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Spinoza and the Netherlands

Introduction

Historians of philosophy pursue a wide variety of different goals: while some of us are mostly interested in establishing predominantly textual ‘facts’, and as a consequence spend most of our time editing texts, others are interested in the history of philosophy for strictly philosophical reasons. To the extent that the results produced by members of the former category are perceived as supplying their colleagues pertaining to the latter category with the materials to work with, both types of historians would seem to be looking primarily for *philosophical* truths. A third group of historians of philosophy, however, is commonly referred to as ‘intellectual historians’. They prefer to regard their efforts as part of a more broadly *historical* quest: they are mainly concerned not to deliver any philosophical truths, but rather to come up with *interpretative hypotheses* relating to the varying historical functions a certain text or a philosophical oeuvre may have had throughout the ages, the changing roles these texts played, the different *purposes* they served.

I have come to prefer this third approach, and I would to hate cause offence at a conference organised by philosophers, but I must admit that I would rather be taken seriously by fellow historians than by my fellow philosophers. Still, historians of philosophy or intellectual historians primarily concerned with the historical *meaning* of texts are bound by the same conceptual demands philosophers obey. Over the last few decades the most influential school of thought among intellectual historians has been the Cambridge School in the history of Political Thought. It owes its methodology largely to a sustained reflection on such concepts as ‘intention’, ‘causality’, ‘meaning’, ‘understanding’ and ‘context’.¹ John Dunn’s and Quentin Skinner’s celebrated papers on method could never have been written had it not been for J.L. Austin’s *How to do Things with Words* and Wittgenstein’s *Philosophical Investigations*. Both Austin’s insistence on the need to regard language as a tool for action and Wittgenstein’s conception of meaning as resulting from use have procured intellectual history with a philosophical basis of its own, as did their analysis of the particular

¹ Most relevant texts are to be found in James Tully (ed.), *Meaning and Context. Quentin Skinner and his Critics* (Cambridge, 1988). See also Richard Rorty, J.B. Schneewind and Quentin Skinner (eds.), *Philosophy in History. Essays on the Historiography of Philosophy* (Cambridge, 1984), and more recently, Tom Sorrell and G.A.J. Rogers (eds.), *Analytic Philosophy and History of Philosophy* (Cambridge, 2005). There’s also an interesting intellectual biography available: Kari Palonen, *Quentin Skinner. History, Politics, Rhetoric* (Cambridge, 2003).

importance to be attached to the contexts in which texts are being written and read, since it is precisely these contexts which enable us to capture their ‘use’, that is their ‘meaning’.

1. The Netherlands and Spinoza

Moving to my topic of Spinoza and the Netherlands, two separate questions present themselves: what did the Netherlands mean to Spinoza, and reverseely, what did Spinoza mean to the Netherlands? As far as the first question is concerned, it would seem obvious that the Dutch Republic represented first and foremost a safe haven for the De Spinoza family, after its flight from Portugal. It enabled the Spinoza’s to make a living as merchants and to reconstruct their Jewish identity. We all know the passage in the *TTP*, celebrating the freedom Amsterdam was offering its citizens.² The title page of his introduction to Cartesianism, the only book Spinoza was able to publish under his own name, proudly refers to its author as ‘*Amstelodamensis*’. Spinoza’s sedimentary lifestyle only adds further significance to his commitment to the Netherlands: unlike Descartes, Hobbes, Locke, Bayle, and Leibniz, he never left the country in which he was born. We know of only a single occasion at which he left the province of Holland for a brief journey, when in 1673 he visited Utrecht in a failed attempt to meet the prince de Condé, but the circumstances of this diplomatic mission are still shrouded in mystery.³

Unless I am mistaken, however, the decisive element in Spinoza’s relationship to the Republic was the *novelty* of this budding state, which by the time Spinoza had reached maturity, was famously characterised as ‘the envy of some, the fear of others, and the wonder of all their neighbours’.⁴ At the time Spinoza was born, however, it was still fighting for its international recognition, that was only achieved in 1648, and the state which emerged from the Revolt was not the realisation of any particular idea. No blueprints were available, it was rather the unforeseen outcome of a series of clashes with Spanish troops as well as of an extremely violent civil war raging in the province of Holland in particular.⁵ Following the stunning economic successes of what soon would be termed the Golden Age of the Dutch

² Baruch Spinoza, *Tractatus theologico-politicus*. Trans. Samuel Shirley (Leiden etc., 1989), p. 298.

³ Steven Nadler, *Spinoza. A Life* (Cambridge, 1999), pp. 316-319.

