



BOOKS

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# When Religion Had a Mind

The history of philosophical religion

By [Peter E. Gordon](#)

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Written in 1779 by the playwright and philosopher Gotthold Lessing, *Nathan the Wise* - [http://www.amazon.com/gp/product/1463609019/ref=as\\_li\\_qf\\_sp\\_asin\\_tl?ie=UTF8&camp=1789&creative=9325&creativeASIN=1463609019&linkCode=as2&tag=thenewrep08-20](http://www.amazon.com/gp/product/1463609019/ref=as_li_qf_sp_asin_tl?ie=UTF8&camp=1789&creative=9325&creativeASIN=1463609019&linkCode=as2&tag=thenewrep08-20) - ranks among the most powerful arguments for religious tolerance in the entirety of the eighteenth century. Germany in the age of Enlightenment was still trembling from the confessional disputes of earlier times. The Reformation motto “*cuius regio, eius religio*” (where the prince reigns, so too his religion) had not put an end to strife amongst Lutherans, Calvinists, and Catholics. But Lessing’s play extended the hand of tolerance even beyond the Christian fold, to Judaism and Islam. In a brilliant feat of displacement, he removed the dramatic action from the Germany of his own day and set his characters in a half-imaginary Jerusalem in the midst of the Third

Crusade, where Muslims and Christians scramble for dominion of the Holy City. The play's hero is the eponymous Nathan, a pious Jew who keeps a household along with his adopted daughter and her Christian maidservant. The critical heart of the play is the confrontation between Nathan and Saladin, the Egyptian sultan who rules the land. Saladin presents Nathan with a challenge: of the three monotheistic religions, only one can be true. But surely a man as wise as Nathan does not obey mere accidents of birth and circumstance. If he remains a Jew, it must be with good reason. Saladin therefore asks that Nathan justify his faith.

Nathan is at first perplexed—he thought Saladin had summoned him only for a loan—but he marshals his wits and explains himself with the following parable. There was once a man who possessed a ring with miraculous properties. Whosoever wore the ring would be beloved of God and men. When the man died, the ring passed through the generations until it fell into the hands of a father with three sons. Since he loved all his sons equally, he sent for a jeweler to fashion two more rings that were in outward appearance identical to the first. The father gives a ring to each of his three sons and promptly dies, leaving them to puzzle over the question of which is genuine. A quarrel breaks out, and they present their case to a judge, each of them swearing the genuine ring is his alone. The judge reminds them that the true ring had the power to make its possessor beloved of God and men. But in their quarrel each brother now hates the other. The sly judge concludes that no ring could be the original—it must have been lost. He offers an alternative: each son should be permitted to believe that his own ring is the true one. After all, it is possible that the father could not tolerate “the tyranny of just one ring.” The judge admonishes the sons to model themselves after their father in unprejudiced affection, each to strive to outdo his brothers in benevolence. Some day, maybe in a “thousand thousand years,” the magic hidden in the jewel will reveal itself when a wiser judge sits at the bench.

Saladin is so moved by this parable that he declares Nathan his everlasting friend. Lessing borrowed the rudiments of the ring parable from Boccaccio's *Decameron* - [http://www.amazon.com/gp/product/0393069303/ref=as\\_li\\_qf\\_sp\\_asin\\_tl?ie=UTF8&camp=1789&creative=9325&creativeASIN=0393069303&linkCode=as2&tag=thenewrep08-20](http://www.amazon.com/gp/product/0393069303/ref=as_li_qf_sp_asin_tl?ie=UTF8&camp=1789&creative=9325&creativeASIN=0393069303&linkCode=as2&tag=thenewrep08-20) -

, but he was also a spirited advocate of philo-Semitism in an era when Jews had not

yet been granted civil rights, and he modeled the character of Nathan on his friend, the Jewish philosopher Moses Mendelssohn. The rest of his play involves a series of increasingly implausible plot twists that lead to a startling revelation: it turns out that Nathan's adopted daughter is a Christian by birth, and the Knight Templar who wishes to marry her is actually her brother. It is then discovered that they are both children of a Muslim knight who was the brother of Saladin. The characters all embrace as the curtain falls. These days most audiences are too cynical to accept the didacticism of an Enlightenment-era drama: the revelations that unite the characters in happy consanguinity at the play's denouement come with a real thud. This makes it all the more important that we recognize the philosophical radicalism at its core.

