

*The Problematic Relationship between Religion and Politics in Spinoza's Philosophy:
Toward a State Based on Reason and Freedom*

Harrat Soumaya

Badji Mokhtar University of Annaba, (Algeria)

soumaya.harrat@univ-annaba.dz

Abstract;

This article analyzes the relationship between religion and politics in Spinoza's philosophy through the ontological foundations of the civil state. Nature is conceived as a rational system governed by necessity, and the state as an extension of universal reason balancing freedom and order. Separating religion from politics is not a denial of the sacred, but a rejection of clerical domination. True religion promotes virtue and justice, while the rational state protects freedom of conscience. Democracy is thus the most complete form of the state, ensuring equality, freedom of thought, and law as the expression of the general will.

Article info

Received

December 26;2025

Accepted

August 14;2026

Keyword:

- ✓ Religion;
- ✓ Politics;
- ✓ Political theology;
- ✓ State,
- ✓ Democracy.

1. Introduction

Spinoza occupies a central position in the history of modern philosophy, as the first to confront the theological and political legacy with the rigor of reason alone, seeking to liberate the human being from fear and superstition and to lay the foundations of a civil society whose affairs are managed according to the principles of freedom and reason. His intellectual project represented a radical attempt to redefine the relationship between religion and politics, not through the exclusion of faith, but by rereading it in light of natural necessity and moral consciousness. Hence, the main problem addressed by this article emerges in the following question: how can religion and reason be reconciled in the political sphere? And can religion remain a moral force without becoming a dominating authority over the state?

From this problem arise related subsidiary questions, among the most important of which are: what is the ontological foundation upon which political action is based in Spinoza's philosophy? How is the principle of reason embodied in the construction of the state and the social contract? And how is religious freedom to be understood within the framework of the rational civil state that he advocated?

2. Spinoza's Critique of Religion

Baruch Spinoza was dubbed by historians of philosophy "the civil monk" for the decisive rupture his thought brought about with the doctrinal system, in which religious authority stood at the apex of the epistemic and political hierarchy. He first rebelled against his Jewish community, rejecting its spiritual authority, and then directed his critique toward the entire theological structure. His philosophical project constituted a decisive step toward the independence of thought from theological tutelage and opened the horizon for the secularization of politics and its separation from religion. Spinoza established a new vision of revelation and the sacred text, which makes it necessary first to pause at the features of his critique of religion and his interpretive methodologies, before moving on to analyze his conception of the theological-political problem and his position within modern philosophy.

2.1 Reconstructing the Concept of Revelation in Light of Spinoza's Critique of the Sacred Text

Spinoza began his critical project of religion, and his rationalization of revelation, through his new reading of the Bible in his famous work *Theological-Political Treatise*, where he took the religious text as a field for the exercise of reason and for reconsidering the very concept of sacredness.

From here, he called for a critical, rational reading of the Bible, based on considering that the sacred text is not direct divine speech, but rather a human expression of the experience of revelation as lived by the prophets within their historical and social contexts. Miracles, extraordinary narratives, and the rulings contained within it should not be understood as supernatural facts, but as products of human consciousness of the relationship between humanity and God. Through this reading, Spinoza removed the Bible from the sphere of rigid belief into the domain of philosophical and historical inquiry, making it an object of understanding rather than veneration. In doing so, he laid the foundations for what may be called the “rational hermeneutical method,” which changed the course of modern religious thought and opened the door to the secularization of religious understanding and the separation of revelation from clerical authority.

From this perspective emerges the central question that will guide the research in this article:

How did Spinoza redefine the concept of revelation when he made the sacred text a human discourse subject to reason and history, and what impact did this have on transforming the understanding of religion from the domain of faith to the domain of philosophy?

Spinoza maintains that the most dangerous thing that has afflicted religion is the subjugation of its texts to the test of human passions, for theologians made revelation a field for experimenting with their authority rather than a locus of truth, and for extracting their own innovations and arbitrary judgments from the sacred scriptures by forcibly interpreting them and justifying these innovations and judgments through divine authority (Spinoza, 2005, p. 132).

From this, we discern Spinoza's profound vision in redefining the essence of the relationship between religion and reason, as he sought to transfer religious understanding from the realm of submission and imitation to the realm of free and critical understanding. Revelation, for him, is not a discourse suspended above history, but a human experience that expresses the prophets' awareness of truth within the limits of their intellects and their time; therefore, its texts cannot be treated as immune from interpretation or critique. Spinoza holds that sacredness is not derived from letters, but from the ethical values they convey, and that God is not known through texts, but through reason, which grants the human being the capacity to comprehend the cosmic order and to understand the good.

As for the readings that Spinoza criticizes, they are those that built their understanding of religion on absolute literalism,

interpreting texts through the logic of myth and considering every word in them to be a literal expression of divine will. These were readings that refused to subject the texts to any rational examination or historical perspective, and that treated revelation as a closed discourse that does not accept interpretation. Such readings turned miracles into violations of the laws of nature instead of seeing them as symbols of spiritual meaning, and turned the text into a source of authority rather than a spring of wisdom. Under them, religion lost its human ethical essence,

Understanding sacred texts has never been a random act or a momentary emotional response, but rather a structured effort governed by precise controls that ensure the soundness of interpretation and prevent meaning from deviating from its original purposes. Reading revelation requires the possession of rational and linguistic tools that enable the interpreter to penetrate the symbolic depth of the text, far from literalism and passion. For this reason, exegetes set out a set of rules and standards that must be adhered to in order to understand religious discourse in its coherence and true meaning (Karim, 2012, p. 123).

Here we infer the principle from which Spinoza set out in his project of interpreting the religious text, namely that correct understanding of revelation can only be achieved when it is read through the eye of

reason rather than through the eye of imitative faith. The sacred text, in his view, is not a source of miracles or oddities, but a mirror reflecting the human experience in its search for meaning and justice. Accordingly, it should not be treated as a closed discourse or an absolute authority, but as a text open to reflection and critique.

