Chapter 3
Spinoza on Philosophy and Religion: The Averroistic Sources

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Spinoza has often been recruited for genealogies of modernity.[1] Although these genealogies sometimes yield interesting insights, I doubt that "modernity" is a fruitful *philosophical* category on which Spinoza's relevance depends. One important aspect of Spinoza's work which is normally given a prominent place among his contributions to modernity is his critique of religion. This critique in my view has not yet been adequately understood within the context of his philosophical project. Clarifying its purpose, of course, depends on understanding the general role of religion and its relation to philosophy in Spinoza's work. While I surely will not be able to settle the matter in this paper, I would like to draw attention to what I take to be an important piece of the puzzle: the distinctly Averroistic aspects of Spinoza's approach to the relationship between philosophy and religion in the writings preceding the critique of religion set forth in the *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus*. The position of the *TTP* in a sense radicalizes the stance on philosophy and religion advocated by Averroes in his chief philosophical-theological work, the *Faṣl al-maqâl* (Decisive Treatise). It is highly likely that Spinoza was familiar with Averroes' main claims, for they are taken up by the Jewish Renaissance Averroist Elijah Delmedigo (d. 1493) in his Hebrew treatise *Beḥinat ha-dat* (The Examination of Religion), which was among the books in Spinoza's library. All parallels between Spinoza and Averroes that I will point out can be explained on the assumption that Spinoza read Delmedigo's treatise, and, as I will show, there is considerable evidence suggesting that he did. Let me stress, however, that my purpose is not to hunt for Spinoza's "sources." Rather, my assumption is that understanding the critical dialogue that Spinoza conducted with earlier and contemporary philosophers is indispensable for illuminating important features of his thought.

Before turning to the question of Spinoza's Averroism, let me briefly outline the underlying broader issues that provide the context for the present paper. My goal is

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[1] See e.g. Israel, who attempts to trace what he considers to be the distinctive features of modernity back to Spinoza (2001 and 2006). Compare also Goetschel (2004).

to explain a striking inconsistency in Spinoza's treatment of scripture by taking two
intellectual contexts into account: the philosophical interpretation of the purpose of
religion in medieval Islamic and Jewish thought and various approaches to scripture
in the Netherlands of the seventeenth century. The problem I am interested in is
this: In his critique of religion in the *TTP* Spinoza develops an exegetical method
by which he intends to show that scripture contains no truth and, therefore, cannot
interfere with philosophy.[2] Whereas philosophy determines what is true and false,
religion based on scripture secures obedience to the law.[3] On the other hand, there
is a significant number of passages throughout Spinoza's work—from the *Cogitata
Metaphysica* to the *Ethics* and the late correspondence with Henry Oldenburg—in
which he attributes a true core to scripture, often presented as its allegorical content.
My main thesis is that this inconsistency is best explained by assuming that Spinoza
is committed to two projects that he ultimately was unable to reconcile: he wants to
use religion as a replacement of philosophy that provides the basis for the best life
accessible to non-philosophers, and he wants to refute religion's claim to truth in
order to defend what he calls "the freedom to philosophize."

The concept of religion as a replacement of philosophy which educates and
guides non-philosophers is the standard view of medieval Islamic and Jewish
philosophers that Spinoza knew well through his study of medieval Jewish philoso-
phy. The main idea is that religion's content according to its literal sense—Biblical
narratives, laws, rituals, and so forth—is a pedagogical-political program devised
by philosophers to guide non-philosophers. The allegorical content of religion, on
the other hand, corresponds to the doctrines demonstrated in philosophy. Religion's
authority thus depends on the assumption that the teachings of religion are true
on the allegorical level. Spinoza calls this position "dogmatic" and describes and
rejects it in the *TTP*.[4] The "dogmatist," thus Spinoza's main criticism, instead of
strictly separating philosophy from theology, turns theology into the "handmaid of
philosophy" (*ancilla philosophiae*).[5]

The "dogmatic" approach was first introduced into medieval Islamic and Jewish
philosophy by the medieval Muslim philosopher al-Fârâbî (d. 950).[6] According to
al-Fârâbî, "religion" (*milla*) is an "imitation of philosophy" (*muḥâkîyya li-l-falsafa*)
(*Taḥsîl al-saʿâda*, Ar. 185; Eng. 44).[7] Hence religion "comes after philosophy, in
general, since it aims simply to instruct the multitude (*taʿalîm al-jumhûr*) in the-
oretical and practical matters that have been inferred in philosophy in such a way

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[2] See in particular *TTP* 7.

[3] See in particular *TTP* 12–15.

[4] See Chap. 7 and 15.

[5] Cf. the title of *TTP* 15 (A 482; G iii. 180). I quote the *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus* in the
new edition prepared by Fokke Akkerman (1999) (=A and page no.). I add references to Carl
Gebhardt's edition (1925) (=G, volume no., and page no.), according to which I also quote all
other writings of Spinoza.

[6] The following paragraph summarizes what I elaborated in Fraenkel (2008b).