The play was a medieval lesson for modern times. Its crucial lesson is that, notwithstanding all the various historical and cultural differences that separate religions from one another, they are in essence the same. For those who are not blessed with a higher wisdom, that sameness will remain obscure. But for those who are philosophers like Lessing himself, the variations will seem unimportant, and the essential sameness of ethical aspiration will shine forth. The ring parable can mislead us because it tells us of three rings that look identical, which the monotheistic religions do not, at least in their externals; but Lessing was actually trying to tell a story about an inward resemblance that survives the confusing facts of outward dissimilarity. Laws and stories and practices do not matter in the end. All that matters is the common philosophical truth that lies at their core. We grow intolerant when we take notice only of the outward forms, but the truly wise will discern the unity within plurality.

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In a [remarkable and important book](http://www.amazon.com/Philosophical-Religions-Plato-Spinoza-Religion/dp/0521194571/ref=sr_1_1?ie=UTF8&qid=1383601323&sr=8-1&keywords=carlos+fraenkel) - [http://www.amazon.com/Philosophical-Religions-Plato-Spinoza-Religion/dp/0521194571/ref=sr\\_1\\_1?ie=UTF8&qid=1383601323&sr=8-1&keywords=carlos+fraenkel](http://www.amazon.com/Philosophical-Religions-Plato-Spinoza-Religion/dp/0521194571/ref=sr_1_1?ie=UTF8&qid=1383601323&sr=8-1&keywords=carlos+fraenkel) - , Carlos Fraenkel characterizes Lessing as one of the late exponents for an intellectual tradition of philosophical religion that stretches as far back as late antiquity. This is a tradition that united pagan thinkers such as Plato with Christians (Origen and Eusebius) and Muslims (Al-Fārābī and Averroes) and Jews (Philo and Maimonides) in a shared philosophical vision, according to which historically distinctive religions should not be understood in the literal sense. They must be interpreted instead in allegorical fashion, so as to grasp their higher and purely rational content. This allegorical content is far from self-evident. But those who are incapable of philosophizing, or have not yet arrived at the requisite intellectual maturity, are not lost: the historical forms of a given religion offer just the sort of moral and political instruction most of us need if we are to conduct our lives with virtue and for the common good. Only the philosopher will understand that the historical forms have an educative function.

If this argument sounds bold, it is. A standard alternative view is that medieval thinkers held religion and philosophy to be essentially incompatible. On this reading, the philosophers of the medieval world drew a sharp distinction between “Athens” and “Jerusalem,” where the former signified philosophy in the Greek sense (basically Plato and Aristotle) and the latter meant biblical religion, with all of its curious laws and its imaginative claims about miracles and supernatural beings. Those who promote this reading typically agree that philosophy must be reserved only for the select few, whereas religion is left to the vulgar masses. But on their interpretation religion is nothing more than a collection of “noble lies” whose real purpose is to cultivate among the hoi polloi the proper attitude of obedience so that philosophers can live in safety and peace within a stable moral and political order.

I have summarized this view here with crude brevity, but it is, more or less, the argument we typically associate with the conservative political philosopher Leo Strauss. Indeed, the Straussian wants to take a further and decisive step. He implies that this is not only the way things stood in ancient and medieval times; it is also the way things still are today. He recognizes that many of us will consider this an illicit inference from the elitism of the historical past to the present, but that is only because we cleave blindly to the blandishments of a democratic ideology, according

to which all human beings are created equal. The truth is that there is no such thing as a philosophical or “allegorical” reading of the Bible, since the stripping-away of its literal meaning is like peeling an onion: nothing would be left.