After laying down the methodological foundations for interpreting the religious text, Spinoza proceeded to criticize interpretations that disabled the role of reason and made faith hostage to superstition, affirming that the path to truth is only opened when thought is liberated from the authority of arbitrary interpretation, stating Reason cannot attain its clarity as long as it is captive to the chaos of interpretations that submit to the whims of souls and contradict the essence of revelation. True understanding is not based on submitting to ready-made judgments, but on distinguishing between what proceeds from the pure divine and what human minds weave of conjectures. The path of knowledge is only opened through methodical contemplation that makes reason the measure of understanding and protects faith from distortion and manipulation (Spinoza, 2005, p. 134).

Thus, the central principle in Spinoza's thought becomes clear: reason is the only means to safeguard faith from distortion and restore it to its authentic ethical essence. To the extent that religious

understanding frees itself from the authority of passion and superstition, it approaches its original truth, which makes religion a path to freedom rather than a means of constraint. Spinoza sought to subject revelation to the standards of reason not to diminish its value, but to reveal its inner logic, which accords with the cosmic order itself. Revelation, for him, does not contradict reason but complements it, and both proceed from one source, namely divine truth.

Spinoza affirms that the path to understanding religious texts does not pass through faith alone, but through rational inquiry based on the same rules we rely on in studying nature (Spinoza, 2005, p. 134).

The features of Spinoza's rational method are revealed in his effort to subject religious texts to the same rules to which reason submits when studying nature, because truth, for him, is one even if its manifestations differ. Religious understanding does not rest on blind faith or indoctrination, but on methodical reflection that reads the text in light of its language and its historical and social circumstances. From this standpoint, Spinoza holds that the sacred text cannot be understood except by analyzing the context of its emergence and identifying its ethical purposes that address human reason. Therefore, he made interpretation a structured rational endeavor based on observation and induction, distancing it

from literalism and emotional impulse. The text, for him, does not carry truth in itself, but expresses it to the extent that it accords with the laws of nature and reason; thus, revelation becomes an extension of knowledge rather than its opposite.

However, this rational foundation of religion leads him to more daring results, as he arrives at denying everything that cannot be explained by reason or experience, on the grounds that the miracle contradicts the divine order of nature, and that prophets are nothing but sages who expressed eternal truths in a symbolic language suited to people's minds. Here the question arises: how did Spinoza address the issue of miracles and prophecy in light of this rational method?

2.2 Spinoza's Critique of Prophecy and Miracle in the Light of Reason

Spinoza's critique of revelation served as a prelude to a deeper critique that touched the very essence of the concepts forming the fabric of religious thought, foremost among them prophecy and miracle. When he subjected revelation to the criterion of reason, he was compelled to explain the nature of the prophet and his role, and to determine the limits of the miracle within the fixed divine order of nature. From here, his critique assumed a dual character, linking the analysis of prophetic experience as a rational–imaginative perception with a critique of the idea of a breach in the laws of the universe. Can prophecy and miracle

remain possible within a strict rational vision that considers nature a divine system that does not change?

Baruch Spinoza defines prophecy as a form of distinctive cognition, grounded in a certainty that God pours into the minds of specific individuals so that they may be the voice of His will among human beings. These individuals do not merely receive knowledge through direct divine revelation; rather, they possess an innate disposition that enables them to translate what they receive into a language comprehensible to the masses (Spinoza, 2005, p. 119).

This definition shows that Spinoza strips prophecy of its otherworldly character and places it within the ranks of human knowledge that ascends from sense perception to reason and then to intuition. The prophet, for him, is not an extraordinary being who receives a heavenly message apart from the laws of nature, but a human being distinguished by purity of soul and the power of imagination that enables him to represent universal meanings in symbolic forms that bring them closer to the understanding of ordinary people. Prophecy is therefore not a rupture with the natural order but a continuation of it, since the divine intellect manifests itself in the human being to the extent of one's purity and receptivity.

Spinoza holds that the diversity of the forms of revelation among prophets is not

accidental, but arises from differences in their psychological and bodily constitutions and from variations in the powers of imagination they possess. Each prophet receives inspiration according to his temperament and inner disposition: one dominated by joy apprehends revelation in bright and reassuring images; one governed by sadness perceives it in gloomy and dark manifestations; one with refined sensibility experiences it in gentle and tranquil forms; the soldier in symbols of strength and war; and the rustic in scenes of nature and simplicity. Thus, revelation, for Spinoza, is not a uniform discourse, but a human experience colored by the prophet's imagination, environment, and the culture of his age (Spinoza, 2005, p. 48).

Spinoza's profound vision of the nature of prophecy reveals a radical reconstruction of the concept of revelation. It is no longer a miraculous, otherworldly connection between God and the human being, but a rational–imaginative experience arising within the human soul in accordance with its innate disposition and its capacity to apprehend divine meaning. Revelation, in his view, is not a rupture with the order of nature, but one of its manifestations, wherein the divine intellect reveals itself through the powers of imagination and reason in the human being. Hence, the diversity of prophetic forms becomes an expression of the multiplicity of modes of perception, not of disparity in value or truth; each prophet expresses the Absolute

to the extent allowed by his faculties, temperament, and environment. In this way, prophecy is stripped of its mythical character and becomes a symbolic rational knowledge that conveys ethical values in a language the masses can understand. The prophet, for Spinoza, is not distinguished by a supernatural power, but by purity of soul, which enables him to perceive the divine order and translate it into commandments aimed at virtue and peace.

“Spinoza believes that the certainty of the prophets does not rest on an absolute direct revelation, but on three elements that constitute the basis of their apprehension of what is revealed to them: first, that the images of revelation appear in their imagination with a clarity that resembles the human perception of material things; second, their reliance on signs or omens that grant them reassurance regarding what they imagine; and third, their innate inclination toward goodness and justice, which makes their ethical vision an integral part of their very nature (Spinoza, 2005, p. 52).

