



Paradoxes of Religious Toleration in Early Modern Political Thought



Edited by JOHN CHRISTIAN LAURSEN *and* MARÍA JOSÉ VILLAYERDE

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and María José Villaverde



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Introduction

John Christian Laursen and María José Villaverde

Religious toleration is a theme of perennial interest and life-and-death significance, of obvious importance even today.¹ Much of what people in the contemporary developed world think about religious toleration has evolved from crucial innovations in toleration theory of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Thinkers from that period have been rightly celebrated for influential and liberating concepts and ideas that have enabled many of us to live in peace.

But the literature on these theories has always tended toward hagiography. Historians of ideas have complacently shown that some figure's ideas are the best foundation of toleration, and that history inevitably leads to the triumph of the present. The essays in this volume break new ground in a different direction. They focus on paradoxes, blind spots, unexpected flaws, weaknesses, or ambiguities in early-modern toleration theories and practices. They explore the complexities, the complications, the surprises, and the inconsistencies that came up in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries as people grappled with the idea of toleration.

There are good reasons for exploring the paradoxes. One is that understanding the weaknesses, contradictions, and flaws in other theories may help us identify and sort out the flaws in our own way of thinking. If we recognize and become sensitive to these flaws, we may understand better why no theory has ever garnered the support of everyone. The other is that in the long run we may be able to construct better theories of toleration. Sensitivity to the weaknesses and unexpected flaws in classical theories may help us avoid or overcome similar problems. That is one of the justifications of doing history.

It follows that this book is not the usual survey of early modern theories of toleration. It is not an exploration of all of the important theorists of the time, nor of everything important about their theories. We have tried to avoid presenting a linear history that leads from fanaticism and intransigence to liberty of conscience. We hope to show that the reality was much more complex.

By centering attention on the complexity we draw attention to the paradoxes of the concept, to the varied historical conditions in which our authors lived and worked, to their fears and obsessions and weaknesses

on the one hand, and to their theoretical innovations and successes on the other. We seek their "blind spots" as well as their advances.² This may help us identify our own blind spots, or at least sensitize us to the almost inevitable contradictions or incoherences in every way of thinking. A metaphor for the complexity is the kaleidoscope: one thing we emphasize is that often the many shapes and colors of these theories clash with each other, undermine each other, and occasionally support each other as they interact in twists and turns.

Let us begin with some conceptual points.³ "Toleration" and its cognates in many European languages derived from the Latin "tolerare," and came to range from meaning suffering, putting up with, patiently bearing, permitting something that one does not approve, to more variations along these lines. One central paradox here is raised by the question, "Why should we put up with something that we do not approve?" Doesn't this imply apathy, carelessness, or negligence? The answer has often been that we could not do anything about it, but the more interesting set of answers came when we could do something about it but chose not to. Why not? As we shall see, this could be as simple as that the anticipated benefit was not worth the cost, as in obtaining uniformity of ideas at the price of civil unrest, chaos, or war. And it could become a much more complex set of reasons derived from religion, theories of human nature, psychology, or political theory.

Another set of paradoxes is commonly observed: if one is too tolerant, even of the intolerant, one inevitably risks the charge of enabling intolerance by not preventing it. Tolerance must have its limits in order to avoid complicity with persecution. One can be too tolerant, just as one can be not tolerant enough. But one can also lose one's claim to tolerance by becoming too intolerant of the intolerant, albeit in defense of tolerance. Tolerance disappears or dissolves by moving to either extreme, so the only way to avoid paradox seems to be to find a kind of middle way.

And then there is the danger of too much tolerance being harmful to the tolerated people. Sometimes suffering persecution helps build identity. One reason the Jews seem to have lost their identity in ancient China may have been that precisely because they were not persecuted or singled out in any way they had no incentive to maintain a separate identity.⁴ This seems to have been what T. S. Eliot had in mind when he wrote that "the most intolerable thing for a Christian is to be tolerated," because that might make him or her lax; by contrast, "when the Christian is treated as a persecuted minority . . . his course . . . is simpler."⁵ But the foregoing are perhaps only the most obvious of the paradoxes of toleration. All of our authors uncover more subtle, more surprising paradoxes in the texts that they contemplate.