It is one of the great merits of Fraenkel’s extraordinary book that he helps us to see beyond the Straussian caricature of medieval philosophy. As Fraenkel notes, if the Straussian interpretation is correct, then medieval thinkers held the great mass of people in the deepest contempt. They did not really care what the masses believed, so long as those beliefs served the purpose of political stability. But Fraenkel cogently argues that we do not need to think that medieval philosophers subscribed to a theory of democratic equality in the modern sense to see that their actual views were far more subtle than the Straussian interpretation will allow. The challenge is that elucidating their actual thoughts demands that we reconstruct a philosophical understanding of the relation between religion and reason that today must strike us as remarkably alien. As a historian of philosophy, Fraenkel has primarily a historical purpose: to get a proper fix on what these thinkers actually believed. But his book also has a curiously contemporary lesson as well—a point he reveals only at the very end.

The conceptual lineaments for philosophical religion were already established in pagan antiquity. We know that Socrates could not accept the literal meaning of Greek myths. “And do you believe,” he asks, “that there really is war among the gods, and terrible enmities and battles, and other such things as are told by the poets?” At the same time Socrates was keen to defend himself against the charge of atheism. In the *Apology* - [http://www.amazon.com/gp/product/1492792950/ref=as\\_li\\_qf\\_sp\\_asin\\_tl?ie=UTF8&camp=1789&creative=9325&creativeASIN=1492792950&linkCode=as2&tag=thenewrep08-20](http://www.amazon.com/gp/product/1492792950/ref=as_li_qf_sp_asin_tl?ie=UTF8&camp=1789&creative=9325&creativeASIN=1492792950&linkCode=as2&tag=thenewrep08-20) -

, he describes his pedagogical technique as an “investigation in the service of the God.” In the final hours before his execution, he recalls that “one day I heard someone reading ... from a book of Anaxagoras, and saying that it is Reason [*nous*] who directs and is the cause of everything. I was delighted with this cause and ... thought that if this were so, the directing Reason would direct everything and arrange each thing in the way that was best.” According to Fraenkel, this means that Socrates subscribed to a highly unusual species of philosophical theology according to which God is just reason. This striking formula reappears in Plato’s later



dialogues, where it motivates an ideal of human perfection: in the *Republic* - [http://www.amazon.com/gp/product/0872207366/ref=as\\_li\\_qf\\_sp\\_asin\\_tl?ie=UTF8&camp=1789&creative=9325&creativeASIN=0872207366&linkCode=as2&tag=thenewrep08-20](http://www.amazon.com/gp/product/0872207366/ref=as_li_qf_sp_asin_tl?ie=UTF8&camp=1789&creative=9325&creativeASIN=0872207366&linkCode=as2&tag=thenewrep08-20) -

, he enjoins the philosopher to contemplate the eternal things and strive to emulate them, for such a philosopher, “by consorting with what is divine and ordered ... himself becomes as divine and ordered as a human being can be.” The identification of God and Reason is especially pronounced in the *Laws* - [http://www.amazon.com/gp/product/B00847N8GY/ref=as\\_li\\_qf\\_sp\\_asin\\_tl?ie=UTF8&camp=1789&creative=9325&creativeASIN=B00847N8GY&linkCode=as2&tag=thenewrep08-20](http://www.amazon.com/gp/product/B00847N8GY/ref=as_li_qf_sp_asin_tl?ie=UTF8&camp=1789&creative=9325&creativeASIN=B00847N8GY&linkCode=as2&tag=thenewrep08-20) - , the last and longest of the dialogues, where Plato extols “Reason who rules all things.” The very first word of the dialogue is in fact “God” (*theos*), and we are told that God is “the measure of all things.”

