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Spinoza's Distinction between Religion and Reason *

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Abstract: The main point that Spinoza emphasis in his religious criticism is the distinction that he made between religion and philosophy, also, this is becoming the main topic of Spinoza's book named *Theological-Political Treaties*. Spinoza reveals the inaccuracy of attempting to adapt religion to reason/ philosophy or to adapt reason/philosophy to religion, through the works of two prominent names, Mūsā bin Maimūn (Moses Maimonides) and Juda ben Alpakhar, in the Jewish traditional thought. Although these two thinkers belong to the same tradition and the same faith, they differ from each other in terms of methodology. In this study, firstly, we will examine the opinions of Ibn Maimūn and Alpakhar on the subject and subsequently, we will try to analyze the subject with consideration of Spinoza's criticism and comments related to the subject.

Keywords: Religion, philosophy, reason, criticism of religion, Spinoza, Mūsā ibn Maimūn (Moses Maimonides), Juda ben Alpakhar.

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Introduction

Baruch Spinoza's theological approach is closely related to the general characteristics of 17th Century Western philosophical thought in which Baruch Spinoza grew and lived in. The 17th century is a new philosophical era in every aspect of Western thought history. Descartes (1596-1650) one of the philosophers who played a crucial role in forming the world of thought at that period. Descartes objected to the truth and illogicality of the revelation, on the other hand, he used mathematics as a method to glorify the mind.[1]

Spinoza influenced by Descartes's ideas in different dimensions since Descartes made a similar distinction between reason and religion in his work *Descartes Metaphysical Meditation.*[2] Also, the distinction between theology and philosophy in terms of their content and purpose, that Spinoza indicated, has a very crucial part in Descartes s religious concept.

According to Spinoza, anyone who knows the basis and purpose of religion and philosophy could easily realize that there is a huge gap between these two. In the simplest sense, the main purpose of philosophy is to seek only the truth, but the main purpose of religion is obedience. The ancient stories, a language that has been used in these stories have an essential part in religion, while nature has an essential part in philosophy. Also, religion is generally based on revelation and religious texts.[3]According to Spinoza, the argument about whether the religious text is at the service of the reason or the reason at the service of the religious text and the possibility of adapting religion and reason to each other have been made by those who do not know how to make a distinction between these two disciplines. The defender of the first approach, namely the approach that claims the reli-

1 Ahmet Cevizci, *17. Yüzyıl Felsefesi* (İstanbul: Say Yayınları, 2016), 149.

2 Étienne Balibar, *Spinoza ve Siyaset*, çev. Sanem Soyarslan (İstanbul: Otonom Yayıncılık, 2017), 21.

3 Baruch Spinoza, *Teolojik-Politik İnceleme*, çev. Cemal Bâli Akal and Reyda Ergün (Ankara: Dost Kitabevi, 2016), 220. [Henceforth, with the acronym TTP]

gious texts should be in the service of the reason is named as skeptics, the defenders of the second approach are named as dogmatists. However, the basis of defender of the both climes is not convincing for Spinoza. Because, in such a case if they have to choose one of these approaches, this means, they have to refuse another one, namely reason or religious texts. Also, the religious text does not teach philosophy and its only attempt to teach how to be obedient in accordance with the abilities of the believers. Therefore, the one who tries to adapt the religious text to philosophy will do a vain effort to achieve an impossible work.[4] Likewise, the one who tries to put philosophy into the service of the religion will have to accept the old-time prejudgments as a religious value, since some people have a religious belief which is based on the superstation and prejudgments. Regarding this understanding, people veil many illogical matters with the mask of religion. In Spinoza's opinion, this kind of belief consists of absurdity and a vain, man-made religion. There is a clear dilemma between religion and philosophy and due to this contradiction, one approach must be rejected while the other one has to be accepted as a criterion. Therefore, the attempts for the adaption of these two disciplines will be fruitless and illogical effort.

