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1

## Trouble in Voorburg

THE TOWN of Voorburg, in the province of South Holland, is today a suburb within the urban sprawl of The Hague, the seat of government of the Kingdom of the Netherlands. In the seventeenth century, during the Republic, it was—along with Rijswijk, Stompwijk, and Wassenaar—merely one of several small villages surrounding the larger town. The center of Voorburg consisted of no more than half a dozen short streets of tightly packed houses around a central square. One could easily walk the three kilometers from the village church to the Huis ten Bosch, the stately summer residence of Holland's stadtholder (and national leader), built by the Prince of Orange, Frederik Hendrik, and his wife Amalia van Solms. A few kilometers more would take you to the dunes on the North Sea.

In the spring of 1663, Spinoza decamped from the village of Rijnsburg, near the university town of Leiden and where he had been living since at least 1661 after moving from Amsterdam, to Voorburg. He rented rooms from the master painter Daniel Tydeman and his wife Margarita Karels. The house was on a street called Kerklaan, just around the corner from the Oude Kerke (Old Church, also called St. Martin's Church). One

contemporary, not a fan, says that Spinoza made the move in order to spread his pernicious ideas more widely:

[Spinoza] made it his task to sow his perverse seed clandestinely, for which reason he left Rijnsburg for Voorburg, and finally moved to The Hague, possibly thinking that he would find more scope there among the frivolous youth and other men of the world who are often much more inclined towards such evil, for his diabolical *politica* and other atheistic ideas.<sup>1</sup>

A more sympathetic early biographer, however, reports that the likely reason for Spinoza's relocation was that "he believed that it would be more peaceful there."<sup>2</sup> Moreover, we are told by another contemporary writer that Spinoza had "a great many friends" in The Hague, and during his years in Voorburg he acquired a circle of admirers there—much as he had done in Amsterdam.<sup>3</sup> One of those friends in The Hague, the scientist Christiaan Huygens, had a family estate (named Hofwijk) in the vicinity of Voorburg, which his father, Constantijn Huygens—secretary to Frederik Hendrik and a close friend of Descartes—called "a village that knows no equal."<sup>4</sup>

In the end, life in Voorburg turned out to be not as peaceful as Spinoza had hoped. His neighbors were gossiping. Word on the street was that there was an atheist living among them. Worse, he was sticking his nose into local church affairs.

Around two years after Spinoza settled in Tydeman's house, a dispute was raging in Voorburg over who would replace the village's retiring preacher. On one side were the hard-line Calvinist supporters of a conservative candidate, Eduardus Westerney; on the other side were the more liberal members of the consistory, who were promoting a younger, less rigidly orthodox candidate named Van der Wiele. With a majority of

the village's church members behind him, Westerneyne was eventually appointed. Spinoza's landlord, a man with dissident Reformed sympathies, was on the losing side. His liberal faction, moreover, had earlier lodged a complaint with the Delft municipal government, within whose bailiwick Voorburg lay, about underhanded maneuvers within the Voorburg consistory during the selection process. In turn, the leaders of the conservatives, taking exception to the liberals' remonstrance, claimed that the liberals' protest had been composed by Tydeman's lodger, whom they regarded as an outside meddler. In the conservatives' own complaint, they told the Delft church leaders that

the aforementioned Daniel Tydeman has, in his rented house [i.e., in the rented part of his house], living with him an A[msterdammer?] Spinosa, born to Jewish parents, now being (so it is said) an atheist or someone who mocks all religions, and after all [is] a harmful presence in this republic, as many learned men and preachers . . . and those who know [Spinoza] can attest.<sup>5</sup>

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Gijsbert Voet was arguably the most zealous atheist hunter of the seventeenth century. Better known by the Latinized form of his name, Voetius was a firebrand pastor, orthodox Reformed theologian, and, for a time, rector of the University of Utrecht. In the 1640s, he and his minions hounded Descartes for promoting an "atheistic" philosophy. Descartes's arguments for God's existence were so bad, they argued, that he must have crafted them intentionally to convince readers that God did *not*

exist. Even after Descartes's death in 1650, the Voetians kept the pressure on Descartes's philosophical followers (known as "Cartesians") and political fellow travelers and did what they could to ensure that their Calvinist republic was no haven for religious deviants, unbelievers, and libertines.

Voetius knew an atheist when he saw one. But he also took the theoretical trouble to examine, at great length, the nature of atheism and its varieties, all the better to alert his disciples to the multiple dangers in the land. In a 1648 publication of a collection of his disputations, he included one titled *De Atheismo* (On Atheism).

Voetius notes in that long essay that atheism is a charge that covers a wide spectrum of views. It has, in effect, a broad and "calumnious" meaning and thus serves well as a way of attacking (or slandering) someone's religious views, whatever they might happen to be. In general, he says, "we understand here an atheist in truth to be someone who removes knowledge, faith and worship of God, directly or indirectly, from himself or from others."<sup>6</sup> But the varieties of atheists are many, depending on just how they go about undermining that faith and worship.