The meaning of the word toleration has evolved over time from a central meaning concerning religion to referring to all sorts of behavior. In the period we are studying, it was almost exclusively applied to relig-

ious issues. Much later, in the twentieth century, it came to be applied to minority ethnic groups, people of various sexual orientations, immigrants, and other people who were distinguished from the majority of a population for some difference as well. And the valence changed. At first people who were tolerated were gratified and relieved: this meant an end to persecution. But already in the eighteenth century voices ranging from Mirabeau to Thomas Paine to Goethe and Kant criticized the concept for its implicit arrogance and hierarchical assumptions: who are you to tolerate me? By the end of the century the “Declaration of the Principles of Tolerance” of the United Nations defined tolerance as “respect, acceptance, and appreciation of the rich diversity of our world’s cultures.”⁶ Books came out urging the expansion of the meaning of the word toleration to include respect.⁷

There is already a paradox in this evolution of the word. If toleration is going to mean “respect, acceptance, and appreciation,” does that mean we have to respect and appreciate absolutely everything in every culture? So domestic violence, gangland murders, child labor, class, race, ethnic, and gender discrimination, and an infinite number of other doubtful aspects of the rich diversity of our world’s cultures should be appreciated? If one answer is that all of these doubtful aspects should be eliminated by law, what is the word we should use to describe putting up with them until the laws can be changed and enforced? What is the word we are going to use if some of those richly diverse cultures refuse to change?⁸

Let us return to the earlier debates, which were set off by the Reformation and the wars of religion that it spawned. One of the first voices in favor of toleration was that of Erasmus of Rotterdam (1466–1536) who insisted that the only way to avoid fratricidal wars was to tolerate the diverse emerging sects. But this was not widely accepted. In sixteenth-century France the intransigence of the League, together with the impotence of the moderate sector including Jean Bodin and the *politiques*, led to the St. Bartholomew’s Day massacre of Huguenots in 1572. The *Vindiciae contra tyrannos* of 1579 and the numerous pamphlets of the monarchomachs reflect the intensity of the conflict. Against this background, another important voice for toleration and moderation was that of Eméric Crucé, a witness to the massacre. His *Nouveau Cyneé* of 1632 was an important precedent for the numerous peace projects that came out later in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, from Sully and Leibniz to the abbé de St. Pierre and Kant.⁹

One of the figures most involved in practical negotiations to end the religious conflicts was Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz (1646–1716), who dedicated a large part of his life to the effort, although he did not succeed. As Concha Roldán notes in chapter 5 of this volume, in contrast to “negative” notions of toleration, Leibniz promoted a “positive” one that tried to understand the reasons of others in order to put ourselves in their

place. Toleration was not a panacea for ending conflicts but a point of departure for rational debate and the convergence of opinions.

The bitter polemics that divided the orthodox Catholics, the Jansenists, and the Huguenots in the late seventeenth century, each denouncing the others for intransigence, are analyzed in chapter 3 by Luisa Simonutti. In these debates, Protestants such as Pierre Jurieu and Pierre Bayle, and Catholics such as Bishop Bossuet, Antoine Arnauld, and Pierre Nicole could be as much at loggerheads with people on their own side of the Catholic-Protestant divide as the other side. Everyone could take up the banner of tolerance and loyalty to the monarchy and show that the others had dropped it. In the process, everything from absolutism to limited sovereignty and the right of resistance was questioned.