Spinoza reveals the falsity of the attempts to adapt religion to reason or to adapt reason to religion through the works of two prominent names in the Jewish philosophical tradition. The first of these names is Mūsā ibn Maymūn. In this part, we will closely analyze his approach to the subject.

1. Mūsā ibn Maymūn (Maimonides)

Mūsā ibn Maymūn is one of the most influential names in the Jewish philosophical tradition. Ibn Maimūn is a theologian in addition to his philosopher identity and he was impressed by the Islamic intellectual tradition. His ideas and viewpoint about religion are other points that made him a unique and important name. Although he has the thought that based on Jews discours-

[4] Spinoza, *TTP*, 221.

es, "From Moses to Moses there was no equivalent of Moses"[5] he expressed his contradictory opinions to his traditional intellectual system. Jews did not lean towards the ideas that Ibn Maimūn stated about the relationship between religion and reason

Ibn Maimūn tried to reconcile religion and philosophy through the scope of reason. Specifically, He used the interpretation method to reconcile the differences that arise from these two disciplines.[6] Because, he thought that verses and Holy Text should be analyzed allegorically, by the hermeneutic principle. In this sense, if religious scripts are interpreted in this way, then, it will be seen that the reason and religious scripts are compatible with each other.[7] Since, the revelation just as reason is a natural God's gift to the human being, hence there is no contradiction between these two.[8]

Although Ibn Maimūn has a Philosopher identity, his theologian character is more dominant. Spinoza did not strongly emphasis on the reason, with his theologian identity, especially, while he pointed out the falsity of attempts for adapting religion to reason or adapting reason to religion. Although Ibn Maimūn tried to reconcile the religion and philosophy, he prioritized the revelation in his attempts. Because revelation has a crucial and special place for the salvation of mankind. In this case, the reason is insufficient, and revelation could be taken into consideration as a basic principle.[9] Additionally, in his thought religion is more inclusive and has a larger scope in terms of content and subjects rather than philosophy. Regarding this approach, since the philosophy could not determine the religious principles, it has to continue his existence within the theological framework.

[5] Israil Wilfinson, *Mūsā ibn Maymūn: Ḥayātuh wa Muṣannafātuh* (Cairo: Lajnat at-Ta'līf wa at-Tarjama wa an-Nashr, 1936), 26.

[6] Mūsā ibn Maymūn, *Delâletu'l-Hâirîn*, çev. Osman Bayder and Özcan Akdağ (Kayseri: Kimlik Yayınları, 2019), 70-71.

[7] Leo Strauss, *Spinoza's Critique of Religion* (New York: Schocken Books, 1965), 148.

[8] Ibn Maymūn, *Delâletu'l- Hâirîn*, 40-52.

[9] Strauss, *Spinoza's Critique of Religion*, 147; Ibn Maymūn, *Delâletu'l- Hâirrîn*, 91-92.

Although he considerably influenced by Aristotle, he never accepts the superiority of Aristotle over Moses as well as the superiority of Philosophy over the Torah.[10] He thought, despite philosopher obtains many pearls of wisdom abilities through reason, this does not mean, philosophers could have accessibility to all unlimited knowledge. Besides this, Philosophers do not have the capabilities of accessing to the knowledge about the nature of God and many metaphysical issues with only their wisdom. But he thought that prophets are capable to access this knowledge, due to this fact, prophets are superior to philosophers.[11]

Spinoza criticized Ibn Maimūn, despite his importance a crucial contribution to the field of religious studies. The main point of Spinoza's criticism is the efforts of Ibn Maimūn on the instrumentalization of the reason and in this way attempting to adapt religion to the philosophy. Spinoza objected to the argument of Ibn Maimūn for adapting religion to the reason and on the contrary, Spinoza thought that neither theology should be in the service philosophy nor philosophy should be in the service of theology. Namely, these two disciplines should independently prevail in their fields because the fields that have been dominated by these two disciplines are different from each other. Since the master point in the theological field is devotion and obedience while the reason and wisdom are the masters of philosophy. However, if these two phenomena come together, the occurrence of unresolved dilemmas and conflicts would be inevitable due to their contradiction on the yardsticks and value. Theology only obeys what has been dogmatically ordered by religion, even these orders could be illogical, while the reason does not accept anything without questioning. That is why, these two disciplines must operate and exist freely, and without entering the service to each other.[12]

[10] Hüseyin Karaman, "İbn Meymûn'un Düşüncesinde Aklın Sınırları ve Din-Felsefe İlişkisi," *Dinbilimleri Akademik Araştırma Dergisi* 6, no. 4 (2006), 169.