Atheists . . . are variously called foolish [*stultus*] or stupid . . . or wicked . . . or ignorant. . . . By the vulgar they are called Epicureans . . . Libertines . . . Cyclopians, because, like the Cyclops they have no piety or honesty. . . . These days in France they are called Deists, [here quoting the French minim priest Marin Mersenne] *because they claim for themselves some knowledge of the deity, but deny his providence and justice*, and, we might add, [they deny] the immortality of the soul and eternal punishment after this life. . . . Socinians conspire with this atheism of the Deists.<sup>7</sup>

A reliable sign or indicator that someone is an atheist is that they

deny or at least on every given occasion put into doubt supernatural things, miracles like prophecies, the apparitions and operations of spirits; and when they are unable to turn away from the light of facts, they relate everything to natural forces, antipathies and sympathies, to the fictitious natures and peculiar temperaments of men, to the powers of the human intellect, or to imagination.<sup>8</sup>

The different species of atheists can actually be ranked hierarchically in their menace. The first division is between atheists “in the proper sense” and atheists “by participation.” The latter include someone who, “by counsel, permission, command or some other way, promotes atheism by becoming a participant in someone else’s sin”—for example, by encouraging idolatry even if not an idolator himself. The former, that is, atheism proper,

is understood either directly or indirectly, that is, by implication [*seu interpretativus*]. It is direct when someone tries, as much as he can, to extinguish every knowledge, feeling and faith in God in his heart. . . . This is the highest and most perfect grade of atheism. . . . It is indirect when every knowledge and feeling of God is overturned as a necessary consequence [of something they believe].<sup>9</sup>

On the question of “whether there are atheists, that is, people who believe that there is no God,” Voetius grants that “no one doubts that there are atheists.” But he does not believe that there are in fact any real direct atheists, or that it is even possible to be one. He allows that there are people who will *say* that they believe there is no God. But he denies there is anyone who truly

does not have the belief in God. Every human being comes into the world knowing God. “For that inborn natural theology is no more absent from a man than a rational intellect.”<sup>10</sup> Such a direct atheist “would be without natural law or natural conscience, which is absurd. For experience teaches that that law clearly cannot be destroyed from human minds.”<sup>11</sup>

Thus, the atheists among us are restricted to the indirect kind, that is, those whose beliefs or behaviors *imply* a denial of the true God. These indirect atheists come in two types: speculative or theoretical atheists and practical atheists. “There can be and are practical atheists, who do not worship God. . . . And interpretative or indirect speculative atheists, who, because they attribute or deny to God such things that, as a necessary and proximate consequence, are contrary to the natural light, deny God.”<sup>12</sup>

Practical atheists speak or behave as if there is no God or they do not care whether there is a God. They live dissolute and immoral lives, do not engage in any kind of worship, and mock the pious behavior of others.

Practical is either (1) when someone, by his own confession, denies as useless or neglects the concern for piety and even its external exercise. These are especially called Deists, Epicureans, Lucians, Libertines, and Profane people; . . . or (2) when someone denies or neglects the confession or external exercise of the true religion, although he professes some religion. And so all Ethnics [*Ethnici*] are called Atheists. In almost the same way Mohammedans, Jews, and those sectarians among Christians, whether ancient or new, who come close to those apostates. Or (3) when someone not so much in feeling or confession as in life, morals, and action [*praxi*] denies religion and God. . . . To this class belong

those who are neutral or indifferent to any reception or profession of religion and who use religion as money, they agree, they deny, they pretend, they dissimulate.<sup>13</sup>

Among these practical atheists Voetius includes the “disciples of Machiavelli.”

By contrast, theoretical atheism is a matter of conscience. Indirect theoretical atheists hold beliefs that, while not explicit denials of God’s existence—for then they would be direct theoretical atheists—imply that there is no God; or, at least, not Voetius’s Christian God. The theoretical atheist,

by a true and solid consequence, denies God and destroys divinity. This again is twofold, either primarily or secondarily. It is primary when the consequence [the implied denial of God] is immediate, for example, if someone denies all providence of God, he as a proximate and immediate consequence denies God. Similarly if someone should deny that God is just, free of all sin, etc. Thus Epicureans are often called atheists . . . [also] if someone should deny the divinity of Scripture with the ethnics and with other foreigners, or put it in doubt with the Popes, or if he should deny the certainty of the natural light, which after Scripture is the principle of all knowledge of things, whether divine or human, as do the ancient and recent Sceptics. . . . It is secondary when, by the natural light, the consequence is certain but not so close and obvious.<sup>14</sup>

Further divisions among theoretical atheists are warranted depending upon whether the atheist’s opinion is displayed “externally”—for example, “denying God by disputation, maliciously and contrary to their own sense”—or remains “internal,” as a matter of ignorance, doubt, opinion, or certitude.<sup>15</sup>

For the record, Voetius would no doubt have classified Spinoza, with his denial of divine providence and his views on the human origins of Scripture, as at least an indirect theoretical atheist of the primary *and* secondary sorts. He would have had much to say about the excommunicated Jew's manner of living as well, thus compounding the atheism. As it is, however, our heretic hunter never had the opportunity to read the *Ethics*—he died the year before it was published in the *Opera Posthuma*. Nor, unfortunately, did he have anything to say about the *Theological-Political Treatise*. He was an old man of eighty when the scandalous work appeared in 1670, and had other worries on his mind, including the French occupation of Utrecht and the closure of his Protestant university.<sup>16</sup>