This understanding situates prophecy within the horizon of human experience, not as a miraculous phenomenon but as a psychological faculty that links imagination, reason, and ethics in a single structure. Reason, for Spinoza, does not deny revelation but redefines its conditions within the divine system of nature that admits no exception. The prophet is not a

mediator between two separate worlds, but a human being whose perception has reached completion, so that his consciousness becomes a mirror reflecting the divine order in symbolic forms suited to the minds of the masses.

Spinoza explains that divine communication with prophets did not occur in a single manner, but took varied forms depending on their sensory and spiritual capacities: revelation might appear as a voice heard, or as a vision seen, or as a combination of both. Moses, in his view, heard the word of God through a unique, truly audible voice unmatched in other prophecies; divine anger manifested itself to David in the vision of an angel brandishing a sword; and Joshua perceived divine assistance through the vision of a heavenly soldier leading the ranks of battle. These examples indicate that revelation, for Spinoza, is a variable experience whose form is shaped by the prophet's nature, imagination, and clarity of perception (Spinoza, 2005, pp. 46-47).

Here Spinoza presents a vision that renders revelation a relative phenomenon, differing according to the psychological and cognitive dispositions of the prophets. Revelation thus no longer becomes a discourse sent down from outside nature, but an experience within it. The sacred assumes diverse forms according to individual imagination and collective culture, which demonstrates that divine

truth is apprehended only through human mediations. From this standpoint, the multiplicity of prophetic forms becomes an expression of the unity of cosmic laws that manifest themselves in the diversity of modes of perception. This reading turns religion into a field of symbolic awareness rather than clerical authority, as revelation is understood as a discourse addressed to reason through imagination, not as a challenge to it. In this way, Spinoza returns miracle to its symbolic nature and restores meaning to the natural order, which is itself the divine order, thereby addressing the core question raised in the critique of religion: how can revelation remain possible without contradicting reason or nature?

Spinoza holds that the experience of Christ represents the highest form of divine knowledge, because it did not rely on hearing, sight, or any symbolic medium, but was a direct apprehension of the truth of God through a complete spiritual unity between the divine and the human intellects. Christ, in his view, was not a transmitter of a message through imagination as the prophets were, but a speaking divine presence in which divine wisdom is embodied without veil. For this reason, Spinoza regards Christ alone as having attained the rank of pure intellectual communion, from which the voice of God flows from within the soul rather than from outside it (Spinoza, 2005, p. 47).

Here the pinnacle of the Spinozist position becomes apparent, making Christ the supreme example of the divine intellect in the human being, where the divine and the human meet in a pure intellectual and ethical unity. Christ is not a miracle that challenges nature, but an embodiment of its intellectual perfection, as he expresses the harmony of human reason with the universal intellect. Hence, the true miracle for Spinoza is not a violation of the laws of the universe, but awareness of them.

From his critique of the prevailing concept of prophecy and his presentation of a new approach that removes it from the context of the miraculous and places it within the domain of rationality and humanity, Spinoza moved on to critique miracle, considering it the natural extension of understanding prophecy as a rational phenomenon subject to the laws of nature rather than an exception to them.

From this, Spinoza's radical stance on the idea of miracle becomes clear, viewing it as a remnant of theological consciousness that interprets what humans do not understand as a miraculous act issuing from divine will. For him, the miracle is not a violation of the laws of nature but a phenomenon arising from human ignorance of the causes of things, since God does not intervene in the world in a way that contradicts the order He has established within it. Everything that occurs in the universe proceeds according to an eternal and immutable law;

therefore, belief in miracles is nothing but belief in ignorance. In this way, Spinoza transforms the miracle from evidence of revelation into an opportunity to contemplate the order of nature and reason, where the recognition of cosmic necessity becomes the highest form of faith. Through this perspective, his critique of miracle falls within his broader project aimed at liberating religion from superstition and restoring it to its rational and ethical foundation, for there is no meaning in a faith that contradicts reason, nor in a religion that binds the human being to ignorance.

Within this framework, religion is transformed into a system of values and meanings that arise from within the human being rather than from outside him, because the human intellect is the direct extension of the divine intellect. Consequently, knowledge of the laws of nature becomes the highest form of worship. God, for Spinoza, is not known through visions or literal revelation, but through the apprehension of the necessity that governs the universe, as every being bears witness to His presence. From this standpoint, true faith becomes rational knowledge of the total order of existence, not blind assent to extraordinary phenomena.

Spinoza thus shifted the center of gravity from a transcendent God to a God immanent in nature, from external

revelation to inner understanding. In doing so, he became the philosopher of rational monism, who links God and the world through the bond of necessity rather than will. Religion, for him, is not blind obedience, but a free apprehension of the source of moral order in the universe. For this reason, he held that everyone who follows the path of virtue and reason truly worships God, because the intellectual love of God is the highest degree of faith, and it is what unites philosophy and religion in an indissoluble unity.

Through this intellectual construction, it becomes evident that Spinoza's critique of religion was not an end in itself, but an entry point into his political project, which rests on the separation between the authority of reason and the authority of faith, between state and church, without separating ethics from politics. If he liberated religion from theology, how will he seek to liberate politics from the domination of the sacred? And how will the place of religion be defined within the system of the state in his political philosophy?

3. Spinoza's Political Project and the Relationship Between Religion and Politics

Spinoza's political project is manifested in two complementary books which together form the theoretical foundation of his political philosophy: the *Theological-Political Treatise* and the *Political Treatise*.

In the former, Spinoza presented a critical reflection on the relationship between religion and the state, seeking to liberate politics from the domination of theology without denying the moral role of religion in preserving civil order. In the latter, he sought to construct a rational theory of the state, in which he addressed the emergence of civil society, the foundations of authority, and the three forms of government: monarchy, aristocracy, and democracy. However, his life ended before he could complete this work, and its writing stopped at the beginning of the chapter on democracy, which indicates that his project remained open toward developing a comprehensive political vision that springs from the core of his philosophy of nature and reason.

This project is distinguished by the fact that it does not look at the human being as he ought to be, but as he is in his actual reality, attempting to understand his inclinations and natural motives in order to establish a political system that harmonizes with his nature instead of suppressing it.