[7] Al-Fârâbî's most elaborate discussion of religion is the *Kitâb al-milla* (*Book of Religion*).

as to enable the multitude to understand them by persuasion or imaginative representation, or both" (*Kitâb al-hurûf*, secs. 142–143). The difference between the philosopher and the prophet comes down to this: the prophet, in addition to intellectual perfection, also has the skills of an orator, poet, and legislator that allow him to translate philosophical insights into a language and a set of practical rules accessible to non-philosophers (the "multitude"). Religion is thus integrated into a philosophical framework as a pedagogical-political program for non-philosophers. In this sense Spinoza can say that religion is conceived as philosophy's "handmaid." One implication of this view is that a religious text, if understood literally, is similar but not identical to the philosophical doctrines it imitates. If understood as an allegorical representation, however, it can be translated, as it were, into these doctrines by means of allegorical interpretation. A standard example from the medieval Islamic and Jewish context is God's description as a king in scripture which is seen as a pedagogically useful metaphorical imitation of the philosophical doctrine of God occupying the first rank in the hierarchy of existents. The notion of the king conveys an approximate idea of God's rank to non-philosophers who cannot understand the ontological order, but who do understand the political order.[8] In other words: literally, the representation of God as a king is pedagogically and politically useful but not true; allegorically, on the other hand, it is true but not pedagogically and politically useful. The two most prominent "dogmatists" at the end of the early medieval period were the Muslim philosopher Averroes (d. 1198) and the Jewish philosopher Maimonides (d. 1204), who were also the last important representatives of the Aristotelian school in Muslim Spain. Both worked out an interpretation of Islam or Judaism respectively as a philosophical religion, on the basis of al-Fârâbî's model for conceiving the relationship between philosophy and religion. Spinoza in turn became first acquainted with the dogmatic approach by studying the work of Maimonides, as well as that of other medieval and Renaissance Jewish philosophers. In the *TTP* he uses Maimonides as an example to first illustrate the dogmatic approach and then reject it.

I have shown in detail elsewhere that before Spinoza started working on the *TTP* in 1665, he consistently endorsed the dogmatic position whenever he discussed the character of scripture.[9] In what follows, I will briefly summarize the conclusions of that paper insofar as they are relevant for understanding my present argument. Two examples will suffice to illustrate the different aspects of what I take to be Spinoza's early dogmatism. The first is a passage from *Cogitata Metaphysica* 2.8, in which Spinoza discusses God's will. The problem at stake is this: How are we to understand passages in scripture according to which "God hates some things and loves other things" since, taken literally, they imply that God's will is affected by and reacts to things he created and hence is mutable? This appears to contradict the view of the philosopher, according to which God's will is immutable:

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[8]See e.g. *Taḥsîl al-saʿâda*, Ar. 185; Eng. 45, quoted by Averroes in his Commentary on Plato's *Republic*, 30. Cf. Maimonides, *Guide of the Perplexed*, 1.8–9.

[9]See Fraenkel (2008a).

But when we say that God hates certain things and loves certain things, this is said in the same way as scripture says that the earth will spit out human beings and other things of this kind. That God, however, is not angry at anyone, nor loves things as the multitude [*vulgus*] believes, can be sufficiently derived from scripture itself. For this is in Isaiah and more clearly in Paul's Epistle to the Romans, chapter 9. [. . .] Finally, if in the holy scriptures some other things occur, which induce doubt, this is not the place to explain them; since here we only inquire into the things which we can grasp in the most certain way through natural reason [*ratione naturali*]; and it is sufficient that we demonstrate these clearly in order to know that scripture must also teach the same things [*ut sciamus Sacram paginam eadem etiam docere debere*]; because the truth does not contradict the truth [*veritas veritati non repugnat*] and scripture can not teach the absurdities [*nugas*] which the multitude imagines. [. . .] Let us not think for a moment that anything could be found in sacred scripture that would contradict the Natural light [*quod lumini naturae repugnet*]. (G i. 264–265)

The conflict between the philosophical doctrine of God's will and scripture is resolved in the way most medieval Muslim and Jewish rationalists would resolve it: the statements about God's love and hate in scripture must be understood allegorically. Only the *vulgus* understands them literally. Moreover, the correct understanding of God's love and hate can be found in scripture itself: in both the prophets of the Hebrew Bible (Isaiah) and in the New Testament (Paul). The criterion to determine which passages of scripture are to be understood literally and which allegorically clearly is their agreement or disagreement with the corresponding philosophical doctrine. Contradictions between philosophy and scripture derive from the fact that scripture does not teach things *more philosophico*, i.e., in the way we grasp them when we inquire into them by means of "natural reason." But since the truth arrived at by reason is the same as the truth contained in scripture, we can rest assured that nothing clearly demonstrated by reason contradicts what scripture teaches. The character of the teachings of scripture is adapted to the imagination of non-philosophers. Understood literally, they amount to absurdities, but the philosopher-exegete should in principle be able to make the philosophical content visible within the non-philosophical form. Spinoza in this passage clearly adopts the "dogmatic" position, attributed to Maimonides in the *TTP*.

The second passage is taken from Spinoza's first letter to Willem van Blyenbergh, written in January 1665. In his response to Blyenbergh's questions, Spinoza explains, among others, why, according to the Biblical account, God commanded Adam not to eat from the tree of knowledge, although, according to the philosopher, he determined his will to transgress the command:

I say that scripture, because it is particularly adapted and useful to the multitude [*plebs*], always speaks in human fashion [*more humano*], for the multitude is unable to understand the higher things. For this reason I believe that all that God has revealed to the Prophets as necessary for salvation is set down in the form of laws [*legum modo*]. On this account the Prophets invented entire parables [*integras Parabolas Prophetae finxerunt*] representing God as a king and lawgiver, because he revealed the means [leading to] salvation and perdition and is their cause. The means, which are nothing but causes, they called laws and wrote them down in the form of laws. Salvation and perdition, which are nothing but effects necessarily resulting from these means, they described as reward and punishment, putting their words more in accordance with that parable than with the truth, constantly representing God as human, now angry, now merciful, now looking to what is to come, now jealous and suspicious, and even deceived by the devil. So philosophers and likewise all who have

risen to a level beyond law, that is, all who pursue virtue not as a law but because they love it as something very precious, should not find such words a stumbling-block. Therefore the command given to Adam consisted solely in this, that God revealed to Adam that eating of that tree brought about death, in the same way that he also reveals to us through the natural intellect [*per naturalem intellectum*] that poison is deadly. (G iv. 92–94)

