PHILOSOPHICAL RELIGIONS from Plato to Spinoza

Reason, Religion, and Autonomy

CARLOS FRAENKEL

CAMBRIDGE

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Preface

In this book I lay the groundwork for understanding and tracing the history of what I call a philosophical religion. Proponents of a philosophical religion conceive the relationship between reason and religion in a way that at first looks unfamiliar. Since the Enlightenment religion's critics claim that religion is an obstacle to the emancipation of reason. Instead of knowledge, religion promotes ignorance in form of fables and superstition. Instead of autonomy it preaches submission to God by rousing irrational fears of punishment and hopes for reward. If we choose to follow reason, religious beliefs and practices have no place in our life. To proponents of a philosophical religion these criticisms would sound strange. The projects of reason and religion, they hold, cannot be meaningfully distinguished at all. The core purpose of religion is to direct us to a life that is guided by reason towards the perfection of reason. For the best and most blissful life is the life of contemplation, culminating in knowledge of God. God himself, they argue, is the perfect model of this life. Being pure Reason, he eternally knows and enjoys the truth, unencumbered by hunger, pain, ignorance, and other afflictions that come with being embodied. The task of religion is to make us as much like God as possible. Plato marks the beginning: laws, he contends, are divine if they direct us to "Reason who rules all things" (*Leg.* 631d). The same idea is still echoed in Spinoza: while human laws aim only at prosperity and peace, divine laws aim at "the true knowledge and love of God" (*TTP* 4.3/50). Under ideal circumstances there would be no need for laws at all: everyone would know what is right and be motivated to do it by the desire to become like God through contemplation. In the ideal religious community, therefore, God's rule and self-rule coincide.

At first view a philosophical religion seems to have little in common with the historical forms of religions like Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. How can it accommodate their laws, stories, exhortations, and practices of worship? And how does the concept of God as Reason square with the

God of Scripture who speaks, gives laws, performs miracles, gets angry, has mercy, and so forth? Proponents of a philosophical religion reply that, alas, not everyone is cut out for the philosophical life. Hence prophets must put a pedagogical-political program in place that can offer guidance to non-philosophers. This program's role is to serve as *philosophy's handmaid*. It establishes beliefs, practices, and institutions that imitate philosophy to give non-philosophers a share in the perfection that philosophy affords. On this picture, the difference between the philosopher and the prophet comes down to this: while both have knowledge of the good, the prophet is also an accomplished legislator, poet, and orator, skills that allow him to convey the good to non-philosophers and motivate them to do it. Think of a doctor's prescriptions for a healthy regime and the reasons he gives for following these prescriptions. This is what a religion's laws and narratives are like. But is this not cheating? Must the prescriptions not be dictated by God to count as divine? Although proponents of a philosophical religion recognize that imagining God as a lawgiver is important for pedagogical reasons, they consider it philosophically unsound. In fact, all anthropomorphic features of God in the Bible or the Koran are educational devices for non-philosophers. Yet philosophers agree with non-philosophers on the divine nature of the laws. God is their source because all rational insight depends on God, including the knowledge of the good that divine laws embody. In this sense rational insight *is* revelation. And God is also their final cause, the end "for the sake of which wisdom commands" as Aristotle puts it (*EE* 8.3, 1249b14–15).

Must non-philosophers be coerced to obey divine laws? True, the *best possible* religious community falls short of the *ideal* religious community in which everyone is a doctor following his own prescriptions. But it strives to realize this ideal as much as possible given that most of its members are imperfectly rational. A core thesis of my book is that for proponents of a philosophical religion one of religion's main aims is to lead all members of the religious community to the highest level of *rational autonomy* they can attain. Consider the example of Plato's *Phaedrus*: Socrates does not explain to Phaedrus "what the soul actually is" (246a) but illustrates it through the image of a charioteer with two horses. He then goes on to describe the relation between the soul's different parts on the basis of this image, and explains what causes the embodiment of the soul and how different ways of living influence the soul's current state and its fate in the future. The story thus provides non-philosophers like Phaedrus with a notion of the soul's structure and of the kind of behavior which, given this structure, is good or bad for the soul. Although based on an image of Plato's philosophical