From here, the relationship between religion and politics in Spinoza's thought is determined as the essence of the theological-political problem: religion is a moral necessity for preserving values and unity, and politics is a rational necessity for organizing common life. Yet the overlap between them raises a central question that will constitute the focus of this section:

How can religion remain a moral factor within the state without turning into an authority that restricts freedom of thought?

3.1 The Ontological Foundation of Politics in Spinoza

Before presenting his political project and determining the optimal system of government, clarifying the relationship between religion and politics and the status of religion in the civil sphere, Spinoza first devoted himself to studying human nature and analyzing the condition of the human being in his original state—that is, in his natural condition prior to the emergence of civil society. He recognized that any sound political construction can only be based on precise knowledge of human nature, the laws governing behavior, and human motives. Accordingly, he made understanding human nature the necessary entry point for establishing politics, so that the political system would be in harmony with the requirements of reason and the necessities of existence, rather than imposed by ideal conceptions far removed from reality.

Spinoza began the foundation of his political theory from his understanding of human nature as being subject, like all existing things, to universal laws that govern it by necessity. Human nature is not separate from the general order of nature but is considered a part of it and proceeds according to its constant cosmic order (Al-Shamekh & Saeed, 2008, p. 168).

The foundation upon which Spinoza builds his conception of politics is the consideration of the human being as part of nature, subject, like all other beings, to its necessary laws that cannot be transcended or suspended. Politics, for him, is not a science separate from nature, but an extension of natural reason at the level of human organization. From this perspective, human actions and behaviors are understood as products of necessity rather than chance or absolute will, for the human being acts in accordance with the requirements of his nature and what is dictated to him by the laws of survival and the desire to persist in existence. Freedom, in Spinoza's view, does not mean escape from these laws, but awareness of them and harmony with them. Thus, politics becomes a system of reason that seeks to translate natural necessity into an organized civil order, making communal life an extension of the laws of nature in their rational form, such that necessity becomes the foundation of freedom and nature the principle of justice.

Spinoza defined the human being's original state in nature, when his existence and action derived from natural right, stating:

By natural right and the order existing in nature, I mean those laws through which we understand that every existing being acts and persists in existence according to the necessity of its own nature, not by an external will or an imposed command, but

by an impulse stemming from its essence, which determines its existence and the course of its actions. Everything in the universe moves within a comprehensive order in which there is no place for chance or chaos, for every act that proceeds from nature occurs in accordance with the principle of absolute necessity, which makes freedom itself an expression of awareness of this necessity, and human behavior an extension of the universal intellect that governs all beings (Spinoza, 2005, p. 367).

Spinoza thus proceeds from a vision that makes nature an absolute rational system governed by necessity, and the human being is not an exceptional entity within this system, but a part of it, subject to the same laws that operate in the universe. Freedom, for him, does not mean escape from this necessity, but awareness of it and living in accordance with its dictates, because human action is not separate from natural law but takes place in its light. From this understanding, both ethics and politics are founded on the recognition of the essential connection between existence and necessity.

Living beings, according to what their own nature dictates, work to preserve themselves and safeguard their existence. Their continuation in life is not a voluntary choice but a necessity arising from their deep essence. Every being carries within itself a principle of preserving its own

being and exerts as much energy as it possesses in order to remain and continue in existence. This striving is not limited to bodily survival alone, but also includes the intellectual and spiritual balance that makes the being consonant with the order of the universe (Damasio, 2003, p. 84).

From here, we can discern the cosmic dimension in Spinoza's thought, where the principle of perseverance in existence unites with the comprehensive law of nature governing all beings. Every entity, including the human being, carries within its essence an innate inclination to persist in existence, which makes desire, reason, and life integrated expressions of a single necessity: the preservation of being. From this standpoint, politics in Spinoza's view becomes an extension of this cosmic order, working to organize the energy of persistence in its collective form and to transform it into a rational system that achieves harmony between the human being and the world.

Spinoza considers the human being to be social by nature, whose existence is completed only with others; isolation, in his view, is the opposite of nature and reason. The power possessed by the individual alone is limited and often insufficient to preserve his life or protect his interests from the dangers of nature and the whims of others. Therefore, reason directs him toward cooperation rather than conflict, and toward union rather than

division. Through this rational awareness, the human being realizes that mutual cooperation is not a moral luxury but an essential condition for survival, and that security is achieved only when people exchange benefits and refrain from harming one another. Reason, in Spinoza's philosophy, is the principle that teaches the human being that his existence grows stronger to the extent that he becomes integrated into a system of relationships governed by understanding and common interest.

For this reason, Spinoza says that reason teaches us that mutual cooperation is what secures safety for the lives and property of each individual. If two persons agree to unite the power they possess, this will increase their strength and consequently grant them a right over nature greater than that which each had individually; and the greater the number of persons united in this way, the greater the right they all possess (Spinoza, *A Treatise on Politics*, 1995, p. 44).

Human association in Spinoza's thought is therefore not a contingent social option, but an expression of a rational necessity arising from human nature itself. Cooperation, for him, is the principle that guarantees survival and transforms limited individual power into a shared capacity that organizes life and gives it meaning. Politics is thus founded on reason as the power that unites individuals within a system of mutual

interest, making society a continuation of nature in its rational form, in which balance is achieved between the self and the other, and between individual freedom and collective order.

In Spinoza's view, the state represents the rational transformation that elevates the human being from the level of individual instinct to the level of collective consciousness. It is the form in which conflicting desires move from the domain of free nature into an organized system governed by reason. Instead of the will remaining captive to appetite and selfish pursuit, it becomes disciplined by the principle of the common good. Natural right no longer resides in the individual alone, but is embodied in the community that unites its powers within a single framework. (Spinoza, 1951, p. 302).