In this passage "revelation" refers to the prophet's knowledge of the means leading to salvation and perdition, of which God is the cause. This knowledge is comparable to the knowledge revealed to a biochemist by means of his natural intellect about the destructive effect of poison, of which God is equally the cause. If the prophet were to address a group of philosophers, he would explain the means leading to perdition and salvation *more geometrico*, in the same way as the bio-chemist would offer a causal explanation for the danger of poison if he were to address a group of scientists. But since the prophet's task is to instruct non-philosophers, he has to speak *more humano*—i.e., "in the language of human beings" as Spinoza puts it using a Maimonidean formula. For this purpose he composes a parable describing God as a king and lawgiver who issues commandments and prohibitions, who is pleased about obedience and angry about disobedience, and who rewards the former and punishes the latter.

Whereas from the passage in *Cogitata Metaphysica* 2.8 we learned that scripture's anthropomorphic representation of God has an allegorical sense, here we learn in which way the literal sense is useful to non-philosophers. By speaking of God *more humano* and translating causal connections into laws associated with rewards and punishments, scripture is able to replace for the non-philosopher philosophical insight as a guide to virtuous action. This I take to be the most important reason for adopting the dogmatic position: it allows preserving the authority of scripture as the basis of popular religion which provides a pedagogical-political program replacing philosophy for non-philosophers.

If until about 1665 Spinoza's position on the relationship between philosophy and scripture is indeed the same that he rejects as "dogmatism" in the *TTP*, i.e., the position, according to which theology is the *ancilla philosophiae*, the issue becomes more complicated after 1665 when he begins to work out his critique of religion, published in 1670 as part of the *TTP*. But despite the critique of religion in the *TTP*, different versions of the dogmatic position reappear throughout all of Spinoza's later writings, for the most part reflecting the medieval position of philosophers like al-Fârâbî, Maimonides, and Averroes. What all the passages in question have in common is this: none of them can be justified through the exegetical method that Spinoza promises to adopt in the *TTP*, namely "to neither affirm anything of [scripture] nor to admit anything as its doctrine which I did not most clearly derive from it."[10] To put it in a provocative way: If Spinoza had never written his critique of religion, these passages, together with those of his earliest writings, would have allowed him to claim that the allegorical content of scripture is never in conflict with what the *Ethics* teaches philosophers *more geometrico*, and that the literal content

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[10]*TTP* Preface; Spinoza elaborates the method in *TTP* 7.

of scripture teaches non-philosophers *more humano*, i.e., by means of parables and laws, an imitation of the doctrines of the *Ethics*.

Finally I claim that the dogmatic position, which has philosophy determine the true core of religion, is not only compatible with the philosophical project in the *Ethics*, but also with the freedom to philosophize that Spinoza sets out to defend in the *TTP*. It is clear that Spinoza's main opponent in the *TTP* is not the dogmatic position, but the position of the Calvinist Church in the Netherlands of the seventeenth century, in particular the view that the authority of scripture overrides the authority of reason. Spinoza describes this position as "skepticism" in the *TTP* and contrasts it with the dogmatic position.[11] It is this form of "skepticism" that turns philosophy into the "handmaid of theology." This in turn is the chief threat to the *libertas philosophandi* according to Spinoza.[12]

Let me now address three important objections to my thesis concerning Spinoza's early dogmatism which can be met, I contend, if the Averroistic character of his dogmatism is recognized.[13] The first objection is that I am wrong to claim that until 1665 Spinoza consistently endorsed the dogmatic position, for there are three passages in his early writings in which he clearly states that philosophy and theology contradict each other. These are the *scholium* to *Principia Philosophiae Cartesianae* 2.13, *Cogitata Metaphysica* 2.12, and *Epistola* 23 to Blyenbergh. In the last of these passages the alleged contradiction is most clearly formulated:

> Furthermore, I should like it here to be noted that while we are speaking philosophically [*Philosophice loquimur*], we ought not to use the language of theology. For since theology has usually, and with good reason, represented God as a perfect man, it is therefore appropriate that in theology it is said that God desires something, that God is affected by anger through the deeds of the impious and delights in those of the pious. But in philosophy, where we clearly perceive that to ascribe to God those attributes which make a man perfect would be as wrong as to ascribe to a man the attributes that make perfect an elephant or an ass, these and similar words have no place, and we cannot use them without utterly confusing our concepts. So, speaking philosophically, we cannot say that God wants something from somebody, or that something angers or delights him. For these are all human attributes, which have no place in God. (G iv. 98)

The second objection is that Spinoza not only stresses the contradictions between philosophical and theological propositions, but also shows no interest in resolving them by allegorically commenting on scripture as Maimonides does in his chief philosophical-theological work, the *Guide of the Perplexed*.[14]

The third objection, finally, concerns my claim that the dogmatic position is consistent with the *libertas philosophandi* that Spinoza defends in the *TTP*. This seems

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[11] See *TTP* 15.

[12] In the Preface to the *TTP*, Spinoza describes "skepticism" as the "one obstacle" that prevents potential philosophers from philosophizing (A 74; G iii. 12). Cf. *Epistola* 30.