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psychology and its moral implications, it gives Phaedrus conceptual tools with which he can decide on his own what the right thing to do is.[1] The Bible and the Koran, on this view, explain the order of things and our place in that order in lay terms. Both the philosopher and the non-philosopher thus know the reasons for the prescriptions they follow, only that the former has expert knowledge, the latter lay knowledge.

One problem with this view is that the soul is not a charioteer with two horses. If that is the model for prophetic parables they seem to be pedagogically well-intentioned falsehoods. Is the God who speaks, gives laws, and so forth nothing but a noble lie? To defuse this concern proponents of a philosophical religion argue that only taken literally the parables are false. Their allegorical content, by contrast, is true. In the case of the *Phaedrus*, for example, the charioteer and the two horses stand for the three parts of the soul: reason, spirit, and appetite. Or take the representation of God as a king in the Bible: it allegorically indicates that God occupies the first rank in existence. Allegorical interpretation thus rescues the truth of the text.

A more serious problem is that, while Plato *is* a philosopher who puts his poetic skills to philosophical use in the *Phaedrus* and elsewhere, the same cannot be said for the historical founders of a religion, for example Moses, Christ, or Muhammad. After all, the actual beliefs, practices, and institutions of Jews, Christians, and Muslims lack a philosophical foundation. When prophets describe God as a king they are not really teaching metaphysics through parables. The question, then, is how a pedagogical-political program, conceived by philosophers, should be related to the non-philosophical contents of a religious tradition. One possibility is a *cultural revolution*: the old beliefs, practices, and institutions are replaced by those that the philosophers worked out. Most proponents of a philosophical religion, however, opt for a less violent solution. The historical beliefs, practices, and institutions, they contend, were in fact established by philosopher-rulers. Hence they need not be replaced but only restored to their original purpose. Proponents of a philosophical religion can then engage in the *philosophical reinterpretation* of these beliefs, practices, and institutions *as if* they had been put in place by philosopher-rulers with the aim of ordering the community towards a philosophical concept of the good. Since Spinoza, advocates of the historical-critical method object to this kind of camouflage. It has, however, an obvious pay-off: widely accepted cultural-religious forms are turned into vehicles of enlightenment.

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[1] Note that most philosophers I discuss in this book consider Plato to be a model of prophetic discourse.

Although daring, this interpretation of religion was by no means marginal. It was set forth by pagan philosophers and their Jewish, Christian, and Muslim heirs in many contexts from antiquity to the early modern period. The divine laws of Magnesia – the fictional Cretan colony discussed in Plato's *Laws* – mark the starting point. They are based on the systematic claim that a pedagogical-political program is necessary to guide imperfectly rational members of the community and the empirical claim that existing Greek cultural forms, properly reinterpreted, fulfill this purpose. But if Greek cultural forms can be reinterpreted in this way, why not the historical forms of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam? Consider Philo Judaeus whose work represents the intellectual culmination of the encounter between Greek culture and the Jewish Diaspora in ancient Alexandria. What Plato does for the Greeks, Philo does for the Jews: he philosophically reinterprets the Bible's legal and narrative contents *as if* Moses had been an outstanding philosopher-legislator. Although proponents of a philosophical religion belong to different times and places, as well as to different linguistic and religious communities, the question how to reconcile their philosophical commitments with beliefs, practices, and institutions that lack philosophical content is a key question for all of them. They do not always carry out the project of reinterpretation on as large a scale as Plato or Philo. But they adopt the project's underlying premises and portray their religion's laws, stories, exhortations, and practices of worship as philosophy's handmaid which direct imperfectly rational members of the community to a philosophically grounded concept of the good.