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As Voetius's classification shows, in the early modern period the term 'atheist' was a notoriously ambiguous label. It could mean precisely what it means today: someone who denies the existence of God altogether (Voetius's atheist "in the proper sense"). As the seventeenth-century theologian Johann Amos Comenius put it, an atheist "has no God at all [*n'a point de Dieu*]."<sup>17</sup> But it also had a broader, less easily defined, even rhetorical meaning. Much as 'communist' was (and still is) used in the United States by those on the political right to cast aspersions on their more liberal opponents, regardless of what their actual principles or party commitments were, so the term 'atheist' in the seventeenth century was an all-purpose epithet for smearing those whose religious beliefs or practices did not line up neatly with those of the dominant faith (or perhaps of the accuser's preferred faith). It was a convenient personal,

spiritual, and philosophical slur more than anything else, one whose meaning was relative to the religious, political, or national context in which it was lobbed.<sup>18</sup> As the Spinoza scholar Edwin Curley writes, “‘atheist’ in this period was often a general term applied, not just to those who deny the existence of God (or of any other divine beings), but to anyone who did not accept the basic propositions on which Christians and Jews agreed.”<sup>19</sup> Another historian of philosophy, Gianluca Mori, claims that in the early modern era, “accusations of atheism were almost universal. There was hardly a single seventeenth- or eighteenth-century philosopher, no matter how closely identified with Christianity, who was not accused at some point or another of being an atheist.”<sup>20</sup> Not only Descartes, but also Bayle, Leibniz, John Locke, Nicolas Malebranche (a Catholic priest!), and many others were all attacked by their religious or intellectual opponents as either explicitly adopting atheistic views or propounding doctrines that could not but lead to atheism.

A thinker could be deemed an atheist for holding any number of philosophical or theological positions. A fideist who took a skeptical attitude toward rational proofs for God’s existence; a reformer or rebel who, though a person of deep faith, composed anticlerical polemical tracts; a Deist who argued that God, having created the world, removed himself from providentially governing its affairs; a philosopher who happened to favor the wrong set of divine attributes—any opinion deemed “unorthodox” by the local, national, or international ecclesiastical establishment was sufficient to secure the charge of atheism. In some circumstances, even favoring the wrong political party or living a libertine life of lax morality made one an “atheist” in the eyes of vigilant contemporaries. To the leaders of the Dutch

Reformed Church, Mennonites, Anabaptists, and Quakers were atheists because they rejected conventional modes of worship; and to Catholics and mainstream Protestants alike, Socinians were atheists because they denied the divinity of Jesus.

All of this, of course, makes it extremely difficult to know what precisely was meant in the seventeenth century when someone was either called an “atheist” or denied being an atheist.<sup>21</sup> Mori suggests, quite usefully, that for the purpose of understanding the various currents of unbelief in the early modern period, we restrict the term ‘atheism’ to any philosophical position that explicitly or by implication “denies the existence of a first cause of the universe endowed with supreme intelligence, freedom and design.”<sup>22</sup> An atheist, that is, may allow that there is an eternal, infinite, necessary first cause or principle of things but rejects the notion that this first cause is a thinking agent, a kind of person, such as the providential God of the major Abrahamic religions is typically portrayed in the Hebrew Bible and other sacred texts.

This will do as a good working definition of the “right” kind of God that seventeenth-century thinkers had in mind when, on the lookout for atheists, they actually dropped sectarian religious polemics and attended to theology proper. Whether they accepted that personal, providential God or rejected it, early modern thinkers seem to have shared a common understanding of the Abrahamic deity as a transcendent creator endowed with intellect, (free) will, purpose, and emotion; a kind of sovereign who is lawgiver and judge, jealous and merciful, angry and forgiving. Leibniz, for one, says in an unpublished juridical text that “an atheist is he who does not acknowledge a wise and powerful governor rewarding the good and punishing the wicked after death.”<sup>23</sup> One of his occasional antagonists, the Benedictine theologian and Cartesian philosopher François

Lamy, insists in his anti-Spinozist *Le nouvel athéisme renversé* (The New Atheism Reversed) that

the idea of the true God that nature and reason gives us is that of an infinitely intelligent, infinitely wise, infinitely free and infinitely powerful being. A being who knows everything, who produces and conserves everything with full liberty, a being who governs everything, who cares for everything, who presides over everything—both the movements of bodies and those of minds—who regulates everything with so much wisdom and power, who prescribes to each being the end which is proper to it and which gives them the means to achieve it . . . who sees into hearts and the most hidden folds, a being who loves order, equity and righteousness, who is averse to disorder, injustice and sin. A being, finally, who examines everything, who judges everything, whom nothing escapes.<sup>24</sup>

Leibniz, Lamy, and others were interested not so much in Voetius's "practical" atheists—those who live and converse with others as if there is no God—as in his "theoretical or speculative" atheists, and these especially of the *direct* variety: those who positively deny, in their hearts and minds, not to mention in their writings, that there is such a Biblical or Abrahamic deity. While the Utrecht theologian did not believe that there really are any such atheists "in the proper sense," many of his contemporaries were less confident about this. After all, Lamy's target was Spinoza himself.

While Spinoza did not like the label, he would not—or at least should not—have argued with this general definition of atheism as an accurate characterization of his account of God. It certainly captures at least the negative or polemical side of his metaphysics of *Deus*. He says in the *Ethics* that

by God's power ordinary people understand God's free will and his right over all things which are, things which on that account are commonly called contingent. For they say that God has the power of destroying all things and reducing them to nothing. Further, they very often compare God's power with the power of kings. But we have refuted this.