Fraenkel acknowledges that he is not the only one to recognize this theological strain in Plato’s work. The classicist Andrea Nightingale characterizes the *Laws* as a “sacred text,” and the historian of ancient philosophy Malcolm Schofield notes that religion pervades the *Laws* “from beginning to end.” But Fraenkel may be the first to draw together all the various strands of the intellectual tradition that began with Plato and continued to inspire so many of the religious philosophers of the medieval world. He is also highly attuned to its political implications. The mysterious figure in the *Laws* identified only as the “Athenian Visitor” commences his work with a prayer: “Let us therefore call upon God as we undertake the founding of the city. May he hear our prayer, and having heard it come graciously and in kindly concern for us to join in establishing the ordering of the city and its laws.” It is especially important for Fraenkel’s argument that we do not dismiss such religious language as mere rhetoric that serves only to elevate the significance of a merely political project. For the laws that govern the philosophical city of Magnesia (as it is called in the *Laws*) are themselves divine. On this point Plato anticipates Aristotle, who claimed that “God is not a ruler who gives commands, but is that for the sake of which wisdom commands.”

One of the more unusual consequences of this doctrine is that the philosopher’s striving for human perfection is not incompatible with religious piety. If reason is divine, then the philosopher best approximates the ideal condition of the human

being when he realizes his rationality to the fullest degree. But as he does so, he also draws near to God. Obedience to reason thus means the same as obedience to God. The same is true for the polity as a whole: A well-ordered state is “divine” insofar as it embodies order and reason as it properly should. “The city will never become happy until its outline is sketched by painters who use the divine model.” But it follows that the best state can rightly be called a theocracy, even though this is a case where obedience to God does not inhibit but actually fulfills the human aspiration toward autonomy. Platonism as a philosophical religion therefore culminates in the unusual proposition that self-rule and theocracy coincide.

Proponents of philosophical religion were not democrats in the modern sense: they did not believe that everyone was capable of grasping the identicalness of God and Reason. But neither did they believe that popular religion was a mere fabrication or a collection of noble lies. Instead they held, in the words of the medieval Islamic philosopher Al-Fārābī, that “through religion the multitude is taught, educated, and given all that is needed to attain happiness.” This is because religion serves as a vehicle for what divine reason demands. It conveys the “theoretical and practical matters that have been inferred in philosophy, in such a way as to enable the multitude to understand them by persuasion or imaginative representation.”

A similar idea can be found in the writings of Philo Judaeus, the first-century Jewish philosopher from Alexandria who fashioned a synthesis of Judaism and Hellenistic philosophy. Fraenkel takes special notice of Philo’s efforts to grapple with biblical anthropomorphisms that attribute to God bodily or emotional states and therefore distort God’s true nature. While the philosopher may dismiss such anthropomorphisms as mere falsehood, Philo urged philosophers to understand that such figurative imagery is intended for the benefit of “those who lack wisdom.” When God is described as acting with “anger” and resorts to “shafts and swords and all other devices of vengeance against the unrighteous,” the philosopher should see how these representations teach the non-philosopher the wisdom of moderation. The third-century Christian theologian Origen (also from Alexandria) used a similar strategy to read the story of the Fall as what Fraenkel calls “the turning away of the rational souls from the *Logos*.” From the philosophical view, the expulsion from Eden and the origin of human sin were therefore understood as an allegory for the unfortunate facts of human embodiment and non-rational desire.

Advocates of philosophical religion distinguished between two readings of traditional religion, literal and allegorical, the first being for non-philosophers, the second for philosophers. But this distinction permitted philosophers to harmonize between philosophy and religion without reducing one entirely to the other. It further allowed for the subtle idea that while much of traditional religion may *contain* philosophical truth, it does not *teach* that truth. The early Church historian and biblical exegete Eusebius (a bishop in fourth-century Palestine) went so far as to suggest that society required both Moses and Plato. To illustrate this he appealed to Jewish strategies of education: “And among the Hebrews ... it is the custom to teach the narratives of the inspired Scripture to those of childish souls in a very simple way just like stories [*mythoi*], but to teach those of a trained disposition the deeper and systematic doctrines of the texts by means of the so-called second level interpretation and explanation of the intelligible contents that are hidden from the multitude.” Eusebius even believed that Plato borrowed his “contemplation of intelligible and incorporeal things” from Moses and the Hebrew prophets. In fact, according to Eusebius, the laws of Magnesia were modeled after the laws of Moses.