In ancient Alexandria Plato's model is used in the first centuries of the Common Era to interpret Judaism and Christianity as philosophical religions, most notably by Philo and Philo's Christian students, Clement and Origen. With the Christian version the project's scope becomes universal: the community to be ordered is no longer limited to Greeks or Jews, but extends to humankind as a whole. An attempt to politically implement Christianity as a philosophical religion is made by Eusebius of Caesarea who tries to turn Constantine the Great into a philosopher-king. From a fictional Cretan colony, then, we arrive at the concept of a Christian world-state whose citizens strive for Godlikeness by living a life ordered by reason towards the perfection of reason.

Al-Fārābī, Averroes, and Maimonides illustrate well how Plato's model is used in the early Middle Ages for interpreting Islam and Judaism as philosophical religions. The historical forms of a religious tradition, al-Fārābī argues, are an "imitation" of philosophy (*Taḥṣīl*, 185/44) whose purpose is to offer pedagogical-political guidance to non-philosophers. He does not explicitly identify this concept of religion with Islam, but stresses the possibility of a plurality of excellent religions that share a true core embedded in different cultural materials. Each has its own *couleur locale*, as it were. Al-Fārābī's aim is to provide a general model that can be used to philosophically reinterpret the beliefs, practices, and institutions of the religious communities living side by side in the Islamic world. Averroes and Maimonides, in turn, do just that: they apply al-Fārābī's model to the interpretation of Islam and Judaism as philosophical religions.

The reception of Greco-Arabic philosophy and science in Christian Europe did not revive the interpretation of Christianity as a philosophical religion. Although the relationship between philosophy and Christianity took on different forms, philosophy never became the core of religion in the way it did for Muslim and Jewish philosophers. Hence the last champions of a philosophical religion on a large scale were Maimonides's Jewish students in medieval Europe. This tradition seems to come to a close with Spinoza's critique of religion in the *Theological-Political Treatise*. The historical-critical method discloses an emperor without clothes. Read on its own terms, Spinoza argues, the Bible contains no evidence for the claim that the prophets were accomplished philosophers who set up a pedagogical-political program to guide non-philosophers. Does Spinoza, then, mark the end of the story? An important aim of my book is to revise the received wisdom on Spinoza. His primary concern, I argue, is to offer a philosophical reinterpretation of Christianity. His celebrated critique of religion, on the other hand, is a secondary project. Indeed, in a state based on Spinoza's theological-political principles, bookstores would arguably not sell the *TTP*. Why, then, did Spinoza remove the cornerstone of religion by arguing that Scripture is not true? He seems to have concluded that from the standpoint of a philosophical religion he could not efficiently avert the threat posed by the Calvinist church to the freedom of thought and expression in the Netherlands. At the same time he remained convinced that religion as philosophy's handmaid is crucial to ensure God's rule over imperfectly rational citizens. There is, then, an unresolved tension in Spinoza's approach to religion.

The hermeneutic strategies employed by proponents of a philosophical religion remain attractive well into the nineteenth century. Despite Spinoza's critique of religion, Lessing, Kant, and Hegel, for example, have no qualms about using them. Also the new science of the early modern period cannot account for the demise of this approach to religion. Consider the deism of Voltaire, one of religion's fiercest critics: it surely is more, not less, hospitable to the historical forms of religion than the austere concept of God as Reason, let alone Spinoza's *Deus sive Natura*. The main objection against philosophical religions stems from a new *moral* paradigm that emerges in the eighteenth century. According to this paradigm we all "have an equal ability to see for ourselves what morality calls for and are . . . equally able to move ourselves accordingly."[2] If the equality thesis is true there is no justification for a pedagogical-political program based on the ultimately paternalist premise that most of us are unable to fully rule ourselves.