⁴ Sir William Temple, *Observations upon the United Provinces of the Netherlands*, ed. Sir George Clark (Oxford, 1972), p. 1.

⁵ See, most recently Henk van Nierop, *Treason in the Northern Quarter. War, Terror and the Rule of Law in the Dutch Revolt* (Princeton N.J., 2009). The best general survey is Jonathan I. Israel, *The Dutch Republic. Its Greatness and Fall, 1477-1808* (Oxford, 1995). See, on its cultural history, Karel Davids and Jan Lucassen (eds.), *A Miracle Mirrored. The Dutch Republic in European Perspective* (Cambridge, 1996); Willem Frijhoff and Marijke Spies, *1650: Hard-Won Unity* (Assen-Basingstoke, 2004); Maarten Prak, *The Dutch Republic in the Seventeenth Century* (Cambridge, 2005).

Republic, many twentieth-century historians have concentrated on the ‘modernity’ of the Dutch Republic, but from a constitutional perspective it was essentially a late medieval state, in which local and provincial elites successfully preserved their ‘ancient’ privileges, enabling them to translate their financial prowess into political power. Again Spinoza in the *TTP* provides an interesting illustration, referring to the illegitimate claims of the king of Spain, posing as count of Holland.⁶ Everybody knew that the last ‘real’ count of Holland, Floris V, had died in 1296, and as early as 1610, Grotius had argued that it was only among the successors of the indigenous House of Holland that the original sovereignty of the States had been questioned.⁷

From a contemporary perspective, on the other hand, much in the Dutch Republic must have looked very new indeed, for this ancient political infrastructure harboured, for instance, a stunning confessional diversity, predominantly Protestant, but including a large Catholic community and a small Jewish congregation. The Amsterdam community of Portuguese *sefardim* was only established, however, in the early seventeenth century. It was made up of refugees facing the challenge to reinvent a way of life that had been denied to them for some eight generations: following the forced conversion to Christianity which got under way from the late fourteenth century onward first in Spain and subsequently also in Portugal, so-called ‘new Christians’ of Jewish descent had been transmitting a cultural and intellectual heritage that had been outlawed.

The ‘conversos’ families who settled in Amsterdam during the early 1600s often found it very difficult to decide what this heritage actually demanded of them. During the first decades of its existence, the Portuguese community often had to seek advice from more established Jewish communities and their leaders, including most notably the Venetian rabbi Leon de Modena. Saul Levi Morteira, one of Modena’s pupils gradually managed to establish rabbinical authority, but it was only by the 1650s that Morteira, together with Menasseh ben Israel, finally succeeded in acquiring some prestige beyond the Jewish world.⁸ At the same time, the Portuguese community remained acutely aware of the exceptional position it held in Amsterdam, and indications are that its leaders went out of their way not to cause offence to their Christian ‘hosts’. This may help to explain the eagerness with which the local elderlies, the *parnassim*, excommunicated members whose ‘unruly’ conduct could draw attention

⁶ Spinoza, *Tractatus theologico-politicus*, p. 279.

⁷ Hugo Grotius, *The Antiquity of the Batavian Republic*, ed. Jan Waszink a.o. (Dordrecht, 2000), Ch. 5-7.

⁸ The literature is immense, and most of it is to be found in my ‘Baruch of Benedictus? Spinoza en de “marranen”’, *Mededelingen vanwege Het Spinozahuis* 81 (2001) and ‘Spinoza’s Jewish Identity and the Use of Context’, *Studia Spinozana* 13 (1997) [=2003], pp. 100-117. Steven Nadler has taken issue with my conclusions regarding the relevance of Spinoza’s Jewish background: ‘The Jewish Spinoza’, *Journal of the History of Ideas* 70 (2009), pp. 491-510.

to the community at large. As will be only too familiar, during the seventeenth century some 200 people were banned by the Amsterdam *parnassim* for one reason or another. So as long as we do not know exactly why in 1656 the young Spinoza was banned, both the internal insecurities as well as the external pressure on the Jewish community living near the 'Vlooienburg' may help to explain why he was punished so severely at such an early age, for there is nothing to suggest that by the mid 1650s Spinoza spawned anything resembling a genuine 'philosophy' of his own.

Of course, I am not implying that if the Portuguese community of Amsterdam had been more stable, more self-confident perhaps, Spinoza's ban could have been prevented. (Just as it has been argued that had it not been for Menasseh's journey to London, Spinoza might have been 'saved' by his former teacher.) I find it difficult to imagine the author of the *Tractatus theologico-politicus* an observant member of Menasseh's congregation. Then again, one might wonder what the *Tractatus theologico-politicus* would have looked like, had Spinoza not been excommunicated as early as he was and in the way that he was?