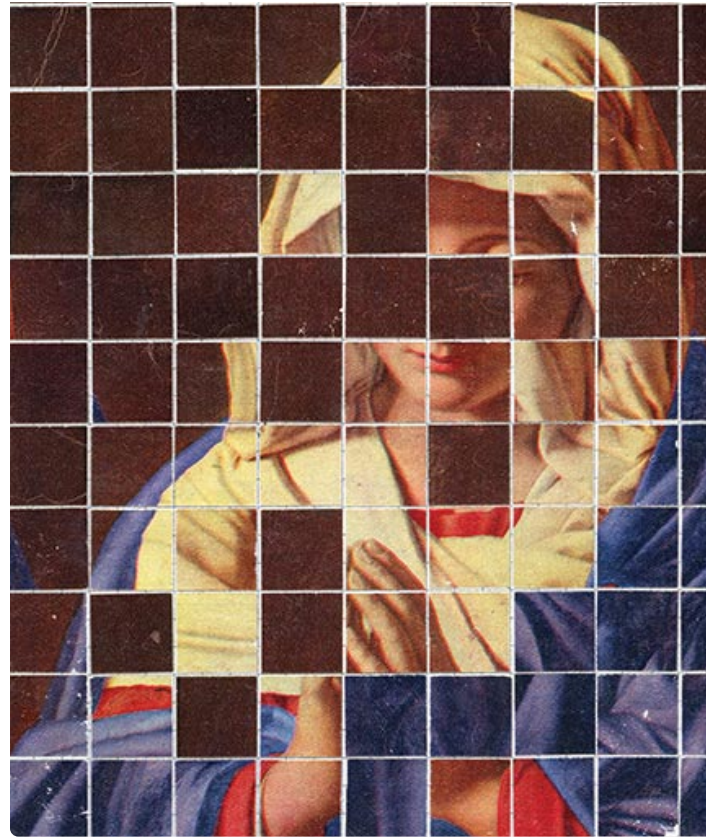
The grand tradition of philosophical religion thus aims at a *symphōnia* of religion and philosophy. This term has a purely technical meaning, of course, but its cognate use in music captures the basic thought that we can harmonize the two voices. The guiding thought of Fraenkel’s study is that what may strike us as an unforgivably elitist distinction, between philosophers and non-philosophers, actually went along with a universalistic acknowledgment that diverse religious traditions share a common core. For it is precisely the social distinction between philosophers and non-philosophers that permitted philosophers to claim that, despite variations in literal content, religion bears an invariant allegorical truth—the insight that God and Reason are one. Plato, for example, believed that the laws of Crete and the laws of Sparta were essentially the same: variations in appearances could be explained by the philosopher as due to the influence of historical and cultural context. It was therefore possible for Plato, in Fraenkel’s assessment, to endorse both contextual pluralism (about variations in religious representations and practices) and universalism (about the inner meaning of religion itself).

The tenth-century Islamic philosopher Al-Fārābī—known in





Muslim circles as the “second teacher,” following only Aristotle in his importance—appears in Fraenkel’s account as one of the greatest medieval exemplars of philosophical religion. Adopting the now-standard distinction between literal and allegorical senses of Scripture, Al-Fārābī applied that distinction even to the idea of God as a “king,” which he interpreted as a means of explaining God’s “ontological rank.” Following Plato, Al-Fārābī also endorsed a certain kind of contextual religious pluralism that allowed for the possibility of more than one virtuous religion. “But what is best known often varies among nations,” he explained. “Hence these things are expressed for each nation in parables other than those used for another nation. Therefore it is possible that virtuous nations and virtuous cities exist whose religions differ, although they all have as their goal one and the same happiness.”



*Illustration by Anthony Gerace*

One of the great virtues of Fraenkel’s book is that it ranges not only across a broad span of history from the Greeks to the eighteenth century, but also across religious traditions that today’s more passionate apologists would prefer to hold apart. With a rare gift for textual analysis in many linguistic spheres, Fraenkel is also the kind of historically minded philosopher who commits himself without fear to broader generalizations that many intellectual historians would resist. The methodological dogma that all ideas must be studied in context all too often inhibits historians from bolder leaps of imagination and comparisons across time and space that reveal surprising continuities and affinities. It is the animating core of Fraenkel’s study that philosophers can discern sameness where more orthodox spirits insist on difference. Contextual pluralism is not incompatible with philosophical universalism. This is

one of the important principles of philosophical religion, and it is also an underappreciated lesson for scholars in any discipline today.