[13] For a discussion of why Spinoza adopted the dogmatic position in his early writings, why he rejected it in the *TTP*, and why he continued making use of it even after dismissing it, see again Fraenkel (2008a).

[14] See the programmatic passages in *Guide* 1, Introduction and *Guide* 2.2.

to be contradicted by the fact that Spinoza criticizes Maimonides in the *TTP* for introducing a form of philosophical tyranny into scriptural exegesis. According to Spinoza, *libertas philosophandi* not only means that philosophers must be safe from persecution in the name of religion, but that every citizen has the right to believe whatever he or she thinks is right on the basis of scripture, no matter whether or not this belief corresponds to what has been demonstrated in philosophy. If Maimonides' view were correct, Spinoza writes,

> it would follow that the multitude, which for the most part does not know demonstrations or has no leisure for them, could admit of scripture only that which is derived from the authority and testimony of philosophers [*de Scriptura nihil nisi ex sola authoritate testimoniis philosophantum admittere poterit*], and would therefore have to assume that philosophers cannot err in their interpretations of scripture. This would indeed be a novel form of ecclesiastical authority, with very strange priests or pontiffs, more likely to excite the multitude's ridicule than veneration. (*TTP* 7 [A 316; G iii. 114])

All three objections can be met, I contend, once we recognize that Spinoza's dogmatism in important respects does not follow Maimonides but Averroes, with whose position he in all likelihood became familiar through Elijah Delmedigo. As I mentioned earlier, both Averroes and Maimonides use al-Fârâbî's model for conceiving the relationship between philosophy and religion to interpret their respective religious traditions as philosophical religions. There is, however, one difference that is crucial for my present purpose. Whereas for Averroes the true doctrines constituting the allegorical content of scripture must remain the exclusive domain of the philosophers who have the intellectual capacity to understand them, for Maimonides they can and must be made accessible at least partly to non-philosophers as well: through allegorical interpretation and religious legislation.[15] The importance of this difference between Maimonides and Averroes was already noted by Shlomo Pines. According to Pines, Maimonides was influenced by the ideology of the Almohads on this point, the North African Berbers who conquered Spain in the twelfth century and "compelled all their subjects to profess an official theology." This theology was derived from the system of the *mutakallimûn*, "who were the official theologians of the Almohad kingdom" (Pines 1963, cxviii–cxix).[16] Maimonides seems to have thought that all members of the religious community can be compelled to adopt true opinions—the doctrine of God's incorporeality for instance—through religious legislation. These true opinions must then be reconciled with scripture through allegorical interpretation.[17] In a sense, therefore, Maimonides represents a deviation from the standard version of the dogmatic position. But because of Maimonides' enormous impact on subsequent Jewish philosophy, his version of dogmatism was adopted by most Jewish philosophers from the thirteenth century to the Early Modern period. This explains why philosophical commentaries on Biblical books became one of the main genres of Jewish philosophy throughout this period.

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[15]For the following paragraph, see the more detailed discussion in Fraenkel (2010).

[16]Cf. Stroumsa (2005).

[17]See in particular *Guide* 1.35.

From the point of view of an Averroist, however, Maimonides' project constitutes a problematic amalgamation of philosophy and theology, for Maimonides introduces philosophy into disciplines where for Averroes it is completely out of place: theology and jurisprudence. This is also the main criticism directed by Elijah Delmedigo against Maimonides. Like Averroes he stresses that philosophy and theology must be strictly kept apart. Let us briefly examine how Averroes argues for this separation in his chief philosophical-theological work, the *Faṣl al-maqâl wa-taqrîr ma bayn al-sharî'a wa-al-ḥikma min al-ittiṣâl* (Decisive Treatise and Determination of the Relationship between the Divine Law and Philosophy). In contrast to Latin Averroists, Averroes holds that no genuine contradiction between philosophy and religion can exist. Islam contains the truth and exhorts all Muslims to pursue it. The formula "*veritas veritati non repugnant*" that we saw in *Cogitata Metaphysica* 2.8 appears as follows in Averroes:

> Since this Law [*sharî'a*] is true and calls to the reflection leading to cognition of the truth, we, the Muslim community, know firmly that demonstrative reflection cannot lead to something differing with what is set down in the Law. For the truth does not contradict the truth [*al-ḥaqq lâ yuḍâdd al-ḥaqq*]; rather, it agrees with and bears witness to it. (*Faṣl al-maqâl*, 8–9)[18]

Averroes, of course, knows that this cannot be the case if the *sharî'a* is understood literally. For then it contains much that is at odds with what philosophy demonstrates. The reason for this is that for Averroes, like al-Fârâbî, there is an important "difference in human nature [*ikhtilâf fiṭra al-nâs*]," namely that between philosophers and non-philosophers, and that the divine Law is addressed to all Muslims, and not only to the philosophers among them (*Faṣl al-maqâl*, 10). To achieve this, the prophet proceeds as follows: for one thing he calls the philosophers to pursue true knowledge on the basis of demonstrations. In addition he translates this knowledge by means of rhetorical and dialectical arguments, as well as poetic representations, into a language accessible to non-philosophers. As a consequence, contradictions arise between the literal sense of the divine Law and the doctrines demonstrated by the philosophers. These contradictions can be solved, according to Averroes, through "exegesis" (*ta'wîl*) which discloses the "allegorical sense" (*bâṭin*) of the divine Law.[19] The decisive point for my present argument is that allegorical exegesis is permitted only to philosophers according to Averroes. The difference between philosophers and non-philosophers with respect to the truth is thus twofold: Only the philosophers have access to the truth through scientific demonstrations and only the philosophers have access to the "allegorical sense" of the divine Law. For Averroes pointing out in public that the literal sense of the divine Law is false and disclosing its allegorical sense would precisely undermine the intention of the prophet who concealed the allegorical sense because of the "difference in human

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[18]Note that the pagination of the Arabic and the English are the same in the edition I used.