A second novel aspect of life in the seventeenth-century Dutch Republic, that appears to have been crucial to Spinoza's *Werdegang* concerned its academic culture, which was the immediate and very recent outcome of the Revolt itself. Faced with the necessity to educate a home grown professional class of theologians, lawyers and physicians, from 1575 to 1648 the cities of Leiden, Franeker, Groningen, Utrecht and Harderwijk inaugurated universities, some of which soon were excellent. Most of all, however, they were newly established, and this definitely held considerable advantages, in particular to philosophers.⁹ Thus it could come to pass that as early as the 1640s at Utrecht and at Leiden University the *philosophia vetus* started crumbling to be replaced by the *philosophia nova*, which in most cases was quite simply the philosophy of Descartes, who had spent most of his adult life in the Dutch Republic.¹⁰ At a time in which the more ancient Catholic universities of Europe were still dominated by Peripateticism, Dutch universities found it relatively easy to abandon Aristotelianism, owing to the lack of any deep rooted Aristotelian tradition. In a much quoted phrase, Adrien Baillet, in his late seventeenth-century biography of Descartes would have it that Utrecht University, in 1636, was actually 'née cartésienne'¹¹: Cartesian from its very incipience.

By the time Spinoza grew interested in philosophy both Leiden and Utrecht University had appointed a series of young, brilliant and very promising professors all dedicated to the cause of this new philosophy, and by the time Spinoza started to publish, Cartesianism

⁹ Paul Dibon, *L'Enseignement philosophique dans les universités néerlandaises à l'époque pré-cartésienne, 1575-1650* (Leiden, 1954).

¹⁰ Theo Verbeek, *Descartes and the Dutch. Early Reactions to Cartesian Philosophy, 1637-1650* (Edwardsville, 1992).

¹¹ Adrien Baillet, *La Vie de M. Des Cartes*, 2 vols. (Paris, 1691), II, p. 2.

had turned very much into the ‘normal’ academic school of thought in philosophy. This is not to say that during the second half of the seventeenth century Aristotelianism vanished altogether from the academic curricula – a handful of popular professors continued to uphold Peripateticism for several decades. What is more, many Dutch ‘Cartesians’ held views Descartes would have abhorred – the example of Descartes’ one time ally Henricus Regius will be only too familiar.¹² But during the 1660s and 1670s in Leiden as well in Utrecht, and also in Groningen and Franeker, key notions from the Aristotelian conceptual vocabulary had become definitely unfashionable and most of its critics were acutely aware of belonging to a ‘faction’ if you will, a ‘party’, a group of scholars and scientists with a common cause.¹³ Spinoza must have had every opportunity to become acquainted with this Cartesian revolution while he was still living in Amsterdam. Amsterdam friends of Spinoza such as Lodewijk Meyer and the Koerbagh brothers studied with the main proponents of Cartesianism at Leiden and Utrecht. Living in Rijnsburg enabled him to visit Leiden on a daily basis, and while his name does not occur in the *Album studiosorum*, most experts agree that he must have taken regular classes, for instance with De Raey, perhaps with Geulincx.¹⁴ The simple fact that in 1663 he was able to compose his introduction to Cartesianism in just a few weeks time clearly demonstrates the extent to which at an early age he had mastered Descartes’ philosophy.

A third aspect of life in the seventeenth-century Dutch Republic that could perhaps be identified as particularly meaningful in relation to Spinoza’s philosophy could perhaps be found in its relatively egalitarian social make up. I only offer this as a suggestion, but I know Jonathan Israel for instance adds great importance to the apparent lack of the essentially feudal social hierarchy which during the Old Regime still structured social life in Germany, England, and certainly in France.¹⁵ The budding Republic allowed for a remarkable social mobility, and while some regent families could boast noble pedigrees, most of them could not. First, the Netherlands were simply too small to accommodate massive land holdings. The nobility that had actually survived the Revolt – several of the most illustrious indigenous families had perished – was superseded by merchants operating in Holland and Zeeland,

¹² Theo Verbeek (ed.), *Descartes et Regius. Autour de l’Explication de l’Esprit humain* (Amsterdam-Atlanta, 1993).

¹³ *From Stevin to Spinoza. An Essay on Philosophy in the Seventeenth-Century Dutch Republic* (Leiden-Boston, 2001), Ch. 2.

¹⁴ Nadler, *Spinoza*, Ch. 8.