Had everyone heeded Kant's call in *What is Enlightenment* to replace books and priests with rational self-rule, the concept of a philosophical religion would indeed be obsolete. There would be no need to engage religious beliefs, practices, and institutions if secularization had gradually purged the world of them. A look around us, however, is enough to reveal that the secularization thesis is in trouble. Many citizens choose to live according to God's will as interpreted by their books and priests. A shift in liberal political theory with respect to the justification of political norms is instructive in this regard. A pressing question is how citizens who submit to God's will can be led to endorse the norms of a liberal state which are only valid if its free and equal citizens consent to them. Appealing to reason is not enough in the case of citizens for whom reason holds less authority than God. A prominent alternative these days is the "overlapping consensus": secular citizens endorse freedom, equality, and tolerance for secular reasons and religious citizens for religious reasons.[3] This is where the dilemma that Spinoza left us comes to bear. The historical-critical method which the *TTP*'s critique of religion helped establish is our best bet to get to the true meaning of religious texts. At the same time it leaves us with no respectable option for interpreting religious texts in light of intellectual commitments external to them. Attaining an overlapping consensus, however, clearly depends on philosophical reinterpretation. For let us be honest: the endorsement of freedom, equality, and tolerance are not prominent features of Judaism, Christianity, or Islam in their historical forms. To make Moses, Christ, and Muhammad teach freedom, equality, and tolerance is, of course, no greater hermeneutic challenge than making them teach the ideal of Godlikeness through contemplation. Yet at any university in the Western world students who make either of these claims would rightly fail their introduction to the Bible or the Koran.

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[2] Schneewind (1998), 4.

[3] The precise role of the overlapping consensus is disputed and its scope and content vary from author to author. It is also just one of many attempts to reconcile a religious or cultural tradition with beliefs, practices, and institutions external to it. See the epilogue for a more detailed discussion.

Acknowledgments

Questions about philosophy and religion accompanied me from early on. A former neighbor in Maria Veen, the small German town in which I spent part of my childhood, recalls that her son and I discussed God's existence in the sandbox (unfortunately she does not remember who argued for and who against it).

A more immediate context was three years of graduate studies at The Hebrew University in Jerusalem in the 1990s. I was both puzzled and intrigued by scholars who combined a Spinozistic mindset with strict religious observance. In a sense this book is an attempt to solve what then seemed like a paradox to me.

Along the way I had the privilege of finding many friends and colleagues to share my puzzlements with. I am particularly thankful to Stephen Menn, who accompanied this book from the beginning with his signature intellectual curiosity, rigor, and generosity.

Much progress was made during the fall of 2007, which I spent as a Friedrich-Solmsen fellow at the Institute for Research in the Humanities at the University of Madison-Wisconsin. I am grateful to Susan Friedman, the Institute's director; Loretta Freiling, the Institute's administrative heart; and a stimulating group of fellows who made the months in Madison pleasant and intellectually rewarding. The opportunity to discuss Spinoza and other things with Steven Nadler and his students was a much appreciated bonus.

Things started coming together in 2009–10 when I was a member of the School of Historical Studies at the Institute for Advanced Study in Princeton. I warmly thank Jonathan Israel for many hours of probing discussions; that my medieval Spinoza and his iconoclastic Spinoza sparred at times made it all the more exciting. All the faculty members generously shared their time and knowledge. I particularly benefited from conversations with Patricia Crone, Avishai Margalit, Heinrich von Staden, and Michael Walzer. I also learned much from my fellow members who worked on topics from ancient Egypt to modern China (and everything in between). Most helpful

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for my immediate concerns were discussions with Julie Cooper, Sarah Hutton, Yuval Jobani, Thomas Laqueuer, Michael Lurie, and Thomas Maissen. While in the neighborhood I also took advantage of Daniel Garber's vast knowledge, as well as of the Early Modern Philosophy Workshop that he organizes at Princeton.