The Revocation of the Edict of Nantes in 1685 provoked a diaspora of Huguenots who sought refuge in England, the Netherlands, Switzerland, and some of the Protestant German states, and denounced Catholic policies from there. In chapter 7, Cyrus Masroori brings out some of the complex interactions between toleration and political ideals. In a strange and peculiar utopia called *The History of the Sevarites or Sevarambi* in its first version in 1675, Denis Veiras presented a rare combination of theocratic politics and religious toleration. If the idealization of a theocracy founded by a Zoroastrian might have provoked surprise at the time as going against the Christian tide, the range of toleration went further than usual, applying to dissident sects and also to deists and atheists as long as they went along with the public cult. But all such radical moves seem to have their limits: it did not tolerate Islam.

The seventeenth century Netherlands, and especially Holland, were famous for providing refuge to all sorts of religious dissidents. Nevertheless, they were far from a paradise of liberty. In chapter 4 Henri Krop analyzes the contradictions in Dutch policy. Although the Union of Utrecht of 1579 had provided that "every individual may stay in his religion and because of his religion nobody will be submitted to investigation and inquiry," it was accepted on all sides that there would be an established church with wide powers of control over the behavior of the populace. Liberty of conscience was largely confined to the private sphere, while the public church retained the right to use force to control the public sphere. As Krop points out, people seem to have accepted contradictory policies that were later taken to be philosophically irreconcilable.

Benedict de Spinoza (1632–1677) lived in this context of relative liberty in the Netherlands, and according to María José Villaverde's account in chapter 1, he was the most tolerant of the early toleration thinkers. He called for not only religious liberty, but also *libertas philosophandi*, a much wider liberty of thought and expression. She affirms categorically that his overriding purpose was the achievement of liberty understood as a stairway with different steps. The first was to liberate oneself from the pas-

sions and traditional religion in order to live a rational life. But this was not the ultimate goal. The next step was to arrive at what he described as happiness, beatitude, truth, and supreme knowledge. Following up on clues and elliptical references in his writings, both published and unpublished, she explains what this means by uncovering a side of Spinoza that has been neglected or even deliberately suppressed: his involvement in alchemy.

As a counterpoint to Villaverde's reading of Spinoza, John Christian Laursen provides a much less sanguine portrait of the philosopher in chapter 2. The debate between the editors of this volume opens up two very different traditions of Spinoza interpretation. Laursen places the philosopher in a tradition that turns to silence, mental reservation, and indeed lying as a means of defense against persecution that goes back to Nicodemus and forward to Jacques Saurin and Benjamin Constant. Spinoza's strategy, in his account, is to encourage lying about one's true thoughts in the interests of peace. He draws special attention to the seven dogmas of faith that Spinoza offers as an obligatory creed in chapter 7 of the *Theologico-Political Treatise* and argues that they imply intolerance of atheists. Although Spinoza suggests that these dogmas may be interpreted metaphorically or in any way that one wants, Laursen suggests that principled atheists may want to openly deny that there is a God, and thus could not subscribe to Spinoza's dogmas. Since Spinoza also asserts that words can be treason, it is at least possible that the atheist would run afoul of the law, even under Spinoza's ideal government.

Decades later, in Britain, David Hume proposed various means of suppressing religious fanaticism, an evil that he felt was endemic to Christianity and other monotheistic religions and which imperiled social order. In chapter 8, Gerardo López Sastre brings out his strategy for establishing religious tolerance. If human development could only take place within a framework of liberty and tolerance, the habits and practices of political debate and unlimited liberty of thought would have to be established. That could only take place in states where the government controlled religion. Since repression would only provoke emotional support and reaction, one of the best methods of preventing clerical interference with liberty was the establishment of a state church with indolent clerics who would draw a good salary and have no incentive to stir up religious passions, and full tolerance of dissident sects. Hume's toleration is actually intolerant in the sense that he hopes it makes religious sensibility fade away, or if it persists, at least become inoffensive.

