p.5.

<sup>3</sup> For example, Tosel (1984), p.26, Delahunty, p.174, Smith, pp.33-34, Strauss, p.247. See also Tosel's reply to Henry Laux, who criticized him for blurring the distinction between superstition and religion. Tosel (1996), pp.173-174.

to expose the alleged cozy relations between religion and power, as it is sometimes hailed as doing? Does it really attempt to shake people out of religious superstition? This is the question I shall address in what follows.

We should first be clear about the textual facts. Nowhere, in a text consisting of twenty chapters, do the words *superstitio* and *miraculum* appear alongside each other to form a single phrase. This means that there is no passage that explicitly correlates superstition and miracle. Of course this does not prove anything, for the author who was once denounced as, “Teaching sheer atheism with furtive and disguised arguments,”<sup>4</sup> might be concealing his true intention. However, if we want to know what exactly he had in mind, we must carefully examine the details of his text where these words appear.

## 1 Superstition and religion

There is a line in the Preface that has been quoted many times by way of attesting to his criticism of superstition. I quote the original Latin:

(1) “*Nihil efficacius multitudinem regit, quam superstitio.*”<sup>5</sup>

Literally, “Nothing rules the masses more effectively than superstition.” It is interesting that some of our contemporary translations impose a slight modification in nuance. The French translation, by Madeleine Francès, for example, translates this same line into French as follows:

(1’) “*La superstition est le plus sûr moyen auquel on puisse avoir recours pour gouverner la masse.*”<sup>6</sup>

This may be rendered as “Superstition is the surest means one can resort to to govern the multitude.” This translation is likely to give the impression that Spinoza is talking about superstition as a tool that rulers can use to control people. Another impressive line that appears a little later may support this impression, the famous line that denounces “the supreme mystery of despotism.” I quote:

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<sup>4</sup> Words uttered by Lambert Van Velthuysen, a Cartesian critic. *Ep* 42.

<sup>5</sup> *TTP*, p.6

<sup>6</sup> Francès, p.609.

- (2) “The supreme mystery of despotism, its prop and stay, is to keep men in a state of deception, and with the specious title of religion it cloaks the fear by which they must be held in check, so that they will fight for their servitude as if for salvation, and count it no shame, but the highest honor, to spend their blood and their lives for the glorification of one man.”<sup>7</sup>

The resulting effect of the association of (1') and (2) will not be trivial. It produces the conviction that the author despises religion, because it is a means of deceiving people for the benefit of a despotic power. Arguably, this is what Francès has in mind. In a note, she declares that from the entire text of the *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus* one can extract the thesis that the doctrine of revelation is “*superstition pure*.”<sup>8</sup> It is difficult not to see this reflected in the decision she made to add the word “authority,” which does not appear in the original title, to render the title of the book as *Traité des Autorités Théologique et Politique*.<sup>9</sup>

However, this apparent association between religion, superstition, and authority is questionable. We should not overlook the slight change in syntax made in the translation: superstition appears as a means in (1'), while in (1) it is the agent, i.e., it is superstition that rules the masses. Another thing to keep in mind is that, as Spinoza himself declares, (1) is a quotation from the *Historiae Alexandri Magni Macedonis* of Quintus Curtius. There is no doubt that he was just as aware of the original context as his contemporary Dutch readers presumably were. As Curtius reports, there was an occasion when soldiers led by Alexander, weary of the long expedition against the Persians, were disturbed on seeing an ominous lunar eclipse, and a revolt against their king seemed possible. Alexander called Egyptian seers to the camp and let them make a prediction before his generals. Though they knew the astronomical truth, they pretended to assure them that an eclipse was a sign of the victory of the Greeks. This restored the spirit of the soldiers, and Alexander regained command. Then comes the passage “*Nulla res multitudinem efficacius regit quam superstitio*,” i.e., “Nothing rules the masses more effectively than superstition.”<sup>10</sup> As is clear from the context, the story depicts superstition as something that the monarchical power finds intractable, and thus is not a means to an end. This is confirmed again by the passage immediately following: “*alioqui impotens, saeva, mutabilis, ubi vana religione capta est, melius vatibus quam ducibus suis paret*,” i.e., “Otherwise impotent, the wild and inconstant multitude is more obedient to the seers of their commanders than to the commanders themselves.”<sup>11</sup> As Curtius reports elsewhere, that was why the King feared the seers, and sought their counsel in

<sup>7</sup> *TTP*, p.7.