Maurice Kriegel gave me the opportunity to present large parts of the project to an academic audience in Paris, where I spent November and December of 2010 as a visiting professor at the École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales. One could not hope for a better and more stimulating host than Maurice.

At McGill University where I have been teaching for more than a decade, I found a supportive environment in my two home departments, philosophy and Jewish studies. I benefited in particular from discussions with Larry Kaplan, Torrance Kirby, Alison Laywine, and Calvin Normore. For a lively intellectual setting I thank my colleagues from the McGill Research Group on Transmission, Translation, and Transformation in Medieval Cultures: Jamie Fumo, Cecily Hilsdale, Jamil Ragep, Faith Wallis, and Robert Wisnovsky. The same goes for the co-organizers of the Montreal Workshop in the History of Philosophy: Sara Magrin, Dario Perinetti, and Justin Smith.

I have been talking about philosophical religions for too long I fear. Colleagues who invited me to lecture on this project or gave me feedback on parts of it include Peter Adamson, Anna Akasoy and Guido Giglione, Marcio Damin, Michael Della Rocca, Erik Dreff, Otfried Fraisse, Gad Freudenthal, Rachel Haliva, Zeev Harvey, Dag Hasse, Klaus Herrmann, Holger Klärner, Yitzhak Melamed, Ohad Nachtomy, and Richard Taylor. I am also thankful to three graduate students who assisted me with technical and substantive matters at the final stage of the manuscript: Alex Anderson, Luis Fontes, and Bilal Ibrahim.

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Half-cooked thoughts on various aspects of the project were published in articles that I list in the bibliography. Given the project's scope, things will likely never feel quite *à point*, but I hope the book gives an idea of how the pieces of the puzzle fit together.

Without family and friends the years spent on this book would have been much less enjoyable. My wife, Anne, has been a delightful companion over recent years, more than once saving me with a smile from getting melancholic over the slow progress of this book. Although she is by training a physician of the body, I found in her a spirited debater of pretty much everything under the sun.

In 2009 my daughter Lara was born. While this led to a temporary shift from dialectics to diapers, I have immensely enjoyed every minute with her. When young colleagues, anxious to find out how children might impact on their careers, asked me how many fewer articles I had written since her birth I replied that I would happily have thrown in a couple of edited volumes. We are now quickly making our way back to dialectics and I look forward to discussing God's existence and other things in the sandbox with her.

I dedicate this book to my father, Renato Fraenkel, and to my teacher and friend, Zeev Harvey. In different ways both helped to shape my questions about philosophy and religion, and both are models of curiosity, integrity, and generosity for me.

Translations, conventions, abbreviations

I have consulted existing translations of primary sources whenever they were available, but I have often modified them for the sake of consistency, style, and sometimes accuracy. All editions and translations are listed in the bibliography. In references, the number before the slash indicates the page in the original and the number after the slash the page in the translation – for example *Guide* 1.26, 38/56. Occasionally original and translation have the same page number – for example *Faṣl*, 10. When texts have a standard pagination or text division that allows for easy identification of the quotation, I do not indicate page numbers – for example *Rep*. 520c or *Cels*. 4.39. When the number following the title is not separated by a comma, it does not indicate the page but the unit in the standard division of the text – for example *Deus* 60. Below I list – in alphabetical order of the authors – the titles of primary sources to which I refer through common abbreviations:

AL-FĀRĀBĪ

Fuṣūl = *Fuṣūl muntazaʿa*
Ḥurūf = *Kitāb al-ḥurūf*
Iḥṣāʾ = *Iḥṣāʾ al-ʿulūm*
Jamʿ = *Kitāb al-jamʿ bayna raʾyay al-ḥakīmayn Aflāṭūn al-ilāhī wa-Arisṭūṭālīs*
Jawāmiʿ = *Jawāmiʿ kitāb al-nawāmīs li-Aflāṭūn*
Mabādiʾ = *Mabādiʾ arāʾ ahl al-madīna al-fāḍila*
Milla = *Kitāb al-milla*
Siyāsa = *Kitāb al-siyāsa al-madaniyya*
Taḥṣīl = *Taḥṣīl al-saʿāda*