As it happened, few places in Europe could adopt the thoroughgoing religious tolerance recommended by Pierre Bayle, David Hume, and Denis Diderot. In the eighteenth century some of the religious debates between Catholics and Protestants were displaced to some extent by bitter debates between *philosophes* and *anti-philosophes*. In chapters 9 and 11 María José Villaverde and Jonathan Israel undermine the commonplace

that the *philosophes* were fully united and tolerant and the anti-*philosophes* always intolerant. The reality was much more complex.

In chapter 11, Jonathan Israel reviews a bibliography of texts of the anti-*philosophes* that have been generally neglected because of our preference for studying what we think of as the *avant garde*. He discovers that some of them were by no means as irrational, dogmatic, and intolerant as they were painted by the *philosophes*. There were hardliners of course, but many anti-*philosophes* such as Claude-François Nonnotte and Nicolas-Sylvestre Bergier defended a "reasonable and just tolerance," moderate and limited it is true, but better than what they described as the arrogant and vitriolic pretended "tolerance" of some of the *philosophes* such as Voltaire and Rousseau.¹⁰ Other anti-Enlighteners such as Sabatier de Castres or the Countess de Genlis, a well-known *salonnière*, denounced the hypocrisy of the discourse of the "new philosophers" whose philosophical fanaticism they considered much more harmful than mild religious intolerance.¹¹

María José Villaverde's chapter 9 compares Rousseau, sometimes called an "apostle of tolerance," with the "intolerant" Bergier, and turns upside down the conventional interpretation of the Genevan. She confirms that Bergier's charges of intolerance of atheists, women, and Catholics are justified by many passages of Rousseau's texts. His denial of religious freedom to women, promotion of patriotic fanaticism, rejection of individual rights, and political absolutism make any interpretation of him as a theorist of tolerance very problematic.

In their denunciations of Catholic fanaticism the *philosophes* often turned to increasing knowledge of other countries such as China, Japan, Siam, and Persia for alternative models of religious politics. As Rolando Minuti observes in chapter 6, Voltaire was fascinated by the east and constructed an ideal model of religious tolerance in Japan and China, which he used to condemn Christian European practices. He had to admit that Christians had been persecuted in Asia, but claimed that it was justified as a means of preventing inevitable Christian persecution of others. Not all of the travelers to the East shared this view, however, and several of the works Minuti reviews help us understand the complexities and ambiguities of toleration in those countries.

John Christian Laursen explores another paradox of the history of toleration in chapter 11, asking if one can be an anti-fanatic without becoming a fanatical anti-fanatic. He explores the cases of three champions of tolerance, Pierre Bayle, David Hume, and Immanuel Kant, with respect to their attitudes toward enthusiasm and fanaticism. He finds that Pierre Bayle may be more virulently anti-fanatic in his attitude toward millenarians precisely because he recognizes, at some level, the nearness of his intellectual foundations to theirs, and desires so strongly to distance himself from them. Kant was most viciously opposed to Swedenborg for similar reasons: he shared a similar leap of faith. And Hume,

behind his pose of “moderation” between the extremes of Protestant fanaticism and Catholic superstition and his defense of “true religion,” may have been the most intolerant subverter of religion of the three. In any case, none of the three are tolerant of most religious people.

Our last chapter, by Joaquín Abellán, brings out some often neglected implications of Kant’s theory of toleration. Kant is one of those who actively sought to move toleration toward respect for the autonomy of all individuals. That required him to reject toleration motivated by pragmatic reasons, and there are other significant limits to his toleration. Removing moral autonomy from the sphere of religion and aspiring to a single rational religion are contentious moves that ultimately amount to a call for religious uniformity and conformity. This implies intolerance of those who do not accept his concept of autonomy, and for that matter, the rest of his philosophy.¹²