The problem, he notes, is that "ordinary people conceive God as a man, or like a man."<sup>25</sup>

There is much more to be said about Spinoza's God. What is clear enough for now is that if Voetius had lived just a year or two longer and had a chance to read Spinoza's *Ethics*, he might finally have had to grant that he had found his *direct* theoretical atheist, someone who explicitly (and sincerely) denies the providential Abrahamic God.<sup>26</sup>

However, the definition of atheism as the rejection of a personal and providential God who acts with moral agency that fueled much of the opposition to Spinoza's God in the seventeenth century needs further refinement. As it stands, it is too broad. It not only covers Deism but also implies that the pantheist or panentheist who rejects the notion of a transcendent, personal God yet insists that "God is in everything and everything is in God"—who accepts that there truly is a divinity worthy of the name—is an atheist, and these are conclusions that, for philosophical if not historical reasons, we should avoid. As one scholar puts it, atheism in the strict sense involves "the absence of belief in any god or Gods, not just the absence of belief in a personal theistic God."<sup>27</sup> Seventeenth-century thinkers, many of whom distinguished Deism from true atheism, acknowledged that one could in fact go so far as to reject anything recognizable as a God or divinity, Abrahamic or otherwise. As a pair of seventeenth-century *dictionnaires* define the term, an

atheist is “someone who does not believe in God” or “someone who denies the Divine [*la Divinité*], does not believe in God, nor in his Providence, who has no religion at all, true or false.”<sup>28</sup> For Spinoza’s contemporaries, the atheist—the authentic and explicit unbeliever—was not just an imaginary bogeyman.

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What were the grounds for the charge by Spinoza’s Voorburg neighbors in 1665 that their resident philosopher and (former) Jew was “an atheist”? (How, I want to ask, did they know?) It is possible, given the ambiguity of the label, that all that the good citizens of Voorburg meant in spreading the word that Spinoza was an atheist was simply that his religious beliefs and habits, whatever they might have been—or might *not* have been—and whatever people might have known about them, were clearly not their own. (After all, he was raised Jewish, not Reformed.) Did he seem the odd person out, someone with daily routines that the community found offensive? Did he avoid joining his neighbors in church? Or did Spinoza go further and actually do or say things to offend them? Was he overheard saying something disrespectful of Christianity, or organized religion in general? Could he have been claiming that the God of his neighbors was a superstitious fiction (thus their charge that he was “someone who mocked all religions”)? Not likely. Throughout most of his adult life Spinoza generally tried to keep a low profile. He certainly was not someone given to mocking other peoples’ religious faith, at least not in his personal relations with them. We know, too, that he occasionally enjoyed attending church services, eager to hear the sermons; this was something he did when he was later living in The Hague—when he told his landlord’s family “not to miss any

sermon” of the local Lutheran preacher—and he may have taken up the habit already in Voorburg.<sup>29</sup>

What about Spinoza’s writings? Could these have been the basis of their suspicions? The only thing he had published at this point was a summary of Descartes’s philosophy, accompanied by his own “Metaphysical Thoughts.” The *Renati Des Cartes Principiorum Philosophiae Pars I & II More Geometrico Demonstratae* (Parts I and II of René Descartes’s *Principles of Philosophy, Demonstrated by the Geometric Method*), which Spinoza composed as part of his lessons on Cartesian philosophy for a pupil from the nearby University of Leiden, appeared in 1663. Cartesianism was highly controversial in the Dutch Republic, especially among ecclesiastics and in the university faculties. Descartes’s theological critics called his philosophy “atheistic,” despite the fact that God plays an essential metaphysical, epistemological, and even scientific role in his writings.<sup>30</sup> After all, the centerpiece of his popular *Meditations on First Philosophy* (1640) is a proof of the existence of God and a demonstration that this all-powerful, perfect, and nondeceiving God is his—Descartes’s—creator; therefore, he has no reason not to trust his God-given rational faculties when he uses them properly. In the scientific parts of his textbook *Principles of Philosophy* (1644), he deduces the most general laws of nature a priori from a consideration of the attributes of the creator of matter and motion, God.

This is very much the God that we find in Spinoza’s generally faithful “geometrical” presentation of these parts of Descartes’s *Principles*. Curious readers would no doubt have wanted to know whether Spinoza shared Descartes’s theology. While they would be in for a rude awakening when, in the 1670s, they got around to reading Spinoza’s own mature

treatises, in the exposition of the *Principles* they would not have found much of anything about God that was not already proposed by the great French philosopher himself. After the definition of God as “the substance which we understand to be through itself supremely perfect and in which we conceive nothing which involves any defect or limitation of perfection,” and establishing that “we cannot be absolutely certain of anything, except our own existence, so long as we have no clear concept of God that makes us affirm that he is supremely veracious,” there follows a series of demonstrations of God’s necessary existence, uniqueness, omnipotence, and goodness. Spinoza also reviews Descartes’s proofs that God is the conserving cause of all things he has created. Though he occasionally supplements Descartes’s text with alternative demonstrations, there is nothing here of (divine) substance that, as his friend Lodewijk Meijer says in his preface to the work, departs much from the original.

To be sure, the God of Descartes’s metaphysical physics is not a God that the preachers of the Dutch Reformed Church would have recognized as their own; it is, as we shall see, what some opponents of Cartesianism called a “philosophical God.” But writing an expansive, not entirely uncritical exposition of Descartes’s main philosophical and scientific ideas, while not something that the local church council would recommend one do, was hardly a scandalous enterprise that, by itself, would draw the accusation of atheism. Bayle himself says that in that work Spinoza is “as orthodox on the nature of God as M[onsieur] Descartes.” Though Bayle being Bayle, he probably means this sarcastically, as if to say: Spinoza’s God is no closer to the God of Christian theologians than is Descartes’s deity. However, Bayle adds, “it must be known that [Spinoza] does

not thus speak according to his own persuasion,”<sup>31</sup> something that Meijer also makes perfectly clear in his preface.

