SPINOZA IN ZEELAND: THE GROWTH AND SUPPRESSION
OF ‘POPULAR SPINOZISM’ (c. 1700-1720)

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Recent studies have shown that in the Netherlands, Spinoza’s home
country, his ideas were taken up and propagated at a very early
stage, sometimes even before they were published.¹ His views on
the identity of God and nature, on the absolute necessity of all
things, on reason as the way to truth and salvation, as well as his
Biblical criticism, provoked lengthy discussions within small groups
of dissenters such as the Mennonites and Collegiants. One famous
example of this is, of course, the series of Bredenburg debates. But
even within strict Calvinism, Spinoza’s philosophy seems to have
met with sympathy, as can be seen from the cases of the Koerbagh
brothers or Johannes Duijkerius, all of whom were members of the
Reformed Church. Many more instances could be given, but it is
clear that soon after his death Spinoza’s ideas had become part and
parcel of Dutch intellectual life. It is also clear, however, that as these
ideas spread, opposition to them increased. While the earlier refuta-
tions of Spinoza had come mainly from Cartesians, whose moderate
stance was being discredited by Spinoza’s radicalism, with the
decline of Cartesianism itself the threat of Spinozism took on a new
dimension. It was no longer the acceptability of Cartesianism that
was at stake. Many thought that the very foundations of church and
state were being undermined by the diffusion and acceptance
among large numbers of people of a radically different world-view.
Since Spinoza’s writings were available in the vernacular, his influ-
ence was indeed not likely to remain confined to the learned.

In the Dutch province of Zeeland, which in the 1670’s had already
been deeply disturbed by religious and political divisions, the grad-
ual spread of heterodox notions in the last two decades of the sev-
enteenth century provoked new fears of instability. In 1683, a

¹ H.J. Siebrand, Spinoza and the Netherlanders. An Inquiry into the Early Reception
of His Philosophy of Religion (Assen-Maastricht, 1988); L. van Bunge, Johannes Bredenburg
famous proponent of heterodox opinions, the Reformed pastor of the village of St. Philipsland, Pontiaan van Hattem (1645-1706), had been removed from office. He was able to continue to teach, however, and had a large following in many local towns and villages. Although he was accused of Spinozism by many of his opponents, the present view is that there were no more than marginal similarities between the two men’s systems. Van Hattem’s main object, like that of his antinomian contemporary Jacobus Verschoor (1648–1700) of Vlissingen, was to cleanse the Dutch Reformed Church of one of the last remaining elements of “popery”, namely, the belief that salvation was to be gained through obedience to Divine law. According to Van Hattem, the atonement achieved through Christ’s death has freed us from the law, so that true worship consists in letting God take over our imperfect selves or “nothings” through Christ, and so make us merge into the Divine Absolute. We must be felt to be nothing, while God becomes our all. When we have reached this level of understanding, the concepts of good and evil, sin and retribution lose their meaning, since they have no existence in God. The true church consists of all those who have been united with God. For them, neither finite reason nor the literal meaning of Scripture can be used to settle matters in religious disputes. Van Hattem therefore pleaded for the abolition of all instruments of confessionalism, such as synods and orders, and for complete tolerance.

Even this short summary should make it evident that Van Hattem shared certain important conceptions with Spinoza. Let us concentrate on one of them—the idea of salvation. Both thinkers agree that man can attain salvation by recognising that he is part of the absolute unity of God, or as Spinoza called it, “the unity of the mind