Tolerance has had its share of critics. Wendy Brown has tried to make up a balance sheet, probing the meaning of tolerance as a discourse of depoliticization, as a discourse of power, as governmentality in the Foucaultian mode.¹³ It has undoubtedly played a role in civilizational discourse, according to which “we” are the civilized and “they” are the barbarians.¹⁴ And the history of discussions about toleration is full of twists, turns, and even somersaults. Something can be celebrated, persecuted, and tolerated in any order. The persecuted seek to be celebrated, passing through toleration on the way. Something that was once celebrated can come to be barely tolerated. Deirdre McCloskey nominates a candidate for that category: the dynamic growth of the modern world through what is loosely known as commercial society was condemned by aristocratic norms, celebrated for its successes in wealth creation by people like Adam Smith, condemned again by Christian moralists and Marxists, and now, as she puts it, “People have become tolerant of markets and innovation” again.¹⁵ The word can apply to almost any dimension of human activity. Even artists have come to value “an expansively tolerant view” and a “growing atmosphere of tolerance.”¹⁶

There is an almost limitless field of connections between toleration and other aspects of social and political life – even of personal life. Toleration can be analyzed in its relations with humor.¹⁷ It can be analyzed in its relations to form of government: if it may sometimes be complacently thought that toleration is natural to republics and representative democracy, it is worth remembering that the republican Rousseau could sometimes be fiercely intolerant, and the seventeenth- and eighteenth-century monarchies could be more tolerant at times than the republics.¹⁸ It can be analyzed in terms of its relations with physical suffering.¹⁹ But one thing this book makes clear is that any such analysis must take into consideration the considerable number of paradoxes of toleration.

NOTES

1. This introduction and the chapters by María José Villaverde, John Christian Laursen, Rolando Minuti, and Gerardo López Sastre are the product of a research project titled "Crítica de la religión, imágenes de la alteridad y cosmopolitismo. Una nueva lectura del pensamiento ilustrado y una defensa de su vigencia," directed by Gerardo López Sastre and sponsored by the Spanish Ministry of Science and Innovation (ref. FFI 2008–00725/FISO).
2. J. C. Laursen, "Blind Spots in the Toleration Literature," *Critical Review of International Social and Political Philosophy* 14, 2011, 307–322.
3. See also J. C. Laursen, "Introduction: Clarifying the Conceptual Issues" in J. C. Laursen, ed., *Religious Toleration: "The Variety of Rites" from Cyrus to Defoe* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1999), 1–12.
4. See Zhang Longxi, "Toleration, Accommodation, and the East-West Dialogue" in Laursen, ed., *Religious Toleration*, 37–58.
5. T. S. Eliot, *The Idea of a Christian Society and Other Writings* (London: Faber and Faber, 1982), 54.
6. See www.unesco.org/cpp/uk/declarations/tolerance.pdf.
7. A. E. Galeotti, *Toleration as Recognition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002).
8. See John Horton, "Why the Traditional Conception of Toleration Still Matters," *Critical Review of International Social and Political Philosophy* 14, 2011, 289–305; see also J. C. Laursen, "Toleration" in T. Ball, ed., *The Cambridge Dictionary of Political Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, forthcoming).
9. See María José Villaverde, "L'Europe et le rêve de la paix perpétuelle," *Etudes Jean-Jacques Rousseau* 16, 2005–2006, 233–251.
10. See also Patrick Coleman, "The Enlightened Orthodoxy of the Abbé Pluquet" and Kathleen Hardesty Doig, "The Abbé Nicolas-Sylvestre Bergier and the History of Heresy" in J. C. Laursen, ed., *Histories of Heresy in Early Modern Europe* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002), 223–238, 263–280.
11. See the related material in J. Israel, *Democratic Enlightenment: Philosophy, Revolution, and Human Rights 1750–1790* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 140ff.
12. See Ian Hunter, *Rival Enlightenments: Civil and Metaphysical Philosophy in Early Modern Germany* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001) and Lars Tønder, "Humility, Arrogance, and the Limitations of Kantian Autonomy," *Political Theory* 39, 2011, 378–385.
13. Wendy Brown, *Regulating Aversion: Tolerance in the Age of Identity and Empire* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006).
14. Brown, *Regulating Aversion*, 149ff.
15. Deirdre McCloskey, *Bourgeois Dignity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010), 390.
16. Susan Landauer, *Elmer Bischoff: The Ethics of Paint* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), 63, 71.
17. See, e.g., Sammy Basu, "'Woe unto you that laugh now!': Humor and Toleration in Overton and Shaftesbury" in J. C. Laursen, ed., *Religious Toleration*, 147–172; David Owen, "Must the Tolerant Person Have a Sense of Humor?," *Critical Review of International Social and Political Philosophy* 14, 2011, 385–403.
18. See María José Villaverde, *La ilusión republicana* (Madrid: Tecnos, 2008); Hans Blom, J. C. Laursen, and Luisa Simonutti, eds., *Monarchisms in the Age of Enlightenment: Liberty, Patriotism, and the Common Good* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2007).
19. Derek Eryvane, "Tolerance and Pain," *Critical Review of International Social and Political Philosophy* 14, 2011, 405–419. See also J. C. Laursen, "Toleration" in Maryanne Horowitz, ed., *New Dictionary of the History of Ideas* (New York: Scribner's, 2005), 2335–2342.