¹⁵ Jonathan I. Israel, *Radical Enlightenment. Philosophy and the Making of Modernity, 1650-1750* (Oxford, 2001), Ch. 3 and 4. See, on the notion of the ‘burger’: Remieg Aerts and Henk te Velde (eds.), *De stijl van de burger. Over Nederlandse burgerlijke cultuur vanaf de Middeleeuwen* (Kampen, 1998); Joost Kloek and Karin Tilmans (eds.), *Burger. Een geschiedenis van het begrip ‘burger’ in de Nederlanden van de Middeleeuwen tot de 21ste eeuw* (Amsterdam, 2002).

whose sense of decorum was defined not by the moral codes of the European aristocracy, but of the ‘burgher’. Foreign observers were shocked to find out that the mayor of Amsterdam, who incidentally was just as rich and certainly as powerful as many of his noble counterparts elsewhere in Europe, every morning simply took a walk to City Hall. (To this day some of our ministers of state take their bike to work.)

I must admit that I find it hazardous to link this relative lack of social hierarchy to Spinoza’s mature political philosophy let alone to what could be called his ‘horizontal’ metaphysics, and I also feel the real differences between life at the *Keizersgracht*, where the Amsterdam elite was residing and the slums where the poor were housed should not be underestimated. What is more, the regent class of merchants by the second half of the seventeenth century was quickly turning into a pretty aristocratic social class itself, but when all is said and done, the Dutch were living in a Republic and Spinoza surely was some sort of ‘republican’.¹⁶ No doubt more could be said about the meaning of the Dutch Republic, and more in particular of its relative ‘youth’ to Spinoza’s life and work, if only on account of the fact that the large majority of Spinoza’s first readers were of course *abhorred* by his views: apparently, to most contemporaries he represented something decidedly *foreign, strange*, and even very *dangerous*. And at least one major specialist of the Golden Age still insists that Spinoza ‘had little to say’ to his countrymen.¹⁷

2. Spinoza and the Netherlands

But let’s now turn to the issue of what Spinoza may have meant to the Netherlands. Which role did he play in the seventeenth-century Dutch Republic, what purpose can be ascribed to Dutch Spinozism and the reactions it provoked? In view of the many studies which have appeared from the 1980s onwards on the early reception of Spinoza - first, I should add, in Germany – it now seems quite clear that in spite of the general revulsion his work met with, Spinoza’s philosophy had a larger impact on his contemporaries than scholars had been prepared to admit for a long time.

Of course, Spinoza’s first admirers may well have had very different reasons for becoming ‘Spinozists’ themselves if only since they were very different people: devout Mennonites from Amsterdam, such as Jelles, Balling and De Vries; Amsterdam freethinkers such as Meyer and Johan and Adriaan Koerbagh; distinguished lawyers and ministers from The Hague, such as Cuffeler and Van Balen, and outright libertines such as the pornographer

¹⁶ See, most recently, Raia Prokhovnik, *Spinoza and Republicanism* (Basingstoke, 2004).

¹⁷ A.Th. van Deursen, *De last van veel geluk. De geschiedenis van Nederland, 1555-1702* (Amsterdam, 2004), p. 307.

Adriaan Beverland. And then there are Calvinists, such as Leenhoff and Van Hattem; and, finally, the anonymous authors of such infamous texts as the *Vervolg op het Leven van Philopater* (1697) and the *L'Esprit de Spinosa* (1719), also known as the *Traité des trois imposteurs*. Together, these authors were among the first exponents of what Jonathan Israel, following Margaret Jacob, has termed the 'radical Enlightenment.' According to Israel, this was an essentially secular movement, out to destroy theological authority. Well before the publication of *Radical Enlightenment*, I have argued that we are best advised to distinguish between two separate strands or tendencies within this early, radical Enlightenment, and I still feel that the differences between, say: Jelles and Baling on the one hand, and the authors of the *Vervolg op het Leven van Philopater* and the *L'Esprit de Spinosa* are more interesting than their similarities.¹⁸

However, one element which seems to have united all early Dutch Spinozists, appears to have been the desire to put an end to theological and confessional debates resulting in political strife. They all seem to have shared a deep felt revulsion over the way in which theological disputes had been spilling over to the political domain, and had more often than not resulted into violence. In the Dutch Republic, Spinoza's philosophy appears to have been perceived by some contemporaries as a way out of the perpetual theological conflicts wrecking the state. Its promise to deliver a philosophical vocabulary capable of answering the Ultimate Questions, which was just as certain and indubitable as Euclidean geometry must have had a huge appeal to some. Here at last, or so Spinoza's friends seem to have thought, was a view of the world, of God, man and his well-being which excluded the interpretative uncertainties Scripture continued to yield. Here at last was a philosophy which could make an end to the sectarianism, that was widely considered a continuing threat to the stability of the republic.¹⁹