<sup>8</sup> Francès, p.1466: note 2.

<sup>9</sup> Cf. note 1, p.1449. Francès takes the original title to mean *De Imperio Theologico-Politico*.

<sup>10</sup> Curtius, IV. x, Vol. 1, pp.252-255.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*

difficult times.<sup>12</sup>

There is no doubt that the discussion in the Preface traces the Curtian context. After considering historical examples, Spinoza points to the fact that, “It is in the state’s gravest difficulties (*in maximis imperii angustiis*) that seers have held the strongest sway over the people and have been most formidable to their own rulers.”<sup>13</sup> Then he proceeds to point out the “inconstancy” inherent in superstitious belief. As superstition arises, he says, not from reason but from strong emotion, and is sustained only by hope, hatred, anger, and deceit, men’s readiness to fall victim to any kind of superstition makes it correspondingly difficult to persuade them to adhere to one and the same kind. As he concludes,

Indeed, as the multitude remains ever at the same level of wretchedness, so it is never long contented, and is best pleased only with what is new and has not yet proved delusory. This inconstancy has been the cause of many terrible uprisings and wars, for—as is clear from the above, and as Curtius, too, says so well in Book 4, ch.10—“*Nihil efficacius multitudinem regit, quam superstitio.*” So the multitude is readily induced, under the guise of religion, now to worship its rulers as gods, and then again to curse and condemn them as mankind’s common bane.<sup>14</sup>

The context reveals that relating superstition to a sure means of ruling is a misconception. In fact, instead of being “*le plus sûr moyen*,” superstition under the guise of religion is regarded by Spinoza as a disturbing factor for rulers.<sup>15</sup>

The immediate move Spinoza makes is worth noting. “To avoid therefore this disaster (*hoc ergo malum ut vitaretur*),” he continues, “immense efforts have been made to invest religion, *true or false*, with such pomp and ceremony that it can sustain any shock and constantly evoke the deepest reverence in all its worshippers” (*ibid.*, the stress is my own). It is clear that, instead of condemning religion as superstition, the philosopher regards it as essential to counteract the potential threat of superstition. Religion, *true or false*, must in this respect be carefully institutionalized. It is not surprising, then, that he draws on the “false religion” of the Turks as a successful case. According to the philosopher, the Turks have achieved the greatest measure of success in this regard by holding even discussion of religion to be sinful, and by leaving no room in the mind for the exercise of reason, or even the capacity to doubt.<sup>16</sup> No doubt, this example cannot be applied to a “free commonwealth”

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<sup>12</sup> Curtius, IV. iv, Vol. 1, p.358-359.

<sup>13</sup> *TTP*, p.6

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>15</sup> Balibar seems not to be immune to the same failure as Francès. He translates the line in question as “*Nul moyen de gouverner la multitude n’est plus efficace que la superstition*,” and talks about “*l’appareil monarchique et ecclésiastique de la superstition.*” Balibar, p.298. This kind of misconception may date from the first reception of the *TTP* by early libertinism in France. Cf. Assoun, pp.176-178.

<sup>16</sup> *TTP*, p.7.

like the Dutch Republic, where freedom counts for much amongst the citizens. This is why the famous line (2) quoted above rejects the example of the Turks as “disastrous” to the Republic. This is not because it relies on superstition, but simply because, however efficient it may be, it is incompatible with the general freedom of the citizen. So, the point is not that the “false religion” of the Turks is to be condemned as superstition but, on the contrary, that the civil authority of the Republic must itself assume the same difficult task of counteracting superstition by means of “true religion”, which should be as efficient as the Turks’, and yet compatible with general freedom. It is just this issue that the *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus* as a whole addresses. In this regard, it is pertinent to look at the declaration of the main theme of the book. Spinoza’s undertaking is, “To demonstrate that not only can this freedom be granted without endangering piety and the peace of the commonwealth, but also the peace of the commonwealth and piety depend on this freedom.”<sup>17</sup>