[11] Ibn Maymūn, *Delâletu'l- Hâirrîn,* s. 91-92.

[12] Spinoza, *TTP*, 222-25.

2. Juda ben Alpakhar

Another name that has been addressed by Spinoza in virtue of his distinctive view on religion and philosophy is Juda ben Alpakhar, the contemporary of Mūsā ibn Maymūn. Although Ibn Maimūn had a remarkable reputation for his lifetime, his view on the compatibility of reason and theology was not accepted by them. Instead, the approach of Jewish theologian Juda ben Alpakhar who thought that the reason should be in the service of the religion/ theology was mostly welcomed at that time.

Alpakhar acknowledges that some statements in the religious scripts could be opposite to the reason. However, he underlined that this is not resulting from religious scripts itself but from misinterpretation that has been made. Merely, he said that these opposite statements do not originate from the holy script itself but from misusing of some certain expressions. According to Alpakhar, the meaning and content of the holy text are not problematic directly. This demonstrates that there is no irrationality in the scriptures, but the uniqueness of the expression in the holy text causes the argument of irrationality. In some specific cases, the statements in the holy text could be explained via metaphors. For instance, the Bible clearly said that God is one[13] no statement claims God is not one in the scriptures. In some sections of the holy text, God uses the plural suffix, when he speaks about himself and the prophets. Naturally, it cannot be a deduction from these statements that God is not one. Therefore, the sections that have such expressions should be interpreted metaphorically. Because in the holy text it is clearly stated that God is one. Also, there are some physical definitions such as the hand, foot and face of God, in some chapters of the holy text, but regarding the previous verse these definitions should be interpreted metaphorically.[14]

To Alpakhar, the definition of whether something right or

[13] Yasa'nın Tekrarı, 6:4.
[14] Spinoza, *TTP*, 222.

wrong depends on the approval of the Holy Text. This means that Holy Text does not change its approach towards approvals and rejections on a subject in other chapters. In another word, the holy text has internal consistency. That is why he stated that every expression in the holy text that refers to God must be accepted as absolute truth. Regarding this, in the case of encountering contradict expressions in the Scriptures, one should seek the real meaning by interpreting and referring to other chapters of Holy Text.[15]

Spinoza appreciates Alpakhar's interpretation studies on Holy Text. Also, Spinoza finds his work very ironic, how one can object to rationalism while using the rational method. Since, the method should be accurate to be used, to understand the internal consistency of the scripture and determine the veracity of the messages that the prophets brought to the people. By considering this method, then, we will obligatorily use our reason and our related judgments for comprehending what has been stated in the scriptures. If our reason cannot be compatible with religious texts, even if in such a case, how one can determine this without applying to a rational method or reason? Is this should be done by resorting to reason or by excluding the reason completely? Spinoza tried to find answers to these questions. On one hand, if one completely excludes rational methods, this would be an inane approach according to Spinoza. On the other hand, if one only uses rational methods, in this case, scripture would only be under the authority of the reason. Spinoza did severe criticism of the irrational method that has been used in interpreting Scripture. He said that if the scriptures all opposed to the reason, then, we would not accept it or we would turn over it via our mind to reasonable it. Also, the efforts for bringing the Holy Text to the reason will eventuate that some changes should be done to make religion and reason closer to each other. Those who completely exclude the mind from the process for avoiding this dilemma will have to exclude the Divine light(reason), which is the great-

[15] Spinoza, *TTP*, 224.