[19]For this argument, see in particular *Faṣl al-maqâl*, 8; 19; 24–25. Cf. *Kitâb al-kashf*, Ar. 132–135; Eng. 16–19.

nature." Averroes explains this by drawing an analogy between the role of the medical doctor and the role of the lawgiver in which he opposes the lawgiver to a person who intends to disclose the allegorical content of the divine Law:

> Here is a parable of these people's intention as contrasted to the intention of the Lawgiver [*al-shâri'*]: Someone intends [to go] to a skilled physician who intends to preserve the health of all of the people and to remove sickness from them by setting down for them prescriptions to which there is common assent [*mushtarakat al-taṣdîq*] about the obligation of practicing the things that preserve their health and remove their sickness, as well as of avoiding the contrary things. He is not able to make them all become physicians, because the physician is the one who knows by demonstrative methods [*bi-al-ṭuruq al-burhânîyya*] the things that preserve health and remove sickness. Then this one [the allegorical exegete] goes out to the people and says to them: "These methods this physician has set down for you [. . .] have interpretations." Yet they do not understand [these interpretations] and thus come to no assent as to what to do because of them. (*Faṣl al-maqâl*, 27–28)[20]

To the "health" in the parable corresponds the perfection and happiness to which the prophet and lawgiver intends to lead all human beings to the extent they can attain it. To the "prescriptions" corresponds the divine Law. What Averroes means is that if the beliefs based on the literal sense of the divine Law are taken away from non-philosophers who do not understand the allegorical sense, because they lack the required intellectual abilities for understanding it, then these non-philosophers will fall into nihilism. For they will not follow the guidance of the lawgiver on account of its literal sense which has lost its authority for them, nor will they follow it on account of the allegorical sense, because they do not understand it. They loose, for instance, their belief in God as a king who rewards the obedient and punishes the disobedient. At the same time, they are unable to understand the notion of a first cause and how it relates to a virtuous life. Hence they loose both their belief in God and their belief in the value of a virtuous life. Again and again Averroes stresses that the allegorical sense of the divine Law is not to be made public. His sharp criticism of Muslim theologians who "strayed and led astray" is motivated above all by the fact that they "revealed their allegorical interpretation to the multitude [*saraḥû bi-ta'wîlihim li-l-jumhûr*]," i.e., did not respect the divisions due to the "difference in human nature."[21] The theologian must never go beyond the literal sense when he addresses non-philosophers. Like philosophy, the allegorical sense of scripture must remain concealed. As a consequence, philosophical doctrines may only be recorded in books that employ scientific demonstrations. For these, according to Averroes, are protected by their difficulty: books which "use demonstrations are accessible only to those who understand demonstrations" (*Faṣl al-maqâl*, 21). This, of course, is as true for Spinoza's *Ethics,* 450 years later, as it is for Averroes' commentaries on Aristotle.

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[20]For the metaphor of the physician, see also *Kitâb al-kashf*, Ar.181; Eng. 67.

[21]See *Faṣl al-maqâl*, 29–32; to have shown that allegorical interpretation is strictly reserved to philosophers is, according to *Kitâb al-kashf*, Ar. 132–133; Eng. 16–17, one of the main results of the *Faṣl al-maqâl*.

It should have become clear that Averroes' version of dogmatism is not exposed to the three objections which I outlined above. Firstly, the contradictions between theology and philosophy that Spinoza stresses in the third letter to Blyenbergh simply follow from the fact that the arguments of theology are based on the literal sense of scripture. This implies by no means that for Spinoza the allegorical sense of scripture does not agree with the doctrines demonstrated in philosophy. As we saw earlier, he expressly states their agreement, among other places in *Cogitata Metaphysica* 2.8 and in the first letter to Blyenbergh. Theology, according to Spinoza, "with good reason represented God as a perfect man," who "is affected by anger through the deeds of the impious and delights in those of the pious." For theology's purpose is not to determine God's existence and essence philosophically, but to convey through rhetorical-poetical means an idea of God to non-philosophers and to guide them to virtuous action. Also, the second objection does not hold. It is clear now why an Averroist would not attempt to resolve contradictions between philosophy and theology by composing an allegorical commentary on problematic passages in scripture as Maimonides did, for instance, with Biblical anthropomorphisms. Finally, Averroists would also not institute an exegetical tyranny of philosophers. On the contrary: The philosopher is prohibited from intervening in the beliefs of popular religion even if they are philosophically as untenable as the anthropomorphic representation of God.[22] Averroes recognizes, of course, a set of fundamental religious principles to which all members of the religious community must subscribe. They include, for example, God's existence and unity. But these exist in Spinoza's *religio catholica* as well. He clearly does not extend freedom of opinion and interpretation to the principles of the *religio catholica*.[23]

On one important issue, however, Spinoza and Averroes differ. As we saw in the passage from *Cogitata Metaphysica* 2.8, Spinoza takes it for granted that scripture must "teach the same things" that we "grasp in the most certain way through natural reason." Unlike Averroes, however, Spinoza does not infer from this that philosophers are obligated to find an allegorical interpretation for every apparent contradiction between philosophy and scripture. It seems that for Spinoza it is sufficient to assume that in principle philosophy and scripture agree. I will come back to this issue below.