In Spinoza's philosophy, the state represents the completion of human rational consciousness; it is the form in which natural power is organized within a framework of law and reason. The state is not the opposite of nature, but its continuation at a higher level, as it works to transform individual desires into a collective will subject to the principle of the common good. Freedom is not realized outside the state but within it, because it alone disciplines passions through reason and grants the human being the ability to reconcile private needs with the requirements of communal life. Thus, the

state becomes the embodiment of practical reason that moves the human being from chaos to order, and from necessity to conscious freedom. Natural conflict only disappears when power is administered within a just legal system that derives its legitimacy from reason rather than from divine delegation.

Through this understanding, it becomes clear that politics for Spinoza is an organization of reason in the practical sphere, seeking to establish a system that balances natural necessity with moral freedom. The essence of the state does not lie in authority but in achieving harmony among individuals through law, which represents the general will.

From here, the question arises: how does the idea of the state manifest itself in Spinoza's political project, and upon what foundations does the legitimacy of authority rest within this rational system?

3.2 The Foundation of the State and the Social Contract in Spinoza's Philosophy

The state, for Spinoza, is a natural outcome of the development of human consciousness, as it represents the transition of the human being from a life governed by individual necessity to a life governed by shared reason. The desire for survival that dwells within every being, when refined by reason, drives individuals to unite within a legal system that guarantees both security and freedom.

From this standpoint, the state is not viewed as a constraint upon human nature, but as the realization of its rational essence in its highest form, for it is the framework that enables the human being to live according to the dictates of reason rather than passion, and that transforms instinct into a shared awareness of duty and the common good

Spinoza holds that the stability of the state does not rest solely upon the balance of powers or the abundance of wealth, but upon the principle of equality among individuals before the law, such that all enjoy the same rights without discrimination based on origin, position, or wealth. A just society is one in which the law serves as a single scale by which all are judged, so that the citizen feels that his dignity is safeguarded to the same extent as the dignity of others, and that privilege belongs only to reason and virtue (Al-Shamekh & Saeed, 2008, p. 224).

What precedes expresses the essence of the Spinozist vision of justice as a necessary condition for the stability of the state and the continuity of its unity. Equality before the law is not merely a legal principle, but an ethical value that guarantees genuine belonging to the homeland. As long as the human being is subject to the law of nature and the laws of the universe apply to him, his love of self-interest, self-preservation, and the satisfaction of his instincts constitutes his motive for placing himself

under the authority of the state and its law. He cannot feel sincere belonging toward it if he does not benefit from it

For this reason, Spinoza believed that patriotism is not a mere emotional feeling, but the product of a just economic system that guarantees every citizen the right to a dignified life. When individuals are equal in opportunities for work and ownership, and justice is achieved in the distribution of wealth, bonds of sincere belonging arise among them, and defending the state becomes a defense of both self and society together (Al-Shamekh & Saeed, 2008, p. 225).

Here the social dimension of Spinoza's political philosophy becomes clear, where legal justice and economic justice integrate in the construction of the rational state that preserves human dignity and achieves material and spiritual balance. Citizenship, for Spinoza, is not built upon emotion or national sentiment, but upon rational participation in a system that ensures equality and freedom together, and that makes the state an extension of the collective intellect organizing individual lives in complete harmony with the law of nature.

Spinoza affirms that the human being is by nature inclined toward pleasure and benefit—two innate tendencies from which he cannot detach himself. Their danger appears, however, when they overwhelm the spirit of citizenship, leading the

individual to place his desires above the common good. Thus, he holds that the state must establish institutions that cultivate in the human being a sense of belonging and responsibility, and that make him realize that his power is inseparable from the power of the community, and that his private interest is only fulfilled when it merges with the public interest (Spinoza, 2005, p. 386).

Political thinking in Spinoza is inseparable from his vision of human nature, for he sees that the human being cannot live in isolation from others, because his needs and the contradictions of his passions drive him to seek a system that balances desire and reason. From this collective awareness arises the state as a rational and ethical necessity, not merely a contingent agreement among individuals. The state, in its essence, is the institutional expression of human reason in its effort to preserve existence and safeguard freedom within a framework of laws that guarantee the common interest.

For this reason, Spinoza believed that patriotism is not a mere emotional feeling, but the product of a just economic system that guarantees every citizen the right to a dignified life (Al-Shamekh & Saeed, 2008, p. 225).

Here the social dimension of Spinoza's political philosophy again becomes evident, as legal justice and economic justice complement one another in building

the rational state that safeguards human dignity and achieves material and spiritual balance. Citizenship, in his view, is not founded upon emotion or national sentiment, but upon rational participation in a system that guarantees equality and freedom together, and that makes the state an extension of the collective intellect organizing individual lives in complete harmony with the law of nature.

Spinoza affirms that the human being is by nature inclined toward pleasure and benefit—two innate tendencies from which he cannot detach himself. Their danger appears when they dominate the spirit of citizenship, leading the individual to place his desires above the common good. Therefore, he holds that the state must establish institutions that cultivate a sense of belonging and responsibility in the human being, and that make him realize that his power is inseparable from the power of the community, and that his private interest is only fulfilled when it is blended with the public interest. A stable society is not one in which obedience is imposed by force, but one in which loyalty arises from rational awareness that makes defending the state a defense of the self itself (Spinoza, 2005, p. 386).

The state, in Spinoza's view, is the highest expression of the unity of reason and interest. It guarantees freedom when it is built upon awareness, and preserves stability when it rests upon justice. To the

extent that it succeeds in achieving equality and satisfying the legitimate needs of individuals, it becomes a homeland for both freedom and reason.

Spinoza held that states founded upon absolute individual rule are systems based on fear rather than reason, on coercion rather than participation. They produce obedient subjects rather than free citizens and nourish tendencies toward tyranny rather than striving for the common good. For this reason, he rejected this form of government and regarded it as the opposite of the essence of the state, which ought to be built upon a collective will expressing shared reason rather than the desire of a ruler.

In this context, the Spinozist position is defined as a radical critique of every authority that derives its legitimacy from force rather than from reason, and from domination rather than from contract. The state cannot fulfill its purpose in preserving existence and guaranteeing freedom unless it is governed by laws laid down by the collective intellect, not by passions dictated by an individual ruler.