That even a despotic regime needs institutional religion to avoid the disastrous effect of superstition is completely obscured by the unfortunate association Francès makes between religion, superstition, and authority. This failure is likely to mislead one to read the Preface as a declaration of war against a theologico-political authority that would exploit superstition under the cloak of religion, in order to control the masses. This is unfortunate, because its dashing criticism of religion loses sight of the true issue of the treatise, i.e., to contain the potential threat of superstition by means of “true religion”, which Spinoza defines in Chapter IV as “*fides catholica*”, compatible with a free commonwealth. So religion cannot be reduced to “*superstition pure*”.<sup>18</sup> According to Benvenist, *superstitio* and *religio* were antonyms in the classics, and Curtius was known as one historian who was, amongst others, keen on the contrast. In fact, the Curtian lesson being “quite common knowledge,” the philosopher thought there was no need to say any more about it.<sup>19</sup>

## 2 Miracles

Let us move on to the other issue, *miracula*, which is treated mainly in Chapter VI of the *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus*, entitled “Of Miracles”. Spinoza denies that anything happens

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<sup>17</sup> *TTP*, p.7.

<sup>18</sup> In this respect we follow Donagan, who makes the point that we need not only a theory of superstition but also “a theory of revelation as non-scientific cognition,” which accounts for the “useful truth” that religion contains. See Donagan, p.32. See also the critical comment of Zac on the Straussian reading of Francès. Zac, pp.224-229.

<sup>19</sup> *TTP*, p.6. Cf. the articles on “*religio*” and “*superstitio*” in Émile Benveniste, *Le vocabulaire des institutions indo-européennes*, vol.2, Paris, Minuit, 1969. See also Spinoza. *Œuvres III - Traité Théologico-Politique*, PUF, 1999, p.698, note 5.

beyond the universal laws of nature, and definitely rejects any event contrary to Nature or a supernatural event.<sup>20</sup> On the other hand, he proposes to understand miracles “as something (that) really happened.”<sup>21</sup> He holds that some of the prodigious events related in the Scripture as miracles did, in the eyes of the ancient Hebrews, occur. What is the truth, then, with regard to the existence of miracles? Is this again the double-tongued talk of a suspicious author?

The apparent ambiguity comes from ignoring the distinction Spinoza makes between those who relate an encountered event as a miracle, and those who draw on it to despise rational thinking, i.e., the distinction between the ancient Hebrews who witnessed miracles, and the contemporary *vulgus* with their company of theologians who harbor a resentment of natural reason. They both talk about miracles, but in different ways. Though Spinoza thinks the latter inherited the ignorance of the former, he does not pass over the change in the meaning of miracles.

For instance, the Book of Joshua relates a miracle in which the sun stood still, to enable Joshua to complete his battle against the Amorites. Such a phenomenon could really have occurred says Spinoza: “As a result of the excessive coldness of the atmosphere at that time, there may have been an unusually great refraction of light,” a presumption based on *Joshua* ch. 10 v.11. However, his intention is less to give a scientific account than to point out the simple fact that the modern idea of a miracle, as an event deviating from the laws of Nature, was completely alien to the ancient Hebrews.<sup>22</sup> It is true that the Book of Joshua talks about God subjugating the sun, the moon, water, and air, but this does not imply that God reveals himself in superseding Nature. Instead, according to Spinoza, the implication is that it confirms the supremacy of Jehovah, God of Hosts, over those visible godlike beings of the gentiles. The story simply reflects the Hebrews’ unexpected success in subduing other groups, and nothing more.<sup>23</sup> So, the phenomenon did appear to the Hebrews as a form of divine support but, as it occurred by natural causes, it provides no basis on which to verify the existence of an event contrary to Nature.

Spinoza’s target is the common opinion of his day that took miracles as evidence of the supernatural power of God. “They consider that God is inactive all the while that Nature pursues her normal course, and conversely, that Nature’s power and natural causes are suspended as long as God is acting. Thus they imagine that there are two powers quite distinct from each other, the power of God and the power of Nature, though the latter is determined by God, whose power they imagine to be like the rule of some royal potentate.”<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> *TTP*, p.82, pp.86-87.