Our author has only set out the opinions of Descartes and their demonstrations, insofar as these are found in his writings, or are such as ought to be deduced validly from the foundations he laid. For since he had promised to teach his pupil Descartes’s philosophy, he considered himself obliged not to depart a hair’s breadth from Descartes’s opinion, nor to dictate to him anything that either would not correspond to his doctrines or would be contrary to them. So let no one think that he is teaching here either his own opinions or only those of which he approves.

Meijer warns us that “though he [Spinoza] judges that some of the doctrines are true, and admits that he has added some of his own, nevertheless there are many that he rejects as false, and concerning which he holds quite a different opinion.”<sup>32</sup> Thus, a contemporary reader offended by Descartes’s philosophy should not have assumed that this was, in all respects, necessarily Spinoza’s philosophy.

We are on different terrain with the *Cogitata Metaphysica* (Metaphysical Thoughts) that were published as an appendix to the main work. Much of this essay represents Spinoza’s own ideas on such abstract topics as existence, essence, eternity, necessity, time, and, above all, the nature of God and the human soul. Things start out in much the same way as they do in the summary of Descartes’s *Principles*. God is endowed with omnipotence and omniscience, he is the sustaining cause of all things (both their essences and their existence), and he acts with “absolute freedom of the will.”<sup>33</sup> God is also apparently a providential being. “Whatever happens, happens by the power

of God's decree and will," and God "acts to the advantage of all."<sup>34</sup> Spinoza also seems to allow in the "Metaphysical Thoughts" both that miracles are possible, "when [God] does something beyond the order of nature . . . such as the speaking of an ass, the appearance of angels, etc.," and that the human soul is immortal.<sup>35</sup> (Spinoza would quite soon abandon these points about divine freedom and providence and the immortality of the soul, if in 1663 they were indeed his own opinions.)

So far there is nothing here that should be of major concern to (most) theologians. Other features of the "Metaphysical Thoughts," however, are much more problematic. For one thing, a careless reader might easily take Spinoza to be claiming that God is material or a body when he says that "all the perfections of extension are in God" and that "there is some attribute in God which contains all the perfections of matter in a more excellent way," though he immediately clarifies that this does not mean that extension itself is "formally" in God, that God *is* literally extended and occupies space like bodies do.<sup>36</sup> Less easily resolved is the fact that, though Spinoza says that God acts with freedom of the will, he also claims that God could not have done differently than as he did, and consequently "a necessity of existing has been in all created things from eternity." This would appear to in fact undermine the freedom and contingency of God's creation. "Nor can we say that those things are contingent because God could have decreed otherwise."<sup>37</sup> Spinoza insists, moreover, that God considered on his own cannot be called "good," that he has no such moral attribute before he created anything. "A thing can be called neither good nor evil if it is considered in itself alone"—not even God. "This will seem absurd to many," he adds, "but I do not know why."<sup>38</sup>

Despite some of the orthodox-seeming theses about classic divine attributes, then, the overall impression of the “Metaphysical Thoughts” is a rejection of some essential features of the personal Abrahamic God. Throughout the text, Spinoza combats any kind of anthropomorphizing of God, any conception of God that depicts God as a kind of person who acts as a moral agent. Right at the beginning of Part Two, which treats of “God and his attributes,” he tells the reader that in this work

God’s existence is explained quite differently from the way in which men commonly understand it; for they confuse God’s existence with their own, so that they imagine God as being somewhat like a man and do not take note of the true idea of God which they have, or are completely ignorant of having it.<sup>39</sup>

People, he says, “usually confuse the divine nature with human nature.”<sup>40</sup> God, for example, is not subject to emotions. “Although it is often found in Holy Scripture that God has been angry or sad on account of men’s sins,” Spinoza notes that this is a disordered way of thinking.<sup>41</sup> God is not even given to love, and when the Bible describes him as having this passion, it is speaking only figuratively or metaphorically. “When we say that God hates some things and loves others, this is said in the same sense Scripture uses in maintaining that the earth disgorges men, and other things of that kind.”<sup>42</sup>

There is thus in the “Metaphysical Thoughts” a subtle but clear foreshadowing of Spinoza’s mature, “scandalous” conception of God. Reformed theologians on the lookout for deviations from orthodoxy no doubt took note of what Spinoza was already saying about God in the summer 1663. Is this what alerted Spinoza’s Voorburg neighbors to his “atheism”?

It is possible, of course. As the historian Jonathan Israel notes, Spinoza's commentary on Descartes and its appended essay "played an important part in his emergence as an intellectual force on the contemporary Dutch scene and internationally."<sup>43</sup> Moreover, Spinoza tells Meijer, who was preparing them for the printer, that "these things are published for the benefit of all men," and that Meijer should take care that "this little work [is] pleasing to all men."<sup>44</sup> However, the "Metaphysical Thoughts" is tough going, rather Scholastic in its organization and its themes. It is not likely to have been read or understood by, or even of interest to, most of the ordinary burghers of the village—certainly not in its original Latin, nor even in the Dutch translation published in December 1664. Still, maybe the leaders of the conservative church faction in the local dispute over replacing the retired preacher, suspecting that the new resident was counseling their liberal opponents, actually got a hold of the young philosopher's recently published book.