ONE

Spinoza's Paradoxes

*An Atheist Who Defended the Scriptures?
A Freethinking Alchemist?*¹

María José Villaverde

SPINOZA, ATHEIST?

Spinoza was classified as an atheist by the majority of his contemporaries. It is well known that when the *Theological-Political Treatise* (TTP) came out he was immediately identified as its author and accused of being an enemy of religion, an Antichrist, and an agent of Satan, and his work was condemned by the political and religious authorities. The religious hierarchies officially convicted the book on June 30, 1670. The ecclesiastical Tribunal of the Reformed Church of Amsterdam summoned a general synod to denounce the book as "dangerous and blasphemous." By the end of that summer, the synods from northern and southern Holland declared the TTP "as vile and blasphemous a book as the world has ever seen," and advised the religious authorities to suppress its threatening influence by pressuring the magistrates to impede it from being printed and disseminated. In April of 1671, the Court of Holland (the tribunal entrusted with matters of justice in the province) reacted to the summons of the synods. It decreed on September 17, 1673, that the publication and distribution of the book was an assault against the order of the General States of Holland which prohibited "'Socinian' and similarly offensive works."² In 1673, the states of Holland and western Friesland asked the Tribunal of Holland to prohibit three joint versions of the TTP and *Philosophy as the Interpreter of Holy Scripture* by one of Spinoza's disciples, Lode-

wijk Meyer, which had false titles. On July 19, 1674, two years after the fall and death of Johan de Witt, the Tribunal took action, and the TTP, along with other "Socinian" books, like Hobbes's *Leviathan*, was banned because it threatened the fundamental principles of Christianity and the authority of the Holy Scriptures.

The European intellectual world rejected the TTP³ as well, from Gottfried Leibniz to Pierre Bayle and, in the eighteenth century, from Diderot to Voltaire. In a letter written to Leibniz, the Cartesian Johann Georg Gravius described the TTP as a *liber pestilentissimus* that opened the door to atheism. Even the most advanced circles of Arminians, Cartesians, and Collegiants displayed hostility toward it. Both Lambert van Velthuysen, a Cartesian who had opposed the Calvinists, and Henry Oldenburg, the secretary of the Royal Society of London, friend and correspondent of Spinoza, opposed Spinoza's religious ideas. In a letter of June of 1675, Oldenburg observed to Spinoza that some of the expressions of the TTP appeared to be anti-religious.⁴ This letter was probably triggered after some clarifications were made by the German baron von Tschirnhaus, a supporter of Spinoza. In 1674, a year prior, an acquaintance of Spinoza, Willem van Blijenbergh, wrote that the book was "abhorrent," plagued with abominations "forged in hell."⁵ Even Johan de Witt, who was thought to stand for tolerance and freedom of thought, refused to encounter Spinoza when the TTP came out, and denounced the work.⁶

The most devastating critique came from a lengthy letter by the Cartesian Lambert van Velthuysen, in January of 1671; it was the first written critique in Holland of the TTP. Velthuysen accused Spinoza of going further than the French deists in attempting to render religion meaningless, undermining the authority of the Holy Scriptures, destroying all religious worship, and supporting "*sheer atheism with furtive and disguised arguments.*"⁷ At "any rate there is not much difference between asserting that all things necessarily emanate from God's nature and that the universe itself is God" (227).