Deviations between Spinoza's position and the position of the *Faṣl al-maqâl* in part are simply due to the fact that Spinoza did not read Averroes' treatise. For one thing, it was not part of the Latin reception of Averroes. It is precisely because Averroes' philosophical-theological works were not known to the Latin West that he came to be represented as a philosophical heretic and denier of religion.[24] One only needs to read the article on Averroes in Pierre Bayle's *Dictionnaire historique et critique* to see that this distorted view of Averroes remained alive in the Early

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[22]Cf. Stroumsa (2005), 20.

[23]Cf. *TTP* 14.

[24]Cf. Ivry (1988).

Modern period.[25] What I tried to characterize as Spinoza's Averroism has nothing in common with this tradition. It is, moreover, highly unlikely that Spinoza read the medieval Hebrew translation of the *Faṣl al-maqâl*.[26] No reference to it is found in Spinoza, nor is there any evidence that this translation was known in Jewish intellectual circles in the seventeenth century. We do know, on the other hand, that Spinoza owned a copy of the treatise *Behinat ha-dat* (Examination of Religion) by the Renaissance Averroist Elijah Delmedigo who made substantial use of the *Faṣl al-maqâl* to clarify the relationship between the Mosaic Law and philosophy.[27] As I suggested at the beginning, all parallels between Spinoza and Averroes that I pointed out can be explained on the assumption that Spinoza read Delmedigo's treatise. This assumption gains plausibility because other writings in the same volume containing Delmedigo's treatise left traces in Spinoza's work. It gains additional plausibility because the contradiction between philosophy and theology discussed in one of the three passages in Spinoza's early writings mentioned above corresponds precisely to the only example for such contradictions given by Delmedigo: the contradiction concerning the understanding of angels.[28] Finally, I will show below that where Delmedigo deviates from the orthodox Averroist position, Spinoza is clearly closer to Delmedigo than to Averroes.

In a paper published in 1922 Leon Roth documented the traces in Spinoza's work left by the volume containing Delmedigo's treatise. In the same paper he also drew attention to the importance of Delmedigo for understanding Spinoza. Roth's suggestion has not been pursued further by Spinoza scholars. In my view he not only misunderstood Delmedigo, but also misrepresented his influence on Spinoza:

> It is perhaps hardly necessary to point out how closely this [i.e., Delmedigo's position] is reproduced in the *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus*. The professed aim of the *Tractatus* is to refute the view of Maimonides that philosophy and theology are identical, and the crucial chapter to which all the earlier chapters are preliminary [i.e., chapter 15] sums up the discussion in the very words of the *Examination of Religion*. [...] The definite sundering of the spheres of theology and philosophy to the establishment of which [...] the *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus* is specifically devoted, is one of the landmarks in the history of political freedom as well as of intellectual development. [...] We now see that the very phraseology of its main thesis is to be found in the obscure Hebrew essay of R. Elijah. (Roth 1922, 58.)

A close reading of the *Behinat ha-dat* does not confirm Roth's thesis. As I understand Delmedigo he assumed, like Averroes, that religion and doctrines demonstrated in philosophy cannot contradict each other. This interpretation is, however, controversial among Delmedigo scholars, and I will briefly discuss the matter below. It is, by contrast, uncontroversial, that if Delmedigo allows for contradictions between religion and philosophy, the former always overrides the latter.

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[25]See *Dictionnaire*, 384–391.

[26]For the Hebrew translation, see N. Golb (1956–57).

[27]See already Hübsch (1882–83). Cf. Ivry (1983) and Motzkin (1987). For scholars who claim that Delmedigo is closer to Latin Averroists than to Averroes, see below, n. 34.

[28]See *Cogitata Metaphysica* 2.12 and *Behinat ha-dat*, 93.

Both positions are incompatible with Spinoza's stance in the *TTP*. Let me now briefly examine how Delmedigo appropriates the fundamental assumptions of the *Faṣl al-maqâl*:

> And we say that adherents of religion who are correct in their views do not doubt that the purpose of the Law of Moses is to guide us in human affairs and in good deeds, as well as in true opinions insofar as this is possible for the entire people and according to the nature of the select few [*ha-yehidim*] with respect to what is their exclusive domain. Hence the Law of Moses and the prophets set down certain fundamental principles by way of tradition and by way of rhetorical and dialectical explanations in accordance with the method of assent [*mishpat ha-'immut*] that is characteristic of the multitude, and it [the Law of Moses] stirred the select few to investigate according to the method of assent characteristic of them concerning these issues [i.e., the demonstrative method]. [...] And the following becomes clear [. . .]: that the Law of Moses aims at the perfection of every adherent of religion insofar as possible to him. And since demonstrative science is impossible for the multitude as a whole, while it is possible for the select few—for this reason the Law of Moses requires both these things [i.e., assent on the basis of rhetorical and dialectical arguments and assent on the basis of demonstrative arguments]. (*Behinat ha-dat*, 76)