It is also noteworthy that before his move to Voorburg (and even before publishing his book on Descartes), Spinoza had been working on his *Short Treatise on God, Man, and His Well-Being*. He quickly abandoned the *Short Treatise*, though, as an inadequate presentation of his philosophy and put the manuscript away in his desk. In his rooms on the Kerklaan, he was hard at work on the *Ethics*. These are, of course, the texts in which he struck out on his own with his very particular, very non-Cartesian, non-Christian, non-Abrahamic conception of God. In both works, God, defined in the *Short Treatise* as "that unique, eternal, infinite being, existing through itself . . . outside of which one cannot imagine anything," is identified as *Natura*.<sup>45</sup> It is highly doubtful, however, that the Voorburg locals, least of all the church elders, had any inkling of what was

being said in either of these works. Spinoza was under no illusions about how his radical ideas would be received and was much too cautious a person to have shared the manuscripts or even discussed their contents with his neighbors, and certainly not with anybody who was likely to be unsympathetic to his ideas.

The most likely story of all, in my view, is that the Voorburg conservatives knew pretty much nothing firsthand about Spinoza, his writings, or his ideas. In their complaint they say only that Spinoza “is now (so it is said [*soo geseyt wert*]) an atheist or someone who mocks all religions.” As we have seen, though, they also note that “many learned men and preachers” could attest to the danger that Spinoza represented. Spinoza already had a reputation, probably going back to his days in Amsterdam, and no doubt fueled by antisemitic prejudice. (Why, the locals may have wondered, was he “excommunicated” by the Jews anyway?) Word travels, and it apparently followed him to Voorburg.

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The Spanish Inquisition had heard about the ex-Jew from Amsterdam who was (“it is said”) an atheist well before the news reached the Voorburg church council. Spinoza came to the attention of the Holy Tribunal even before he had, as far as we know, begun putting any of his thoughts on God down on paper.

In 1659, just three years after Spinoza’s *herem*, an Augustinian monk named Tomas Solano y Robles was interviewed by the Inquisition when he returned to Madrid after travels that had taken him to Amsterdam the previous year.<sup>46</sup> The inquisitors were especially interested in what was going on among the

former Spanish and Portuguese conversos now settled in northern Europe. These descendants of Iberian Jews who had been forced to convert to Christianity in the fifteenth century were living openly as Jews in the Dutch Republic, the German lands, and elsewhere. The Amsterdam Sephardic Jews, especially, still had connections with family, friends, and business associates in Spain and Portugal, and the Inquisition wanted to know who among the conversos still in its realm might have been less than sincere in their Christianity and continuing to observe Jewish rituals in secret.

One of the things that Brother Tomas told his interrogators is that when he was in Amsterdam, he met a man named Spinoza who had recently been ostracized by the city's Portuguese Jewish community. He reported that Spinoza told him that he had once been observant of Jewish law but had a "change of mind," and that he was expelled from the congregation because of his views on God, the soul, and the law. According to the monk—and his report is backed up by the testimony of another Spanish visitor to Holland interviewed by the Inquisition, one Capitan Miguel Perez de Maltranilla—in the eyes of the Jewish community, Spinoza had "reached the point of atheism."<sup>47</sup>

What is especially interesting about Brother Tomas's interview is his statement that Spinoza had been claiming that "God exists only philosophically." This suggests that Spinoza had, by 1658, several years before he began the commentary on Descartes's *Principles* and the "Metaphysical Thoughts," already resolved on his rejection of the robust, highly personal, transcendent but providential and intimately involved Abrahamic God of justice and mercy whom one might worship and to whom one might pray for help or forgiveness. The so-called philosophical God—the phrase itself, derogatory in intent, is typically used only by a philosopher's opponents—is the less

anthropomorphic deity that, while possibly still a supernatural, transcendent creator (or, better, “cause”), is defined primarily by the attributes of infinitude, necessity, eternity, and power. This God of the philosophers (as some labeled it) may have brought the world into being and continue to sustain it in existence from moment to moment, but he does not get involved in its moral or salvific affairs. It is a God that, in the words of one of Spinoza’s later correspondents, “cannot move men to reverence.”<sup>48</sup> Or, as Pascal famously sets the contrast in his *Mémorial*, a note recording his religious experience one night in November 1654: “God of Abraham, God of Isaac, God of Jacob, not of the philosophers and the learned.” In the *Pensées*, he adds that “it is the heart that feels [*sent*] God and not reason. Here is what faith is. God sensible to the heart, not to reason.”<sup>49</sup> A God who merely creates is, for Pascal, no God at all. “I cannot forgive Descartes. In his whole philosophy he would like to be able to get by without God; but he could not help giving him a flick of the fingers to set the world in motion; after that he had nothing more to do with God.”<sup>50</sup>

Deists might have found the distant, impersonal God—the God of reason—acceptable, but, as we have seen with Leibniz and Lamy, such a “philosophical” God was not amenable to all philosophers.