est God gift that has been given to mankind. To Spinoza, this is not the right method. Since the real text of God and the noumenal one is the human mind itself. Rejecting this reality will put one in the equal condition of a blind one, that lost his way.[16]

To Spinoza, Alpakhar's argument on the internal consistency of the Holy Text is invalid. Because, first of all, is the Holy Text is consisting of several other scriptures, it has been written at a different time and by different writers. Therefore, taking this kind of text as a standard for the accuracy and rightness and wrongness in such a circumstance will cause problems in terms of internal consistency of the text. Also, Spinoza indicates that Alpakhar's argument about the internal consistency of the holy text is his interpretation. To Spinoza, if he had followed the methods listed below, instead of insisting on the internal consistency of the holy text, his argument would have been on a more coherent ground,

1. Considering the linguistic Structure and the context of the holy scripture.
2. Interpreting the irrational parts metaphorically.
3. Finally, indicating that the holy scripture has not been distorted up until now.[17]

Besides these suggestions, Spinoza asks another question related to the subject: Do we have to consider the holy text as the only authority instead of reason? In response to this question, the possible answer to Alpakhar would be, there is nothing unreasonable in the scripture. Spinoza gives an example of the subject from the scripture. If there is not any contradiction in the scripture, as Alpakhar argued, then how should we understand from the state of the scripture that says God is jealous? If we consider the Holy Text itself as an only criterion in this case, will we understand this statement as it is written in the holy text?

Likewise, if there is a statement that has completely opposite

[16] Spinoza, *TTP*, 222-23.
[17] Spinoza, *TTP*, 224.

meaning to this statement, will we explain it metaphorically as a way of solution.[18] Spinoza pointed out that there are many similar examples in the scripture. For example, in some passages, God is described as motionless, but in other passages, God is depicted as a creator that in a certain place and dynamic.[19] According to Spinoza, the reason for this kind of statement is for adapting the Holy Text to the level of comprehension of ordinary people. However, to Spinoza, we learned this method via reason and philosophy, not from scripture/ we have been taught this method by reason and philosophy, not by holy text. on the one hand, to Alpakhar, these kinds of statements and their meanings also should be considered as truth. On the other hand, to Spinoza, the reason is the only way to determine right from wrong. Alpakhar does not consider reason as a determinant criterion.

To Alpakhar, the Scripture is the only and true authority and every statement in it must be considered as absolute truth. Also, Spinoza does not agree with Alpakhar s ideas that arguing the contradiction between the chapters does not originate from the statements of scripture itself, but it is originated from not interpreting the statements directly. in such a case, how we will explain the fact of the differences between the statement in the scriptures that said God is fire[20] and statement that said God is not like anything[21] in the visible realm, which is on the contrary of Alpakhar's argument. Regarding these, if we consider Alpakhar's approach which is defending that contradiction of these statements originates from indirect interpretations, then we will consider the first statement as absolute truth and believe that God is fire, with a direct interpretation? Spinoza finds this is an inconsistent and absurd explanation.[22] Spinoza says that the approach which is considering the Scripture as the sole authority lead Alpakhar to a deadlock. if we consider what scripture says

[18] Spinoza, *TTP*, 224.
[19] Mısır'dan Çıkış, 19:20.
[20] Yasa'nın Tekrarı, 6:24.
[21] Yasa'nın Tekrarı, 4:12.
[22] Spinoza, *TTP*, 224-25.

right as right and wrong as wrong, then we have to accept both of these opposite statements as truth, which is logically impossible. Additionally, Spinoza objected to Alpakhar's statements concerning the contradiction in the scripture to the indirect interpretations. Also, Spinoza finds Alpakhar's statements on the contradiction in the scripture are senseless and as evidence of this, he indicates the existing contradictions in any chapters of the Holy Text. Moreover, he argued that these statements are contradictory in terms of their consequences, but this does not change the fact of their contradiction.