As in Averroes, the methods used by the Law of Moses for the guidance of non-philosophers—e.g. rhetorical and dialectical arguments—lead to contradictions with the teachings of philosophy. Delmedigo stresses from the outset that methods vary significantly from one discipline to another. The same Biblical text, for example, will be studied in different ways by a Talmudist whose goal is to arrive at a legal decision, by a grammarian whose goal is to provide evidence for a grammatical rule, and by an exegete whose goal is to clarify the text's meaning. The inference Delmedigo wants the reader to draw is clear: a prophet whose goal is to maximize the perfection of the religious community will speak differently about things like God, angels, or providence than a philosopher whose goal is to establish what is true and false.[29] While the prophet's methods are poetical, rhetorical, and dialectical, the philosopher uses scientific demonstrations. These goal-dependent differences in method can, but must not, lead to contradictions.[30] There is, for instance, no contradiction between prophetic and philosophical statements concerning God's existence and unity.[31] For the prophet, however, the scope of true opinions which he can communicate and the quality of the proofs on which he can ground them are limited by his overall goal: to establish the moral, political, and intellectual conditions for perfection in a community made up of philosophers and non-philosophers. If the goal-dependent differences in method give rise to contradictions, Delmedigo argues, one way of resolving them is through allegorical exegesis. There are cases, he argues, in which "a thing has an interpretation reserved to the select few"

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[29] On the goal of the Mosaic Law, see *Behinat ha-dat*, 75–76; on the difference between the Mosaic Law and philosophy with respect to method, see in particular 92–94.

[30] Strictly speaking, these are different methods belonging to the same discipline, i.e., logic. On the inclusion of the *Rhetoric* and *Poetics* into Aristotle's *Organon* and its philosophical implications, see Black (1990). Delmedigo (*Behinat ha-dat*, 75) briefly refers to the different methods of "logic" (*ha-limmud ha-kolel*).

[31] See *Behinat ha-dat*, 76–78.

(*Behinat ha-dat*, 77). One such case concerns angels: for philosophers they are entities "assumed to be separate from any body and corporeal attribute." In other words: they are the incorporeal intelligences of the supralunar world as conceived by medieval Aristotelians. In the Bible, by contrast, angels are described as entities "apprehended through sense-perception as we apprehend bodies" (*Behinat ha-dat*, 93). This, of course, is a concession to non-philosophers who are not familiar with the physical and metaphysical proofs for the existence and the attributes of incorporeal intelligences. If the prophet arrives at the conclusion that in order to attain his overall goal it is required to convey a notion of angels to non-philosophers, he must present them within a conceptual framework that his audience can understand. Like Averroes, Delmedigo harshly criticizes the disclosing of such allegorical interpretations in public:

> Many of those who philosophize among the people of our nation have in my opinion strayed from the method of the Law of Moses and its intention. And this is because they sought to change all the literal meanings of the verses [*peshate ha-pesuqim*] which are [found] in most of the branches and stories of the Law of Moses, as if they wished to make the words of the Mosaic Law more beautiful and to ground them on the meanings [inferred by] scientific syllogism [*ha-heqqesh ha-sikhly*]. And they did not succeed in either this or that [. . .], and I think that this should not be done at all. [. . .] My method, therefore, is very different from the method of many who philosophize in our nation. They changed the goal both of the Mosaic Law and of philosophy and mixed the two [kinds] of investigation—the theological and the speculative [*ha-torani ve-ha-ʿiyyuni*]—together, as well as the universal and the specific method [*ha-derekh ha-kolel ve-ha-miyyuhad*]. And they are like intermediaries between the theologians [*ha-medabberim*] among the religious people and the philosophers. (*Behinat ha-dat*, 93–94.)

Delmedigo explicitly mentions Maimonides in this context as someone who "walked on the way" that he has criticized (*Behinat ha-dat*, 84). As I mentioned above, Delmedigo attaches great importance to the fact that prophecy and philosophy each have their own goal and as a consequence use different methods to attain it. While the method of the philosopher is "universal"—establishing what is true and false on the basis of scientific demonstrations which are valid always and everywhere—the method of the prophet is "specific"—establishing the moral, political, and intellectual conditions for human perfection in a religious community shaped by a particular set of geographic and cultural circumstances. If according to the prophet circumstances require presenting angels to non-philosophers in corporeal terms, the purpose of doing so would be undermined if a philosopher disclosed in public that, correctly understood, this account refers to incorporeal intelligences. The philosopher would be disregarding the political considerations that led to the allegory in the first place.[32] Like Averroes in the analogy between the lawgiver and

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[32] According to Delmedigo, the disclosure of the allegorical interpretation of angels led to conflict and strife between philosophers and kabbalists in the Jewish community (see Delmedigo, *Behinat ha-dat*, 93–94). His account of the conflict is clearly modelled on Averroes' description of the emergence of factions in Islam as a consequence of the disclosure of allegorical interpretations. See *Faṣl al-maqâl*, 29–32.

the doctor that we saw above, Delmedigo stresses the danger inherent in disclosing the allegorical content to non-philosophers:

> When we tell these deep things [*'eleh ha-'amuqot*] as they truly are to the multitude, we do not benefit them, for they do not understand them, but we cause them great damage. (*Behinat ha-dat,* 96)[33]

It would, therefore, be clearly a mistake to publicly interpret verses in the Law of Moses which conflict with doctrines demonstrated in philosophy. To quote once more Spinoza's third letter to Blyenbergh: theology presented God anthropomorphically "with good reason." In order to undermine this "good reason" the scientific examination of God must be confined to philosophical treatises. This does not, however, mean that contradictions cannot *in principle* be resolved through allegorical interpretation. At no point does Delmedigo question the truth of the Mosaic Law.