For this reason, Spinoza considered political stability to be built not on suppression and silencing, but on the state's capacity to absorb criticism and free expression (Durant, 1998, p. 241).

Spinoza explains that individual interest cannot be separated from the public

interest, because the human being flourishes only within a community to which he feels a sense of belonging and in whose prosperity he participates. When the individual transcends selfishness and realizes that his good is bound up with the good of others, interest is transformed into a spiritual bond that unites citizens and motivates them to act consciously for the strength and unity of the state. In this sense, interest is not a narrow utilitarian calculation, but a sense of shared destiny and duty toward the homeland that grants them their being and meaning.

The principle of the social contract in Spinoza rests on the idea that the human being, driven by reason, relinquishes a portion of his natural rights in order to guarantee his survival within an organized society governed by laws. The state, in its origin, is born of a rational agreement among individuals who recognized that preserving existence is not achieved in isolation but through cooperation. Hence, obedience to the law becomes obedience to reason itself, because an order arising from free agreement is more enduring than one based on coercion. The law is not a constraint, but a tool for achieving shared freedom that makes the human being an effective member of the political community.

From this standpoint, Spinoza links the weakness of the state to the despotism of an executive authority that escapes all

oversight. When institutions that monitor the ruler's actions disappear and the boundaries between powers vanish, the doors are opened to domination and unilateral decision-making. A state that silences critical voices and suppresses freedom of opinion loses its self-awareness, because public opinion is the living conscience that reminds it of its duty to serve the common interest. When governance is driven by personal ambition or the instinct for power, the system becomes an instrument in the hands of passions, and the process of disintegration begins from within authority itself (Al-Shamekh & Saeed, 2008, pp. 213-214)."

By tracing the theoretical content of Spinoza's philosophy, it becomes clear that the state is not a structure of domination, but the product of a collective intellect aiming to achieve balance between instinct and reason, between natural right and civil order. It is the highest expression of the union of individuals in their pursuit of preserving existence through participation and cooperation, not through domination and division. Its essence rests on the idea that freedom is realized only through law, and that justice is the core of political legitimacy. The social contract, for Spinoza, is the foundation upon which the state is organized as a rational form of shared life; it guarantees coexistence under the common interest that transcends individual selfishness and establishes active citizenship. Hence, the rational state,

in his thought, becomes the culmination of the development of human nature, because it embodies within its political order the presence of reason as the principle that safeguards freedom and grants human existence its meaning.

Does this rational conception of the state constitute the gateway to what will later be known as the theological-political problem in Spinoza, where questions of religion intersect with politics on the horizon of modern philosophy?

4. Religion and Politics in the Horizon of the Theological-Political Problem in Spinoza

The theological-political problematic in Spinoza's thought emerged from the womb of the profound transformations that seventeenth-century Europe experienced, a century marked by an intense struggle between the authority of the Church, rising from the Middle Ages, and the authority of reason, newly born with the Renaissance and the Reformation. Religion was still the reference framework for all political and moral authority, and the theological institution interfered in public affairs and imposed its guardianship over thought, science, and society, such that every attempt to free oneself from its dominion was considered a departure from faith. In this tense context, Spinoza lived an intellectual experience fraught with danger, for from his youth he clashed with the Jewish religious institution in Amsterdam,

which excommunicated him and expelled him from the community because of his free opinions and rational interpretation of the texts. He was thus deprived of his community, and a decree of “great excommunication” was issued against him in 1656, an event that left a deep mark on the course of his philosophical and political thinking.

The *Theological–Political Treatise* (1670) came as a product of this confrontation, a daring attempt to delimit the boundaries between faith and reason, and between religion and the state, at a time when Europe was living through sectarian divisions and devastating religious wars. Thus the theological–political problem in Spinoza was not merely a theoretical issue, but a question about the possibility of coexistence between religious freedom and civil order, and about how philosophy can free faith from fanaticism without stripping it of its spiritual meaning. He wanted to put an end to the domination of theology over politics without eliminating religion from the public sphere, but rather by redefining it in the light of reason and morality. In this way, his project was an attempt to found a state that protects the freedom of thought and expression while at the same time guaranteeing the unity and peace of the community, without relying on a metaphysical authority or a divine right to rule.

Spinoza considered that the Church in medieval Europe had turned into an authority in its own right, rivaling kings in rule and claiming sovereignty over consciences, thus becoming a spiritual state within the political state. From here Spinoza regarded this overlap between the two authorities as a source of chaos and conflict, and therefore called for the religious institution to be subject to the higher authority of the state, for it alone possesses the natural right to protect society and guarantee its balance. Every religious legislation, then, must issue from the will of the sovereign, as the one who expresses the contract that unites citizens in a single body, since sovereignty is not based on divine delegation but on a rational agreement that makes the state the supreme reference in promulgating laws and organizing religious and political affairs together (Strauss & Cropsey, 2005, p. 685).

What Spinoza put forward through these ideas constituted a major shock in seventeenth-century Europe, where it was not customary for a philosopher to publicly discuss the limits of Church authority or to question its right to sovereignty over consciences. Spinoza confronted an intellectual and political system that regarded religion as the foundation of social order and the clergy as guardians of truth, and he came to undermine this conception from its roots. He called for subjecting the religious institution to the authority of the civil state and making

sovereignty derive its legitimacy from reason and the social contract, not from divine delegation. With this bold stance, he was among the first to challenge the “religious politics” that made faith an instrument of rule and domination, affirming that religion must remain a personal, moral matter, not a means of control. His ideas were an intellectual revolution ahead of their time, for they paved the way for the separation between what is spiritual and what is civil, and announced the birth of modern political reason based on freedom and tolerance. Despite the exclusion and accusations of unbelief he faced, Spinoza remained faithful to his conviction that the peace of the state cannot be achieved unless reason is freed from the authority of theology and religion is understood as a moral, not a political, force.

Spinoza saw that the essence of the crisis lay in the clergy's quest to expand their influence within the state and to use faith as an instrument of domination. Can religion remain pure when it becomes a means in the hands of power?