Al-Fārābī is a welcome illustration of this principle. He was a devout Muslim thinker whose mind remained open to the thought that there are multiple paths to God. It is hardly surprising that the writings of Al-Fārābī would serve as a major source of inspiration not only to the Islamic philosopher Averroes but also to Maimonides and Aquinas, the most consequential Jewish and Christian thinkers of the medieval world. The two had much in common, and scholars conventionally see both of them as proponents of “negative theology,” the doctrine that no positive attributes can be ascribed to God and that the true path to theological understanding lies in our coming to a more sophisticated understanding of what we are unable to know.

Fraenkel appreciates such patterns of cross-fertilization, and it is therefore all the more intriguing to consider the question he raises at the start of his book: why did the great philosophers of medieval Christianity ultimately abandon the tradition of philosophical religion to which their predecessors had contributed so much? In antiquity, Christian thinkers such as Origen and Eusebius saw religion and philosophy as compatible. But compare the later example of Aquinas, who subscribed to the rationalist trend in negative theology only to confront a logical conundrum: the Christian faith is grounded upon certain key dogmas—the Trinity and the incarnation of Christ—that transcend human reason. It is here, according to Fraenkel, that Christians began to diverge from the path of philosophical religion they had walked in common with Muslims and Jews. In 1277, the severance was made official when Bishop Tempier in Paris condemned more than two hundred philosophical and theological works, effectively breaking from the rich tradition of Greek and Arabic philosophy that had already been translated into Latin. Fraenkel does not linger over the question of Christianity’s divergence, but it hovers unanswered over the many pages that follow.

In the concluding portions of his book, Fraenkel turns at last to the early modern era and offers what may be the most surprising argument of the book. Fraenkel has a masterful command of his materials in multiple languages (Greek, Latin, Hebrew, Arabic), but he also has a scholar’s distaste for theatrical display: a reader who is not paying attention could miss his revolutionary conclusion that the tradition of philosophical religion has survived into modernity. It survived the collapse of the

medieval world and the wars of religion, it survived well into the seventeenth century and even into the age of Enlightenment, and—here is the stunning part—a remnant of the doctrine survives even today.

The persistence of philosophical religion well into the later seventeenth century is already remarkable, and proving it demands some sleuth work. Fraenkel argues the case by reconstructing a line of demonstrable influence that runs from Al-Fārābī to Averroes to Elijah Delmedigo, the Jewish thinker of the late fifteenth century who authored the innocuous-sounding *Treatise on the Examination of Religion*. It turns out that Delmedigo was a Jewish Averroist. This means, according to Fraenkel, that he believed that philosophy and religion only seem to be incompatible on the surface, but the apparent contradictions between them are resolvable in principle by means of allegorical interpretation. For “the truth does not contradict the truth.” But allegorical interpretation was only for philosophers; revealing the inner truth to the multitude would cause great damage.

As a matter of fact, although he accepted the essential principle of philosophical religion that a reconciliation is possible, Delmedigo was reluctant to endorse the practice of allegorical interpretation, whether in public or private: he felt that the public welfare of the Jewish community was simply too important to allow for philosophical techniques that could undermine the Law. Delmedigo lived a modest existence—he was born in and died in the town of Candia on the island of Crete—but he enjoyed a terrific afterlife in European letters: among the many thinkers he influenced was the Renaissance humanist Pico della Mirandola. But that was not the end of it. A copy of Delmedigo’s treatise made its way across the centuries into the library of Spinoza.