Spinoza states that he has difficulty in understanding the cause of prejudice against reason and cannot make sense of it. Is it not possible to defend his faith without rejecting or turning his back to reason? Does not even the prejudice of a person against reason show that his distrustfulness to the Scripture? If one believes that his own belief is true, then why he is afraid to resort to reason. Spinoza came to the conclusion that the view of those who argue that religion must be in the service of the reason or reason must be in the service of religion and they cannot rule/operate in a separate field are wrong. Spinoza criticized the religious view and argument of the masses based on dogmatic and superstitions, as well as criticized the arguments of philosophers such as Ibn Maimūn and Alpakhar in the field of religion without hesitation. Particularly, his criticism on religion was not directed towards a certain religion and certain persons, but rather than this, towards the illogical approach and arguments that have been produced by them. Another point that related to the issue and Spinoza pointed out that he has difficulty to understand people who defining their suspect about reason and their judgment as a pure faith, and blaming those who are skeptical about the people that convey the messages of the scriptures to us as a faithless. This kind of attitude is "not a religious devotion but pure foolishness", according to Spinoza.[23]

[23] Spinoza, *TTP,* 223.

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We have explained Spinoza's ideas about the arguments of Ibn Maimūn and Alpakhar on the relationship between religion and philosophy so far. We see that he criticized both approaches. Well then, what is Spinoza's argument about the relationship between religion and philosophy. Spinoza defines reason as the light of the mind in respect of the relationship between religion and reason. Also, he defines the Scripture as a synonym of revelation and the word of God. To Spinoza, revelation, namely, the word of God is not only restricted to a certain number of books. Because the scripture is meant to understand the mind of the prophets. Comprehending the divine mind is something else. Comprehending the divine mind is meant to understand the reality of things, beings without any intermediaries. Spinoza argued the universality of theology.[24]

To Spinoza, the real meaning of the scripture should be derived only from its history, not from the principal of the universality. Because the principle of universal history forms the basis of philosophy. The meaning of the scripture should be deduced from its history and at this stage, even if we deduced irrational meaning from the scripture, still this should not stop us. For, the things that we comprehend by our minds are opposed to religion and words of God. Therefore, in such cases, people are free to think as they will. Because, the unreasonable adscititious issues in the scriptures are consist of insignificant social and personal matters or they have been added to the scripture, not the main issues matter.[25]

Spinoza tries to prove the distinction between religion and philosophy/reason by relying on the thesis that the nature of these two disciplines is different. He is questioning the possibility of establishing the accuracy and inaccuracy of the view on people who could be only saved by obedience. In this case, if one believes blindfolded and without resorting to reason, then he will be alike desperate and mindless people. Additionally, at-

[24] Spinoza, *TTP*, 226.
[25] Spinoza, *TTP*, 226.

tempting to determine this by relying on reason, will also make theology/ religion as a part of the activity of the mind. Spinoza makes this explanation regarding these two contradictions: no one can explain the dogma of theology with the reason (*natural light*) and it is not possible. In this condition, revelation remains as the only source to be consulted. However, we can consult our judgment to determine the reality or rather than this the morality of revelation.

To Spinoza, the preciseness which is essential for the prophets is essential for the scriptures as well, since the authority of the scriptures is based on the authority of the prophecy. In this case, the holy text truth depends on the preciseness of morality. We cannot expect from a prophet, that is sent by God and convey his messages, to go beyond revelation to determine the reality of it. However, we could consider moral certainty as to the yardstick of revelation. In this sense, Spinoza infers that the messages are conveyed by religion and prophets and have moral aspect could be considered as a basis, the matters out of this aspect cannot be explained by reason. The religion that Spinoza mentioned as a religion cannot be explained by reason, it is based on revelation and the outside of moral teachings.

We have tried to demonstrate the definitions of Spinoza about how the relationship between religion and philosophy should be. Hereby, we will try to examine how Spinoza grounded his argument that theology and philosophy are independent fields.