Until now I have portrayed Delmedigo as an orthodox Averroist. This portrait, however, requires two modifications. Firstly, there is the view, persistently reiterated in the scholarly literature, that Delmedigo, in contrast to the historical Averroes, was not committed to the "identity of religious and scientific truth," but "obviously" adopted the theory of double truth that allegedly was set forth by Christian Averroists.[34] I have shown elsewhere why this interpretation of Delmedigo is implausible.[35] For my present purpose a brief summary of my argument must suffice.[36] The case Delmedigo considers is the conflict between two positions of which neither can be conclusively demonstrated. In this case the philosopher will choose the side which is *most likely* in light of the available evidence. Since the available evidence may change as a consequence of scientific progress, the position that was less likely at one point may become more likely at another. If such a conflict occurs between a position advocated in philosophy and a fundamental principle of the Mosaic Law, it cannot be resolved on scientific grounds—assuming, of course, that the philosophical position was established by sound scientific methods. It can also not be resolved on exegetical grounds, because fundamental principles are not open to interpretation: they are necessary conditions for achieving the purpose of the Law of Moses. Since in his scientific investigations a Jewish philosopher must rely on sound scientific methods, he is led to adopt the philosophical position. On the dogmatic assumption that the Law of Moses is true, he will at the same time remain convinced that once *all* evidence becomes available, the position of the Law of Moses will be vindicated. Philosophical and religious commitments thus can be at variance *temporarily* on account of the contingent state of scientific knowledge. *Absolutely* speaking, however, they must be in agreement. It is true that Averroes did not consider such a case. Delmedigo's model here is most

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[33] Note that this passage comes in the context of Delmedigo's discussion of rabbinic *aggadot*.

[34] This interpretation was first proposed by Julius Guttmann in a critical response to Hübsch (see above, n. 27). The quotation is from Guttmann (1927), 197–198. It was reiterated by Geffen (1973–74) and Ross (1984), 48–54; Ross's assessment is the most differentiated to date.

[35] See Fraenkel (forthcoming).

[36] What follows is my understanding of Delmedigo's position set forth in *Behinat ha-dat*, 77–85.

likely Maimonides' account of the conflict between the Mosaic Law and Arabic Aristotelians on the question whether the world is created or eternal.[37] But none of this supports the claim that Delmedigo abandoned the fundamental assumption of dogmatism concerning the "identity of religious and scientific truth."

More interesting for my present purpose is the second point on which Delmedigo deviates from the orthodox Averroist position. In the *Faṣl al maqâl*, Averroes not only assumes that every contradiction between the divine Law and philosophy can *in principle* be resolved through allegorical interpretation, but that the philosopher *is obligated* to resolve contradictions in this manner.[38] But what is the benefit derived from doing so given the strict prohibition to disclose allegorical interpretations? Why is it not sufficient if the philosopher is in principle committed to the agreement between the divine Law and philosophy? While Delmedigo allows for allegorically resolving contradictions as long as they are not contradictions of the type just outlined, he is clearly not enthusiastic about doing so. Carrying out such interpretations is, as it were, useless and, in addition, dangerous if the interpretations are disclosed in public. The best way of studying the propositions of the Mosaic Law is in light of the Law's own peculiar methods and purpose. The aim then would be to understand how these propositions contribute to maximizing the perfection of the religious community. Instead of working out how the anthropomorphic representation of angels, for instance, allegorically refers to incorporeal intelligences, the question becomes which political considerations motivated Moses to represent angels in such a way. Seeking the allegorical content of the Mosaic Law would mean to study it in view of establishing the truth which is the goal of philosophy. This would be as pointless as making poetical, rhetorical, or dialectical arguments in a philosophical treatise in view to communicating its content to non-philosophers, which is the goal of prophecy. Concerning miracles, for instance, Delmedigo explicitly questions the purpose of changing the literal meaning of the Mosaic Law, since both philosophers and non-philosophers accept them, even though they understand them in different ways. It is thus not surprising that he implicitly casts doubt on the philosopher's obligation to provide allegorical explanations. The philosopher should "perhaps" (*'ulay*) interpret such passages in scripture that, taken literally, contradict doctrines demonstrated in philosophy (*Behinat ha-dat*, 93). Delmedigo thus puts more stress than Averroes on the methodological autonomy of philosophical and prophetic discourse. But this does not mean that he is less committed to the fundamental assumption of dogmatism concerning the agreement of philosophy and religion.

As I already suggested, Delmedigo's deviation from the orthodox Averroist position supports my claim that he is the source of what I described as Spinoza's Averroism. For already in his early writings Spinoza goes one step further than

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[37] See in particular *Guide* 2.13–25. For the concept of scientific progress, see in particular 2.19 and 2.24. For considerations of probability, see 2.23. Note that Delmedigo is critical of Maimonides' attempt to settle the matter through scientific arguments.

[38] See *Faṣl al-maqâl,* 9–10 and 19–20.

Delmedigo: he drops the obligation to provide allegorical interpretations altogether. Recall once again the passage from *Cogitata Metaphysica* 2.8: "here we only inquire into the things which we can grasp in the most certain way through natural reason; and it is sufficient that we demonstrate these clearly in order to know that scripture must also teach the same things." Thus in order to ground the authority of scripture dogmatically Spinoza considers it sufficient to assume that its allegorical content can in principle not contradict what is clearly demonstrated by natural reason. There is no need to actually seek for the allegorical content. Finally, the position advocated in the *TTP* in one sense can be understood as a further radicalization of the methodological autonomy of philosophy and religion assumed in the Averroistic tradition. In another sense, however, Spinoza in the *TTP* breaks with the fundamental premise that underlies the dogmatism not only of al-Fârâbî, Maimonides, Averroes, and Delmedigo, but also of his own early writings: that "the truth does not contradict the truth."

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