Does Spinoza represent the late-summer flowering of philosophical religion? Much has been said in recent years about Spinoza’s founding role as progenitor of a “radical Enlightenment” that percolated through European letters in the eighteenth century and breathed life into the atheistic and materialist doctrines of radical *philosophes* such as La Mettrie and Diderot. On this view, Spinozism represents nothing less than the great *caesura* in European thought, a discontinuity with what came before and a passageway to the secular world. It is therefore all the more surprising to learn from Fraenkel that Spinoza, who clearly read not only Delmedigo but also Maimonides, at least started out by subscribing to the traditional principles

of philosophical religion.

When confronted with apparent contradictions between philosophy and holy scripture, Spinoza did not respond with an atheist's disdain for vulgar belief. He did not reject Scripture, but instead followed the well-worn technique that earlier exponents of philosophical religion found congenial: he subjected them to a philosophical reinterpretation. In 1663, in his *Cogitata Metaphysica*, he even appealed to the same principle as Averroes: "For the truth does not contradict the truth." To smooth over the obvious divergence between philosophical truth and religious imagery, Spinoza's habitual explanation was that the prophet recognizes how communication with the multitude demands that one adopt the *more humano*, or human custom. But this is precisely the well-known rabbinic axiom that Maimonides used in *The Guide of the Perplexed* - [http://www.amazon.com/gp/product/0872203247/ref=as\\_li\\_qf\\_sp\\_asin\\_tl?ie=UTF8&camp=1789&creative=9325&creativeASIN=0872203247&linkCode=as2&tag=thenewrep08-20](http://www.amazon.com/gp/product/0872203247/ref=as_li_qf_sp_asin_tl?ie=UTF8&camp=1789&creative=9325&creativeASIN=0872203247&linkCode=as2&tag=thenewrep08-20) - as a philosopher's excuse for the otherwise inexcusable sin of anthropomorphism: *dibrah Torah ki'lashon bnei-adam* (the Torah speaks in the language of men).

Fraenkel goes so far as to suggest that we can discern Spinoza's debt to philosophical religion even in the *Theological-Political Treatise* - [http://www.amazon.com/gp/product/B00CF0K6GG/ref=as\\_li\\_qf\\_sp\\_asin\\_tl?ie=UTF8&camp=1789&creative=9325&creativeASIN=B00CF0K6GG&linkCode=as2&tag=thenewrep08-20](http://www.amazon.com/gp/product/B00CF0K6GG/ref=as_li_qf_sp_asin_tl?ie=UTF8&camp=1789&creative=9325&creativeASIN=B00CF0K6GG&linkCode=as2&tag=thenewrep08-20) - , a work whose assault on religious verities achieved such notoriety that it ended up on the papal index of prohibited books. The suggestion is provocative, since the *Treatise* is typically seen as an inaugural text in the canon of modern philosophical atheism. The great historian of Jewish philosophy Harry Austryn Wolfson, for example, saw Spinoza as the first thinker to break with the ancient tradition of "Philonic philosophy" that had embraced philosophy as *ancilla theologiae*, or theology's handmaid. But Fraenkel thinks that Wolfson failed to appreciate the equality of philosophy and religion in the Philonic tradition; he also believes that Wolfson was blind to the ways Spinoza remained that tradition's faithful disciple.

Fraenkel knows that this argument may strain credulity, but he marshals strong evidence in its favor. In the *Treatise*, Spinoza claims that if we read Scripture in the right fashion we will see that "God's decrees and commands, and consequently

God's providence, are in truth nothing but nature's order." But what does it mean to interpret a religious phenomenon in naturalistic terms? On one reading, Spinoza meant to condemn the literal interpretation as false while redeeming the philosophical interpretation as one that supplants error with truth. A different reading, however, is that Spinoza saw the literal interpretation as a regrettable misunderstanding that was due only to a failure of intellectual insight. In this view, the philosophical interpretation helps clarify lessons that are contained in the Scripture even if such lessons remain inaccessible to the literal-minded.