This portrayal of an atheist Spinoza from the seventeenth⁸ and eighteenth centuries still continues to have numerous contemporary adherents, from Leo Strauss to Jonathan Israel.⁹ And there are certainly weighty arguments for it since Spinoza's work is sprinkled with affirmations that may appear to be, if not atheist, at least pantheist or anti-christian. For example, in the preface to Part IV of the *Ethics*, he repeatedly makes God synonymous with Nature.¹⁰ He also does this in Appendix II (4)¹¹ and in chapter XXII¹² of the *Short Treatise*, as well as in the TTP¹³ and his correspondence.¹⁴ In the same manner, in the *Short Treatise* he repudiates the immortality of the soul¹⁵ as well as the system of punishments and rewards that religions are based upon.¹⁶ These issues are more widely refuted in the TTP, where he extensively critiques the Scriptures,¹⁷ miracles (chapter VI), the divinity of Christ,¹⁸ the resurrection,¹⁹ and more.

AN ATHEIST WHO DEFENDED THE SCRIPTURES?

But if Spinoza was an atheist, how can one explain his persistent denial of atheism, both in a letter to Oldenburg²⁰ and in his response to Velthuyssen,²¹ not to mention his repeated rebuttals of charges of impiety in the TTP?²² "It has now come to the point that people who freely admit that they do not possess the idea of God and know him only through created things (whose causes they are ignorant of), do not hesitate to accuse philosophers of atheism" (TTP, II, 27).

Perhaps he was opposed to the label because what he understood to be an atheist was someone who excessively desired riches and honors, as he explained to Jacob Ostens,²³ and because he lived an austere and faultless life he felt offended when described as such. But his denial could also be associated with simple precautionary measures²⁴ he might have taken to elude the harassment he suffered from theologians and common people.²⁵ According to Leo Strauss²⁶ and Yirmiyahu Yovel,²⁷ Spinoza, like Maimonides and the *marranos*, utilized double meanings in his language. He presented his teachings in a deliberately vague manner because he was conscious that his ideas would presumably be taken as "offensive"²⁸ and place him in the crosshairs of the Calvinist ministers.

Strauss claimed in *Persecution and the Art of Writing* that Spinoza's writing incorporated two planes, one of a popular and edifying character and the other a philosophical meaning appearing only between the lines. An alert and canny reader would not only be able to capture what was expressed explicitly but also what was implied. In other words, since he lived in a society where freedom of thought and expression as well as freedom of religion were not yet considered basic rights, Spinoza was obligated to take extreme precautions when he communicated his ideas. Subsequently, he called certain concerns about discretion to the attention of his friends. "And also, as the character of the age in which we live is not unknown to you, I would beg of you most earnestly to be very careful about the communication of these things to others. I do not want to say that you should absolutely keep them to yourself, but only that if ever you begin to communicate them to anybody, then let no other aim prompt you except only the happiness of your neighbor, being at the same time clearly assured by him that the reward will not disappoint your labor."²⁹ This would explain why Oldenburg felt obligated to promise him on two occasions under oath not to spread his ideas.³⁰ And also why, in a courteous yet firm manner, Spinoza forbade his friend Tschirnhaus from giving his writings to Leibniz (probably without success).

Jonathan Israel appears to share this interpretation since he writes that the Spinozists rejected atheism as a mechanism of self-defense. He alludes to statements by contemporaries like Adriaen Pietersz Verwer, a Collegiant who published a book in 1683 against the members of the