SPINOZA AND THE RELIGIOUS RADICAL ENLIGHTENMENT

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The Radical Enlightenment, being characterized above all by its unrelenting insistence on philosophical reason as the sole and exclusive guide in human life, was predominantly a secular, anti-religious and atheistic as well as democratic tendency. But it was by no means wholly devoid of support from within the religious camp. Dutch and Anglo-American Unitarianism in particular showed a certain proclivity to align with Spinozist and materialist as well as democratic positions. This paper seeks to sketch elements of what can be seen as an enduring alliance between mainstream Radical Enlightenment and at least some sections of the Socinian tradition.

As several scholars have emphasized,¹ Spinoza’s close friends, associates and allies can usefully be divided into two distinct groups. On the one hand there were the secular libertines and radical Cartesians, such as Franciscus van den Enden, Lodewijk Meyer and Adriaen Koerbagh, men who never seriously invoked divine Providence, Revelation, or the light of divine inspiration. This group employed no genuinely theological categories in their arguments and sometimes spoke slightingly, as Meyer and Koerbagh do in a number of passages, of even the most radical religious fringe, Socinianism.² Their writings entailed a more or less complete break with religion, discarding all allegiance to religious values. No less intimate friends of Spinoza, on the other hand, were Pieter Balling (d. 1669) who translated much of his earlier work into Dutch, Jarig Jelles (c. 1620–83), a particularly long-standing friend of more than twenty years, who composed the Preface to the *Opera Posthuma*, in 1677, and Jan Rieuwertsz (c. 1616–87), the Amsterdam publisher who published and distributed all his books, including those needing to be sold illegally and clandestinely,

¹ Most forcefully and interestingly, Wiep van Bunge who has developed this point in his *Johannes Bredenburg (1643–1691), Een Rotterdamse Collegiant* (Rotterdam, 1990), and in his ‘Rationaliteit en Verlichting’, *De Achttiende Eeuw*, xxxii, (2000), 145–64.

that is everything he published after 1663. These too were known to be close students of Spinoza’s writings, sympathetic to and immersed in his philosophical system, while at the same time remaining sincere Christians of a particular stamp.3 These friends were all ‘Collegiants’, that is, they belonged to the influential group of deeply pious and sincere, often anti-Trinitarian believers, who had established themselves since the second quarter of the seventeenth century in Amsterdam, Rotterdam and in the village of Rijnsburg, near Leiden.

All Collegiants were highly heterodox by definition, rejected all forms of organized priesthood or clergy, and entirely repudiated the principle of ecclesiastical authority and church discipline. But they also divided among themselves into several different theological streams. Only some, perhaps a minority, were principled anti-Trinitarians who systematically combined anti-Trinitarianism with a general willingness to abandon Biblical literalism. While all Socinians identified the light of reason as Man’s chief guide in matters of faith and Biblical interpretation, probably only a small minority, much as with the English Unitarians in the late eighteenth century, took this rule to the point of insisting on a close symbiosis of theology and philosophy, and merging the light of reason in Bible scholarship with the rational explanation of nature’s laws, with the philosophical-scientific reason of Descartes and Spinoza.4

Other fervently committed Collegiants who knew Spinoza personally, such as Pieter Serrarius (1600–69), a Spiritualist fringe theologian who, as we see from Spinoza’s correspondence, remained in regular contact with him for some years,5 did adhere to the doctrine of the Trinity and other ‘mysteries’. They therefore continued to believe in the divinity of Christ and the miraculous nature of man’s salvation through Christ, showing no inclination to embrace Spinozism as a creed that could be fused or combined with their particular version of Christianity. Hence, it was only one strand of the Collegiants that can be characterized as firmly anti-Trinitarian.

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