Fraenkel thinks that it is this second reading that best captures the premises of Spinoza's treatment of the Bible. And this means that Spinoza remains remarkably close to the tradition of philosophical religion. Spinoza further believed that, although Scripture can be shown to contain philosophical truth, it cannot itself teach that truth: only a philosopher can reveal what it contains. Scripture's true purpose for those who cannot grasp its philosophical meaning is to ensure that non-philosophers remain obedient to "God's commands," that is, the moral and political precepts that sustain a well-ordered polity. Spinoza also subscribed to contextual pluralism: Christianity was only one among the many forms of historical religion that embodied philosophical and moral truth: "Mahomet, too, taught the Divine Law," he wrote. "As for the Turks and the other Gentiles, if they worship God by the exercise of justice and by love of their neighbor, I believe that they possess the spirit of Christ and are saved." Finally, it seems clear that even his monistic identification of God with nature did not lead Spinoza fully to abandon the medieval notion that our knowledge of the cosmos holds a kind of religious significance. Spinoza believed that the natural order is a perfect and eternal unity, or, in other words, the very embodiment of the divine. The philosopher's contemplation of this divine order is therefore nothing less than a species of redemption. In fact this is the only kind of redemption that is available to humanity—to contemplate the world *sub specie aeternitatis*.

All of which does not make Spinoza just another link in the chain. Fraenkel is so keen to see continuity that he underplays Spinoza's heterodox view that God is identical with His creation: Spinoza's God lacks the transcendence that earlier exponents of philosophical religion always considered His singular distinction. Fraenkel also underestimates Spinoza's ambiguous legacy for the later tradition of

biblical criticism. The technique of historicist criticism that Spinoza himself deployed in the *Treatise* eventually detached itself from the tenets of philosophical religion and worked to undermine the notion that Scripture contains any enduring philosophical truth at all. At this point historicism and naturalism worked like acid, dissolving the conceptual foundations of the older interpretative tradition. Spinoza may have retained a partial fidelity to that tradition, but his heresy was nonetheless real.

Yet even after Spinoza, the tradition managed to survive. Among philosophers of the eighteenth century, one could still glimpse remnants of philosophical religion. Lessing's Nathan was only one example. Kant, too, retained the key precept: the contextual-pluralist view that there are many historical faiths but a common philosophical core, or what he called "religion within the bounds of mere reason." Notwithstanding such survivals, however, philosophical religion began to lose its appeal for one obvious reason: its plausibility proved inconsistent with modern egalitarianism. The notion that traditional religion contains but does not teach philosophical truth implies that this truth is accessible only to the philosopher and not to the literal-minded masses. For proponents of democracy, such a view came to seem intolerable.

But there is a deeper reason for its decline. At least in Western Europe and North America, most of us now tend to conceive of reason and religion as belonging to distinct and even incompatible domains. Modern believers, irrespective of confession, pattern themselves after the Protestant model: religion has withdrawn into a space of privacy and irrationality where its truth must be accepted not on the basis of philosophical argument but on faith alone. Atheists and theists, even if they disagree about everything else, agree that God and Reason belong in different houses; their quarrel is about the legitimacy of each domain and their possible relations, not the separation between them. In the concluding pages of his book, Fraenkel offers the exceedingly curious suggestion that modern theorists of liberalism such as John Rawls still cleave to the interpretative principle of philosophical religion: Rawls held that religious citizens should be permitted to participate in liberal deliberation, provided that they translate their claims into the neutral language of public reason. Here Fraenkel pushes too far, since the translation proviso is meant to expose a non-religious rationality behind religions rather than a



common religious core.

This breakup of the old philosophical union between God and Reason is another name for the great disentanglement in the history of ideas that some theorists still call secularization. The breakup may strike us as irrevocable. But if Fraenkel is right, then the story of philosophical religion reveals a painful irony: the democratic sentiments that now inhibit us from distinguishing between non-philosophers and philosophers have also made it increasingly difficult for us to look past the literal contents of various religious traditions to a shared philosophical commitment within. Our own egalitarianism, in other words, is an obstruction to the kind of contextualist pluralism once upheld by the most subtle thinkers of the Abrahamic religions. The most zealous advocates for religion today are populists and literalists, and they have abandoned the principles of interpretation that made philosophical religion a possibility. Nathan's is a lonely voice in the midst of war.

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*(Harvard).*