<sup>21</sup> “...*ad miracula ut realiter contigerint intelligendum...*” *TTP*, p.93

<sup>22</sup> *TTP*, pp.35-37.

<sup>23</sup> *TTP*, pp.82-83, p.92.

<sup>24</sup> *TTP*, p.81.

It was because of this belief that such people cast doubt on the new Cartesian trend in natural sciences at that time, and were provided with a pretext for bringing an accusation of impiety against such teachings. They considered that the clearest possible evidence of God's existence was provided when Nature deviated from her proper order. "Therefore they believe that all those who explain phenomena and miracles through natural causes, or who strive to understand them so, are doing away with God, or at least God's providence..."<sup>25</sup> Behind this lay a resentment of freedom of thought, which was increased by the liberal policy of the ruling bodies. Considering the numbers of pamphlets that circulated, and the consequent and presumably high literacy rates of Dutch commoners, it is difficult to believe that the *vulgus* remained in ignorance of the burning issues of the day. In fact, the Dutch Republic was in some danger of losing control over theologico-political disputes, given the widespread resentment of intellectual freedom.

This is why the problem of miracles was a crucial issue for Spinoza. Many believed that it was only by abolishing natural causes and imagining supernatural events that they were able to worship God. Spinoza denies that this is true to Scripture. In letters he says that such a presumption is a "new style of argumentation" for the existence of God that was introduced by "modern Christians" and is, therefore, totally alien to the thought of the ancient Hebrews. On the contrary, he declares, his own view of miracles, which admits God not as transcendent cause but as an immanent cause, does not diverge at all from that of all the ancient Hebrews.<sup>26</sup> In fact, they called a storm the chiding of God, and thunder and lightning the arrows of God. For the same reason miracles are called the works of God: "For surely all natural phenomena are the works of God, existing and acting through the divine power alone."<sup>27</sup> Surprisingly, Spinoza regards himself as closer to the Hebraic tradition.

Thus, we can conclude that Spinoza admits the reality of miracles. Of course, he reminds us of the necessary circumspection involved in this belief. A distinction must be made between the phenomenon itself and what the witnesses took it for. We should also be aware of expressions peculiar to Hebrew that otherwise seem to say something incredible. The visionary bent of prophets should also be taken into account.<sup>28</sup> In any case, Spinoza firmly denies the opinion that the import of miracles is to provide evidence of the supernatural intervention of God, this opinion being no more than a popular pretext for attacking rational thought.<sup>29</sup> On the contrary, examination of Scripture reveals that the speculative question of how such events could have happened did not even arise in the minds of the ancient Hebrews

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<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>26</sup> *Ep 73, Ep 75.*

<sup>27</sup> *TTP*, pp.23-24.

<sup>28</sup> *TTP*, pp.91-95.

<sup>29</sup> *TTP*, pp.81, pp.95-96.

and, therefore, has nothing to do with revelation. By establishing the fact that those who reported miracles were no scholars, Spinoza shows that it is pointless to decide such matters by seeking evidence in Scripture. This explains the irregularity of the chapter. In considering miracles, Spinoza deviates from his dictum that, “All our understanding of Scripture and of matters spiritual must be sought from Scripture alone.”<sup>30</sup> However, since the question of whether miracles are natural or supernatural is alien to Scripture, it would better to conduct such a discussion by philosophical examination alone. This does not imply that it has no support in Scripture. The passages of Scripture show nothing contrary to the tenet that “miracles were natural occurrences.”<sup>31</sup>

### 3 Miracles and superstition — conclusion

Thus we come to understand why the *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus* does not mix *miracula* with *superstitio*. There is no need to avoid miracles, under suspicion of superstition, by ignoring relations of incredible events; nor should an attempt be made to merge them with one’s philosophical or theological belief, by forcing such passages to say something they do not say. What good does it do to ascribe astronomical knowledge to Joshua, who was a plain military man of ancient times?<sup>32</sup> What is crucial for Spinoza is, rather, the concern that drives people to such temerity. It arises from a deep-rooted prejudice on the part of those who suspect natural reason of overthrowing Scriptural authority and, thus, of undermining the universal piety of the society. Spinoza saw this prejudice affecting not only orthodox theologians but also the minds of the sophisticated intellectuals of the time, such as the Cartesians, who had serious apprehensions about creeping atheism.<sup>33</sup> We may say that it is this prejudice that the *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus* attempts to remove, by demonstrating that it has no ground in Scripture. As we have seen, the issue of whether miracles are supernatural or natural has nothing to do with prophetic discourse. On the contrary, says Spinoza, textual evidence requires us to accept that every work of Nature was regarded by the ancients as the work of God, and that these two are actually one and the same. There is therefore nothing impious in holding that everything, without exception, occurs according to the laws of Nature.<sup>34</sup> Once this prejudice is removed, there remain no objections to the pursuit of natural sciences.