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The early rumors continued to swirl around Spinoza. Three years after Brother Tomas’s visit to Holland, a learned Danish traveler named Olaus Borch was passing through the Dutch Republic. In his diary entry for May 1661, Borch wrote that when he was in Leiden, he heard from a friend that “there are some atheists in Amsterdam; many of them are Cartesians,

among them a certain impudent atheist Jew.”<sup>51</sup> This is almost certainly a reference to Spinoza, who within just a few months would be leaving Amsterdam for Rijnsburg. Borch’s friend in Leiden was apparently a Scandinavian named Höjerus. What did this man know and when did he know it? Borch’s report of what Höjerus told him, with the association of Cartesianism and atheism, indicates that it was enough for many contemporaries to know that Spinoza was a kind of Cartesian—who else would publish a commentary on Descartes’s philosophy?—to conclude that he must have been an atheist, at least of the “philosophical” or Deist variety.<sup>52</sup> Is this, at least, how the members of the Voorburg conservative faction, who might have known of, if not actually read, Spinoza’s recent publication, reasoned?

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Whatever the merely “philosophical” God that Spinoza was describing to Spanish visitors to Amsterdam shortly after his *herem*, and whatever theological views he may have shared with any Cartesians he was hanging out with in the early 1660s, by 1665 he was well aware of the reputation he carried as he moved from one town to another. Around the time of the Voorburg affair, Spinoza wrote to Henry Oldenburg, corresponding secretary of the Royal Society in London. He had just put aside the manuscript of the *Ethics* to start work on his *Theological-Political Treatise*. The deterioration in the political situation in the Dutch Republic, with the more orthodox party of the Reformed Church striving to exercise greater control over state and secular affairs, had him worried for the sake of pluralism and toleration—and especially freedom of thought and expression—in the major provinces of Holland and Utrecht. He tells

his English friend that among the things that have motivated him to compose “a treatise on my opinion about Scripture” is

the prejudices of the theologians; for I know that they are the greatest obstacle to men’s being able to apply their minds to philosophy; so I am busy exposing them and removing them from the minds of the more prudent.

Related to this, he says, is that he wants to defend “the freedom of philosophizing and saying what we think; here the preachers suppress it as much as they can with their excessive authority and aggressiveness.” Finally, he adds, there is “the opinion of the common people; they never stop accusing me of atheism, and I am forced to rebut this accusation as well as I can.”<sup>53</sup>

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This was the situation in 1665. What in Judaism is known as *lashon ha-ra* (“the evil tongue,” essentially malicious gossip), which followed Spinoza with his departure from the Portuguese Jewish community, and from Amsterdam altogether, was soon compounded by the fact that he seemed to be promoting the Cartesian philosophy. He was, so the people said, an atheist, though as far as they knew at this point probably only in the sense that he was stripping the personal, providential Abrahamic God of the Hebrew Bible and the Dutch Reformed Church of anything personal and providential. To many, he was probably just another follower of Descartes and his “philosophical” God.

In five years, the floodgates would open and “the opinion of the common people” about Spinoza’s atheism would become the proclamation of the land—indeed, of many lands. However, the nature of the charge seems to have remained the

same. In the public eye, Spinoza was an atheist not because he did not believe in any God whatsoever but only because his God, “without understanding and will,” does not exercise providential care over his creation.

What happened is that in 1670, Spinoza published his *Theological-Political Treatise*. Though he kept his name off the title page, which also carried a false publisher and city of printing, it did not take long for Spinoza’s identity as the author of this “scandalous” and “soul-destroying” work—“the most godless book [*het uijsteekende godloos boeck*]”, according to the Amsterdam Reformed classis—to emerge.<sup>54</sup> With its denial of the possibility of miracles, the reduction of prophecy to imaginative moral storytelling, the historical account of the Hebrew Bible as just an anthology of human literature, and the identification of divine providence with the order of nature, it is no wonder that the *Treatise* drew universal opprobrium across Europe. Any doubts that Spinoza was indeed an “atheist”—again, at this point only in the sense of departing from a properly Abrahamic conception of God—were now put to rest.

Just a few months after the appearance of the *Theological-Political Treatise*, the burgemeesters of Leiden, acting at the urging of the local Reformed consistory, ordered that copies of the book be “confiscated [from bookshops] by the sheriff owing to its godless passages.”<sup>55</sup> In 1675, a synod of the Walloon Church—French-speaking Calvinists in the Dutch Republic—directed all local preachers “to seek the most expedient means of preventing the aforementioned Spinoza from continuing to sow his impiety and his atheism in these provinces.”<sup>56</sup>

It was not only the secular authorities and ecclesiastic bodies that saw Spinoza (along with the English philosopher Thomas Hobbes) as arguably the most prominent and dangerous atheist of the day. Academic theologians and philosophers joined the

fray as well. Johannes Georg Graevius, a classical scholar originally from Germany but later based in Utrecht, writing in 1671 called the *Treatise* “a most pestilential book” for “having undermined the authority of the sacred books and opened wide the window for the atheist.”<sup>57</sup> Leibniz, to whom Graevius was writing with this critical review of the *Treatise*, had already arrived at a similar conclusion about the book’s implications. Writing to his employer Duke Johann Friedrich in early 1677, he complained that Spinoza was an atheist because his God is not “a superior power endowed with understanding and will, who involves himself in our affairs.”<sup>58</sup> Another classicist, Jacob Gronovius—the son of a Leiden professor and later a professor of history and Greek himself—proclaimed in his diary in the early 1670s that “all atheists deserve to be imprisoned, like Spinoza.”<sup>59</sup> And the Cartesian acolyte Samuel Desmarets (or Maresius), writing in his 1670 “Vindication” of his own dissertation titled “On the Abuse of Cartesian Philosophy,” singled out Spinoza as the most prominent abuser of that philosophy, calling him an “ex-Jew, blasphemmer and formal atheist.”<sup>60</sup>

These and many other readers of the *Theological-Political Treatise* saw that Spinoza was far from any orthodox conception of God. To their minds this was tantamount to what they, at least, considered atheism. They must have thought it could not possibly get any worse. Imagine their surprise, then—their shock!—in late 1677 when, with the publication of Spinoza’s *Ethics* in the *Opera Posthuma*, they got the full vision of *Deus sive Natura* (God or Nature).