ARISTOTLE

APo. = *Analytica Posteriora*

EE = *Ethica Eudemia*
EN = *Ethica Nicomachea*
Metaph. = *Metaphysica*
Ph. = *Physica*
Prot. = *Protrepticus*
Pol. = *Politica*

AUGUSTINE

C. acad. = *Contra academicos*

AVERROES

Bidāya = *Bidāyat al-mujtahid*
Comm. Metaph. = *Long Commentary on the "Metaphysics"*
Comm. Rep. = *Commentary on the "Republic"*
Faṣl = *Faṣl al-maqāl wa-taqrīr ma bayn al-sharīʿa wa-al-ḥikma min al-ittiṣāl*
Kashf = *Kitāb al-kashf ʿan manāhij al-adilla fī aqāʾid al-milla*
Tahāfut = *Tahāfut al-tahāfut*

AVICENNA

Sīra = *Sīrat al-shaykh al-raʾīs*

CICERO

Tusc. = *Tusculanae disputationes*

CLEMENT

Paed. = *Paedagogus*
Prot. = *Protrepticus*
Strom. = *Stromateis*

DIOGENES LAERTIUS

DL = *Diogenes Laertius, Lives and Opinions of Eminent Philosophers*

EPICURUS

Sent. = *Sententiae* (*Kuriai doxai*)

EUSEBIUS OF CAESAREA

DE = *Demonstratio evangelica*
HE = *Historia ecclesiastica*
LC = *Laus Constantini*
PE = *Praeparatio evangelica*

GREGORY THAUMATURGUS

Or. pan. = *In Originem oratio panegyrica*

HEGEL

Enzyklopädie = *Enzyklopädie der Philosophischen Wissenschaften im Grundrisse*
Geschichte der Philosophie = *Vorlesungen über die Geschichte der Philosophie*
Philosophie der Religion = *Vorlesungen über die Philosophie der Religion*

HERBERT OF CHERBURY

De Veritate = *De Veritate, Prout Distinguitur a Revelatione, a Verisimili, a Possibili, et a Falso*

HERODOTUS

Hdt. = *Historiae*

HESIOD

Theog. = *Theogony*

JOSEPHUS

Ap. = *Contra Apionem*
AJ = *Antiquitates Judaicae*

KANT

Aufklärung = *Beantwortung der Frage: Was ist Aufklärung?*
Religion = *Die Religion in den Grenzen der bloßen Vernunft*

LESSING

Erziehung = *Die Erziehung des Menschengeschlechts*
Fragmente = *Fragmente eines Ungenannten*
Nathan = *Nathan der Weise*

MAIMONIDES

CM = *Commentary on the Mishnah*
Eight Chapters = *CM, Introduction to Pirqe Avot.*
Guide = *Guide of the Perplexed*
Iggerot = *Iggerot ha-Rambam*
Heleq = *Pereq heleq* (*CM, Sanhedrin, chapter 10*)
Maddaʿ = *MT, Sefer ha-maddaʿ*
Manṭiq = *Kitāb fi ṣināʿat al-manṭiq*
MT = *Mishneh Torah*

MENDELSSOHN

Jerusalem = *Jerusalem oder über religiöse Macht und Judentum*

MEYER, LODEWIJK

Interpres = *Philosophia Sanctae Scripturae Interpres*

NARBONI, MOSES

Comm. Guide = *Commentary on the "Guide of the Perplexed"*

ORIGEN

Cels. = *Contra Celsum*
Comm. in Io. = *Commentarius in Iohannem*
De Princ. = *De principiis* (*Peri archôn*)
Ep. Greg. = *Epistula ad Gregorium Thaumaturgum*

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