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<sup>30</sup> *TTP*, pp.23-24.

<sup>31</sup> *TTP*, pp.94-96.

<sup>32</sup> *TTP*, 36.

<sup>33</sup> Cf. *Ep* 30.

<sup>34</sup> *TTP*, pp.95-96.

We are now in a position to say that it is the above prejudice that Spinoza denounces as the *superstitio* of the day. “Happy indeed would be our age, if we were to see religion freed again from all superstition,” says Spinoza, referring to the Apostles, who once taught religion “free from philosophical speculations.”<sup>35</sup> It is obvious that by *superstitio* he means speculative involvement, as illustrated by the deviant idea of miracles held by some modern Christians, Cartesians as well as theologians. Note again that, when talking about the superstition of the masses of his day, who are prone to instigation under the pretext of religion, Spinoza denotes it by the name of *Gentilium superstitiones*, or the “superstitions of the Gentiles,” which implies a deviation from genuine religion.<sup>36</sup>

It is now clear that *miracula* do not have the same rank as *superstitio*, based on Spinoza’s use of the words. This said, what is Spinoza’s own conception of miracles? The clue is in the way in which he relates both *miracula* and *superstitio* to the vicissitudes of the state. As we have seen, it is “in the state’s gravest difficulties” that superstition holds its strongest sway over the people, and is most formidable to their own rulers.<sup>37</sup> Contrasting passages on miracles appear in Chapter III, where Spinoza interprets the vocation of the Hebrews. Though there is no such thing as election, there must have been some experience that led them to be convinced of it, he supposes. His assumption is that a society composed of men who lack wisdom and vigilance is largely dependent on fortune and is less stable. If it nevertheless endures for some considerable time, this is to be attributed to some other guidance, not its own.

Indeed, if it overcomes great perils and enjoys prosperity, it cannot fail to marvel at and worship God’s guidance (insofar as God acts through hidden external causes, and not through the nature and mind of man); for what it has experienced is far beyond its expectation and belief, and can truly be regarded even as a *miracle*.<sup>38</sup>

Such was the case of the Hebrew state. When first establishing the state, Moses saw that, “His people could not accomplish their undertaking without mighty miracles and the special external help of God, and must assuredly perish without such help,” and so he besought this special external help of God by means of a covenant, so that God willed them to be saved.<sup>39</sup> We will not go into detail here, but the close examination that Spinoza deployed in Chapter XVIII shows that Moses was astute enough to design a state that could rely on the constant obedience of the multitude, thanks to its ingenious juridical, military, and religious systems. As the power of the state is defined—according to the later *Tractatus Politicus*—by the

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<sup>35</sup> *TTP*, p.158.

<sup>36</sup> *TTP*, p.7.

<sup>37</sup> *TTP*, p6.

<sup>38</sup> *TTP*, p.47; emphasis is my own.

<sup>39</sup> *TTP*, p.53.

power of the multitude,<sup>40</sup> this regime of theocracy had unexpected success, under favorable circumstances, in overcoming great perils, and the nation was blessed with prosperity. Since this was far beyond their expectations, it is not surprising that they regarded what they had experienced as a miracle. Spinoza thus concludes that if the Hebrews surpassed other nations, it was in this alone that, “They were successful in achieving security for themselves and overcame great dangers, and this chiefly by God’s external help alone.”<sup>41</sup> All this, he emphasizes, is clear to anyone who reads Scripture in a straightforward way. Thus, when Scripture says that no other nation has its Gods so nigh unto them as the Jews have their God, this must be understood with regard to the independence of their state, and “as referring only to the time when *so many miracles befell them*.”<sup>42</sup>