Spinoza makes mention of those who claim that theology and philosophy in conflict with each other and they argue that when one of these two (religion and philosophy) should not exist in the influence area of the other. Although he generally criticizes both sides his main criticism towards those who prioritize theology and use mathematical methods and reason to strengthen its ground. Regarding this point, the person that Spinoza referred to as Ibn Maimūn. To Spinoza, this approach has an exact contradiction. Because Ibn Maimūn again has to consult to rea-

son even when he wants to prevail it from the field of theology. However, with this approach, they put theology under the authority of reason. Besides, consulting to the reason for such an aim will conclude that theology is insufficient and will be in deficiency without reason. Also, Spinoza finds the attempts of the people who consulting a rational approach to persuade irreligious people unrealistic. Especially, he does not find adequate their statements on linking this attempt with the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit is consisting of a peaceful mind that occurs only because of good deeds. However, for other issues reason must get involved. Because the existence of reason is necessary for reality.[26]

As can be seen, Spinoza's approach in general based on the distinction of religion and reason/philosophy, namely, these two disciplines should not be in the service of each other and both religion and reason should rule over freely on their specific ground. But this issue merely raises the following questions: Does not mean that Spinoza, who considers the reason as a yardstick in field of religion and as a rationalist philosopher, has contradiction when he says that there should be the distinction between reason and religion and while he somehow advocates, with Wolfson's terms, '*the religion of reason*'[27] Actually, we can find the answer to this question through the background of his statements. Spinoza discusses religion and reason as two disciplines that should freely obtain in their field. Nevertheless, these two disciplines are needed and in total harmony with each other in terms of purposes.[28] Spinoza distinguishes these two disciplines from each other, but in the meanwhile combine them. Based on the general argument of Spinoza. We can say that religion and reason can obtain independently, but also, they could peacefully live together for the common purposes that they have.

[26] Spinoza, *TTP*, 228-29.

[27] Harry Austryn Wolfson, *The Philosophy of Spinoza* (Cleveland and New York: Meridian Books. 1961), II, 328.

[28] Musa Kazım Arıcan, *Spinoza Felsefesi Üzerine Yazılar* (İstanbul: Divan Kitap, 2015), 184.

Reason and religion could be interpreted as two reflections of the same truth, within the context of Spinoza's conception.

To Spinoza, God has given natural light (reason) characteristics to all minds. All the religions, that have a longstanding, essentially express the truths that have been pointed out or found by natural light (reason) as truth.[29] However, within time, people and theologians have distorted religions for the sake of some certain benefits.

The main purpose of Spinoza is going beyond the dogmatic religious perspective that exists in his period, to arguable religion philosophically. Dogmatics perceive the truths as they are written in the religious text. Namely, they do not accept that the views in the Scriptures are negotiable. However, Spinoza, unlike dogmatic, tries to retrieve the supra-rational and contra rational knowledge in the Scripture from the revelation ground.

Conclusion

Spinoza states that religion and philosophy are different in terms of purpose and content, hence they must exist and continue independently. Because, obedience is prevalent in theology, while the reality is prevalent in philosophy. In this sense, Spinoza mainly criticized Ibn Maimūn, who tries to reconcile religion and philosophy through the scope of reason, and Alpakhar, who argues that the reason should be in the service of religion. In this respect, Spinoza did not only criticize the religious conception and arguments of the cases following dogmatics and superstition. But also criticize the views of philosophers such as Ibn Maimūn and Alpakhars about religion. The fact that his criticism towards two important names of Jewish tradition, also shows that he has made an internal criticism about the subject.

Finally, the main reason for his distinction that he made between religion and philosophy is similar to the general purpose of his work named *Theological and Political* Studies *(TTP)*. Be-

[29] Spinoza, *TTP*, 95-105.

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cause, when we carefully analysis his book *TTP*, we can see that the idea of separation of political power and theology and in parallel with that religion and philosophy should be discussed separately. His aim primarily is establishing political freedom, establishing freedom of belief and differentiating reason and religion from each other. In this sense, even though Spinoza tries to explain the issues as a purely religious matter through the examples from the Scriptures, he added a political purpose in the matter.

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