And Spinoza clarified in this context that the greatest danger does not lie in the corruption of the ruler, but in the deviation of the clergy who hide behind a supposed sanctity that renders their errors beyond criticism or correction. For if the ruler acts wrongly, he can be removed and replaced, whereas the corrupt clergyman shelters

under the name of God and turns his error into a sacred doctrine, imposing on people blind obedience. For this reason Spinoza considered the dominance of religious authority to be more dangerous to society than political despotism, because it corrupts consciences in the name of piety and turns error itself into a virtue (Fouad Zakaria, 2008, pp. 223–224).

Here the core of the theological–political problem in Spinoza becomes clear: he believes that the most dangerous thing the clergy did was to take a pure source—religion itself—and pollute it with the schemes and maneuvers of politics. They turned revelation into a cover for worldly ambitions and sanctity into a tool to justify domination, such that the sacred and the profane became so intermingled that people could no longer distinguish between true faith and blind obedience. They transformed religious discourse into a language of power, using it to legitimize the despotism of kings and giving wars a divine character, so that corruption was practiced in the name of obedience and injustice was presented as the will of God. From this Spinoza realized that the danger does not lie in politics when it becomes corrupt, but in religion when it is used to justify that corruption. Power that hides behind the sacred is more dangerous than any worldly tyranny, because it corrupts consciences in the name of salvation. Therefore he called for freeing faith from political instrumentalization and restoring

religion to its original moral purity, where it is a path to truth, not a means of domination, and where reason remains the sole guardian of the sanctity of truth.

Spinoza clarified that the theologians who justified the theocratic state did not content themselves with a devotional interpretation of religious texts but turned them into a closed political system that entrenched submission and obedience. They resorted to specific interpretations of books of the Old Testament—especially Exodus, Leviticus, and Deuteronomy—to establish the idea that God is the sole king of Israel and that priests and prophets are nothing but agents of His authority on earth. Through this interpretation, they made the Mosaic law not a mere moral system, but a political constitution that must be applied at all times, so that obedience to the ruler becomes obedience to God and disobedience to him becomes disobedience to the Creator. Thus the texts were emptied of their spiritual dimension and turned into instruments of rule. Stories such as the divine covenant with Moses or the choosing of David and Solomon were used to justify divine kingship and religious election, and the idea of “God’s chosen people” turned into a foundation for the legitimacy of the religious state.

Spinoza saw in this hermeneutical method a dangerous confusion between faith and politics, because the texts were not intended to establish a permanent system of

government, but to guide people toward justice and mercy. He therefore criticized these theologians for closing the door to free understanding and making the texts captive to their interests, affirming that the correct reading of revelation is not built on blind obedience but on rational understanding that frees the human being from fear. Any interpretation used to consolidate power or repress conscience is, in Spinoza’s view, a distortion of the meaning of religion itself, because revelation does not subjugate people by coercion but invites them to goodness through reason and love.

From this critique of theological interpretations that distorted the meaning of revelation, Spinoza moves on to analyze the historical model in which this intertwining between religion and politics was embodied, namely the theocratic state experienced by the Hebrews in the Old Testament.

Spinoza considered that the theocratic model lived by the Hebrews cannot serve as a foundation for any modern state, for it is based on merging religion and politics to the point that the boundaries between the authority of heaven and the authority of earth disappear. In such a system, the men of theology become the real rulers, and revelation becomes the sole source of civil legislation; thus human freedom and reason are both abolished. For this reason he saw that a state in which theology dominates

public affairs is condemned to rigidity and closure, because it turns authority into sanctity and obedience into slavery (Al-Shaibani, 2009, p. 78).

Here the radical position Spinoza took toward the theocratic state clearly appears, as he regarded it as the antithesis of reason and freedom. His rejection of this model was not just an objection to religious authority but a profound philosophical response to the theologians who sought to make revelation the basis of rule and doctrine the source of legislation. Spinoza confronted them with a rigorous rational method, showing that their argument for legitimizing the religious state rests on a confusion between what is devotional and what is civil, between the spiritual commandments aimed at refining the human being and the positive laws that regulate shared life. Revelation, in his view, was not sent to found states or appoint kings but to guide humans to virtue and justice, whereas the theologians made it a tool to justify their authority and link obedience to God with obedience to them.

Spinoza did not confine the citizens' religious belief to a specific creed, but left this realm to the freedom of individuals in faith, worship, and rituals, because his aim was not to impose a unified doctrine but to preserve civil peace and guarantee the unity of the state. allowing society to live under a rational system that guarantees freedom of thought and belief without letting

religious difference turn into a danger to public peace. From this perspective arises the question of how Spinoza understood the relationship between power and religious freedom, and on what foundations he built his conception of the state's function in regulating the sphere of faith.

Spinoza started from his conviction that the state is the highest framework to which a human being appeals in his religious and civil affairs together, for it alone is able to unify the general will and guarantee security and stability, since its authority rests on reason and law, not on revelation or the authority of the clergy (Jihaf, 2008, p. 170).

Here it becomes clear that Spinoza regards the state as the rational expression of the unity of the community, deriving its legitimacy from reason and not from revelation, and making the law an instrument for organizing the relationship between faith and society. Freedom of belief, for him, does not mean chaos, but rather the subjection of faith to the authority of reason in a way that preserves peace and harmony among people. Thus religion in the Spinozist state becomes a moral force that contributes to consolidating justice and the common good, not a means of domination or division.

Spinoza believes that piety is not realized in isolation nor in rebellion against the order, but in a person's commitment to the

laws of the state which express the common will of all; obedience to the ruler is the practical aspect of obedience to God, since the ruler is required to govern people in the spirit of justice and goodness and to enjoin them to virtuous conduct that preserves their dignity and protects them from harm (Jihaf, 2008, pp. 170-171).