Scripture also tells of the vicissitudes of the Hebrew state. The marvelous days were gone, and were followed by an anguishing series of splits and sedition after the death of Moses. According to Spinoza, this was due to the fatal corruption of the original equality among the federated tribes, and the consequent turmoil induced the Jews to seek a mortal king. This breach of common citizenship on the basis of the divine rule caused fresh sedition.<sup>43</sup> In fact, after the original theocracy changed into a monarchy, there was practically no end to civil wars, and the fighting reached a level of ferocity that surpassed all previous records. Spinoza does not fail to point out that, after the election of kings, we find an abundance of prophets at the same time. Furthermore, we see the people being deceived by false prophets only during the rule of kings, for many eagerly sought their favour.<sup>44</sup> In this, we hear again the echo of Curtius on superstition. The multitude is readily induced, under the guise of religion, “now to worship its rulers as gods, and then again to curse and condemn them as mankind’s common bane.”<sup>45</sup> This inconstancy has been the cause of many terrible uprisings and wars--and in fact it led ultimately to the downfall of the entire state. Returning from the Babylonian exile, they restored the second temple and theocracy, but this was nothing more than the shadow of the first, because the high priests then acquired the authority to issue decrees and transact government business. To gain the support of the masses, they adapted Scripture to suit their immorality, and deviated from the true meaning and interpretation of the laws. Thus, “Religion degenerated into pernicious *superstition*” and yielded to sectarian divisions that knew no end.<sup>46</sup> There is no doubt that Spinoza saw therein

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<sup>40</sup> *TP*, III, 2.

<sup>41</sup> *TTP*, p.47.

<sup>42</sup> *TTP*, pp.49-50; emphasis is my own.

<sup>43</sup> *TTP*, pp.218-220.

<sup>44</sup> *TTP*, pp.224-225.

<sup>45</sup> *TTP*, p.6.

<sup>46</sup> *TTP*, pp.221-223; emphasis is my own.

a reflection of his own time. In periods of anguish the *vulgus* seek omens, and, “If they are struck with wonder at some unusual phenomenon, they believe this to be a portent signifying the anger of the gods or of a supreme deity, and therefore regard it as a pious duty to avert the evil by sacrifice and vows, susceptible as they are to superstition and opposed to religion.”<sup>47</sup> In the time of the *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus*, the easy targets were those, “Who explain phenomena and miracles through natural causes, or who strive to understand them so.”<sup>48</sup> Again, the tumultuous time of the Republic did not lack unusual phenomena such as comets, sundogs, plague epidemics, etc., which served the *vulgus* as omens rather than as subjects for scientific study. With the theologians of orthodoxy in front, they pressed the civil authority to tighten its control of the freedom of thought, which had been relatively well secured during the Dutch Republic. It was against this flourishing superstition, which put peace and piety in peril, that the *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus* fought.

Our considerations so far bring us to the conclusion that, for Spinoza, *miracula* are the index of an effective performance by the state, thanks to a well organized religion, which increases the unifying power of the multitude to overcome perils, whereas *superstitio* is the index of “the state’s gravest difficulties,” and results from the degeneration of communal religion. In other words, *miracula* and *superstitio* are seen by the philosopher as a sort of barometer that indicates the vicissitudes of the state’s sovereignty, the power of which is again thoroughly determined by the power of the multitude, as Chapter XVII shows. Did Spinoza call on people to break with religion and miracles on the grounds that they were entirely based on superstition? The answer to this is ‘definitely not’. The *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus* is a difficult book, and it may look obscure to those who are preoccupied by a simplified scheme of the Enlightenment. However, it is indeed an intriguing book for those who are able to see the philosopher striving to work out a solution for freedom in such a difficult time.

### Abbreviations

*TTP* = *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus*, with chapter numbers and page numbers according to *Spinoza Opera*, Bd.3.

*TP* = *Tractatus Politicus*, with chapter-numbers and section-numbers according to *Spinoza Opera*, Bd.3.

*Ep* = *Epistolae* with numbering in the Gebhardt edition *Spinoza Opera*, Bd.4.

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<sup>47</sup> *TTP*, p.5.

<sup>48</sup> *TTP*, p.81.

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