François Lamy, composing *Le nouvel athéisme renversé* after having read the *Ethics*, proclaimed that Spinoza’s God does not deserve the name, as it is contrary to our “natural idea of divinity.” Lamy is no longer using ‘atheist’ in the broad sense of someone who merely has an unorthodox conception of God. Simply

ruling out a personal God's ongoing providential engagement with the world is not itself atheism in Lamy's view. He explicitly distinguishes an atheist from a Deist.<sup>61</sup> The latter believes that there is a God, but one that is not a "sovereign master and moderator of the universe, a sovereign judge that nothing escapes," while the former "do[es] not want a God at all."<sup>62</sup> As for Spinoza, Lamy says that "this author is far distant, I do not say from superstition but from all religion, and that if he is not an atheist, then at least is no better than a Deist." While Lamy is initially willing to consider the possibility that Spinoza recognizes God in *some* attenuated sense, in the end he finds in Spinoza's cosmos nothing but nature itself.

To acknowledge only a universal being indistinguished from all of nature and the collective of all beings, a being without liberty and without providence, and who without goal and without an end, without choice and without election, who is carried by a blind and inevitable necessity. . . . As for me, if that can be called "recognizing a God," I do not know what could be called "not recognizing a God."<sup>63</sup>

After briefly giving Spinoza the benefit of the doubt, Lamy concludes that only one kind of God will do. "An all-wise and all-powerful God, a God full of freedom and absolute master of his actions and of his works . . . only such a being merits the name 'God.'"<sup>64</sup> What Spinoza offers does not even qualify as Deism. "Nothing more [than what Spinoza does to God]," he notes, "is required to come up with atheism."<sup>65</sup> Spinoza's God is contrary not only to the "Christian God"—Deist or otherwise—but, more generally, to our "natural idea of divinity."<sup>66</sup>

Leibniz, for his part, by 1683 having had a chance to thoroughly study the *Ethics*, was convinced that he was dealing with a deeper kind of atheism than he originally suspected when he

read the *Treatise*. Writing to Landgraf Ernst von Hessen-Rhenfels, Leibniz includes Spinoza among those “atheists who try to cultivate followers.” Commenting on *Ethics*, Part One, “On God,” he notes that Spinoza is

truly an atheist, that is to say, he admits no providence that dispenses goods and evils according to justice . . . the God he parades around is not ours, he has neither understanding nor will.<sup>67</sup>

The problem for Leibniz, though, is not simply, as earlier, the elimination of those characteristics that make for a personal providential deity—that Spinoza’s God is not “a superior power endowed with understanding and will, who involves himself in our affairs”—but that any real distinction between God and nature has collapsed. Leibniz may already have had a sense of this when reading the *Theological-Political Treatise* soon after it was published, and then especially after what Walther Ehrenfried von Tschirnhaus, who had arrived in Paris (where Leibniz resided from 1672 to 1676) in 1676 with a manuscript copy of the *Ethics*, would have told him about its metaphysical contents. In his later notes on that work, Leibniz says that this God is “not a soul but the nature of things, of which I do not approve.”<sup>68</sup> He was by this time under no illusions about what Spinoza was up to. This former Jew, he claims in a piece from 1686–87, makes God “the very nature or substance of the world.”<sup>69</sup>

Lamy and Leibniz, along with Bayle—who, as we have seen, sounds the alarm in his *Dictionnaire* over the atheistic ramifications of “the most dangerous hypothesis”—were far from lone voices in the Republic of Letters. Many saw that Spinoza was a philosopher who not only robbed God of his personal providential character—one who “[did] not acknowledge a wise and powerful governor rewarding the good and punishing the

wicked after death,” to use Leibniz’s criterion—but denied God altogether. Here, that is, was a true atheist, someone who, as Voetius defined it, “believes that there is no God.”

Even as tolerant a thinker as Noël Aubert de Versé, the French author of an eirenic treatise arguing for common ground between Catholics and Protestants, felt compelled to offer his own anti-Spinoza polemic “in which the foundations of his atheism are refuted.” Aubert de Versé published his *L’impie convaincu, ou Dissertation contre Spinoza* (The Convinced Impious, or Dissertation Against Spinoza) in 1685. Right from the start he inveighs against the duplicity of Spinoza, who, in the *Ethics*, though he “speaks only of God, of his infinite power and his sovereign independence,” uses these “great names, these sacred names, these holy and religious terms to hide the most abominable atheism that can be imagined, and so reduces everything to make us worship nature . . . rather than the true God, the author himself of nature.” Spinoza is, Aubert de Versé insists, “the most subtle atheist that hell ever vomited upon the earth.”<sup>70</sup>

By the end of the seventeenth century, Spinoza’s reputation was secure. He was, as one early eighteenth-century writer put it, the *princeps atheorum* (prince of atheists).<sup>71</sup> The epithet ‘Spinozist,’ in fact, had joined ‘atheist’ as an all-purpose pejorative, applicable to a wide range of heterodox believers and complete unbelievers alike. Indeed, the two terms had become synonyms.

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