Spinoza conceived piety as a rational and social practice at once; it is not achieved by withdrawal or rebellion against the system but by respect for the laws that express the general will. Piety, for him, is not mere formal submission but rational obedience arising from the awareness that justice and goodness are the essence of true faith. Thus the state becomes the sphere in which these values are embodied in the form of actions that preserve dignity and ensure shared peace.

The state in Spinoza's thought is founded on the principle of reason, which makes political authority a guarantee of religious freedom, not its negation, for it is the subjection of faith to law that preserves human dignity and maintains peace among individuals. Religion fulfills its function only when it is freed from partisan instrumentalization and directed toward consolidating goodness and justice. Piety is not withdrawal from society but commitment to the laws that express the common will, because obedience to the rational ruler is obedience to justice itself. Thus the political order in Spinoza is an

expression of the divine reason in its civil form, whose aim is to achieve harmony between faith and reason, and between freedom and order, so that the state remains the force that protects conscience and prevents division in the name of the sacred. From this standpoint, leaving freedom of thought and belief is an indispensable condition for the stability of the community.

From this horizon in which the function of the state in preserving freedom of thought and regulating the religious sphere is defined, Spinoza opens the door to questioning the nature of the optimal system on which the state should be based. In his writings he examined the different forms of government and saw that constitutional monarchy represents a reasonable modification of absolute monarchy because it binds it to reason and law. He also considered that aristocracy may be acceptable when the ruling group is broadly representative so as to reflect the various classes of the people and guarantee the interest of all. As for his treatment of the democratic system in his last work, the *Political Treatise*, he expressed his admiration for it and considered it the closest regime to the spirit of reason and freedom, but death prevented him from completing his view of it. Nevertheless, scholars of his philosophy agree that he regarded democracy as the ideal form of government, because it preserves the opinions of citizens, is based on

participation in rights, and at the same time prevents the domination of theology over politics, making religion a personal matter rather than a means of accessing or justifying power.

From this perspective, which makes democracy the greatest guarantor of freedom of thought and the unity of the community, emerges the principle that Spinoza emphasizes: the necessity of separating religious and political authorities, so that faith does not become a means of rule and religion is not used as a pretext to undermine civil reason.

5. CONCLUSION

In light of the analysis, it becomes clear that Spinoza's philosophy presented a comprehensive conception of the relationship between religion and politics, through which he laid the foundations for a rational vision aiming to transcend the conflict between religious and civil authorities by building a state that derives its legitimacy from reason rather than from divine delegation. The results reached may be summarized in the following points:

- Spinoza made reason the supreme principle of the political order and regarded the state as a natural extension of the cosmic necessity governing existence. He freed religion from clerical authority and returned it to its ethical domain, considering that

true faith does not contradict reason but is enlightened by it.

- He made “natural right” the foundation of all social organization, wherein freedom is manifested in the human being's awareness of necessity rather than in escape from it. He thus established the idea of the social contract as a rational consensus rather than a renunciation of rights, so that obedience becomes a free act based on conviction rather than coercion.
- He linked justice and equality as the necessary conditions for the stability of the state and the continuity of its unity. He held that patriotism is not built on emotion or fanaticism, but on participation in a just system that guarantees rights and achieves equivalence. Accordingly, he granted the economic dimension a central place in his political philosophy, considering social justice a condition for civil peace.
- He affirmed that religion fulfills its function only when it is subject to the authority of the rational state that preserves its unity and guarantees freedom of conscience. He transformed the concept of piety from submissive obedience into a rational commitment to the common good, thus making ethics the foundation of politics rather than its instrument.

- He regarded freedom of thought and expression as the true pillar of the stability of the state, because free minds are the guardians of a just order. He criticized the theocratic state for merging the sacred with the political and thereby corrupting both, and called for neutralizing theology to protect both religion and the state. He saw in democracy the most complete form of the state, because it achieves a balance between order and freedom and places sovereignty in the general intellect.
- He showed that faith founded on fear produces tyranny, whereas faith enlightened by reason yields peace and justice. He demonstrated that his project was not a rejection of religion but a defense of it against political distortion, seeking to restore its ethical and spiritual status.
- Thus, Spinoza's philosophy laid the first foundation of the modern civil state, in which religion and reason meet in the service of the human being and freedom.

6. Bibliography List:

Al-Shaibani, M. (2009). *Spinoza and Theology, General Syrian Book Authority*. Damascus.

- Al-Shamekh, F. H., & Saeed, J. a.-D. (2008). *Systematic Philosophy and the System of Political Philosophy in Spinoza* (1st ed.). Dar Sinatra for Publishing. Tunis
- Damasio, A. (2003). *Looking for Spinoza*. London: William Heinemann.
- Durant, W. (1998). *The Story of Philosophy: From Plato to John Dewey* (6th ed.). (F. M. Al-Mushasha, Trans.) Dar Maktabat Al-Ma'arif. Beirut
- Fouad Zakaria. (2008). *Spinoza* (1st ed.). Dar Al-Wafaa for World Printing and Publishing. Alexandria.
- Jihaf, M. A.-S. (2008). *Baruch Spinoza: Philosophy and Education*. Queen Arwa University. Sana'a Yemen.
- Karim, Z. A. (2012). *Spinoza: Moral Philosophy* (2nd ed.). Dar Al-Tanweer for Printing and Publishing. Beirut, Lebanon.
- Spinoza, B. (1951). *A Political Treatise*. (R. H. Elwes, Trans.) Dover Publications. New York.
- Spinoza, B. (1995). *A Treatise on Politics*. (O. Mehibel, Trans.) Dar Mofam for Publishing. Algeria.
- Spinoza, B. (2005). *Theological–Political Treatise* (1st ed.). (H. Hanafi, Trans.) Dar Al-Tanweer. Beirut, Lebanon.
- Strauss, L., & Cropsey, J. (2005). *History of Political Philosophy from Thucydides to Spinoza*. (S. Ahmed, Trans.) Supreme Council of Culture. Cairo.
- Wright, W. K. (2005). *A History of Modern Philosophy* (1st ed.). (M. S. Ahmed, Trans.) Dar Al-Nuweir for Printing and Publishing. Cairo.