Let's not forget that the entire history of this young Dutch Republic which lacked any strong central authority and which never had a State Church either had been marred by *discordia*: from the Synod of Dordt in 1619 to Willem II's attack on Amsterdam in 1650 to the chaos resulting from the French invasion of 1672 and the assassination of Johan and Cornelis de Witt, the fear of civil discord never withered. The disastrous consequences of civil war had been spelt out convincingly by Justus Lipsius in the 1580s already: the loose, federal character of the United Provinces hardly guaranteed political stability, and in a very real sense, the entire history of the seventeenth-century Dutch Republic was a quest for *concordia*, for as the motto of the States General had it – and has it to this day: '*Concordia res parvae crescunt*'. In Dutch: '*Eendracht maakt macht*.'

¹⁸ Wiep van Bunge, 'Spinozistische vrijdenkers in de Republiek', *Rekenschap* 45 (1998), pp. 103-116.

¹⁹ Van Bunge, *From Stevin to Spinoza*, Ch. 5.

Meanwhile, the reputation of mathematics as a discipline uniquely capable of delivering indubitable truths was also very strong in the Netherlands. At least from Simon Stevin onwards, generations of civil and military engineers, architects, seafaring captains and the accountants managing the leading trading houses of Holland and Zeeland had been trained in (applied) mathematics at a considerable level.²⁰ When Descartes first settled in the Netherlands, he did so in order to study mathematics with Metius at Franeker, and one of the reasons why Descartes' own philosophy of nature quickly came to be regarded as the most viable alternative to competing schools of thought was precisely the promise it held of mathematical exactitude. Once Spinoza launched a philosophy, grounded in Cartesianism, which refused to make a halt before the barriers Descartes had still acknowledged to exist between natural philosophy and the domains of theology and politics, some Dutchmen must have felt that now at last, the very source of so many theologico-political conflicts could be neutralised.

Among Spinoza's first critics, again, each and every one had his own axe to grind. Arminians such as the Remonstrant minister Jacobus Batelier were of course particularly concerned to point to the disastrous consequences of Spinoza's determinism. Most of his critics, meanwhile, were Cartesians, and it is easy to see why this should be so. Not only were Van Mansvelt, Van Bleijenbergh, Wittichius and Bayle fervently trying to dissociate Cartesianism from Spinozism, by demonstrating how Descartes' philosophy had been perverted by Spinoza, they must also have been glad to be finally able to prove their mettle as apologists.²¹ At no stage since Descartes had presented his *Meditations* to the Sorbonne as an antidote to atheism, his followers were presented with such an excellent opportunity to play out Descartes' arguments for the existence of God and the immortality of the soul. For now at last they were facing a philosopher whose conception of God and the human mind hardly resembled the essentially supernatural, providential Creator and the immaterial 'soul' cultivated in the Christian tradition and confirmed by Descartes' metaphysics.

As far as the Dutch preoccupation with Spinozism is concerned, however, it should be stressed that it largely and quickly disappeared during the eighteenth century: Historians of philosophy have traditionally pointed to the rise of Newtonianism, that was seized upon at a very early stage by critics of Spinoza, and it is certainly true that even at Leiden and Utrecht by the 1720s Cartesianism was dead and buried.²² Its success had been as swift as it

²⁰ *Ibid.*, Ch. 1.

²¹ *Ibid.*, Ch. 4.

²² See, for instance, Gerhard Wiesenfeldt, *Leerer Raum in Minervas Haus. Experimentelle Naturlehre an der Universität Leiden, 1675-1715* (Amsterdam, 2002), and on the early stages of Dutch Newtonianism: Rienk Vermij, 'The Formation of the Newtonian Philosophy. The Case of the Amsterdam Mathematical Amateurs', *The British Journal for the History of Science* 36 (2003), pp.

was short-lived. But no cultural historian could possibly be satisfied with this answer, which basically *describes* an eighteenth-century state of affairs. For how are we to *understand* the apparent failure of Dutch Spinozism to make a lasting impact? To a cultural historian the fact that there are no indications of any substantial interest in Spinoza among eighteenth-century Dutchmen should make us wonder about the *purpose* Spinozism had been serving during the final decades of the seventeenth-century. As it happens, most Dutch Enlightenment experts seem to agree that during the early decades of the eighteenth century, the *need* for a radical, Spinozistic Enlightenment had evaporated, and the dialectics separating orthodox Protestants from radical dissenters came to be replaced by a widely shared vision of a confessional landscape allowing for diversity within reasonable limits. In addition, concerns over the internal coherence of the Republic were superseded by different worries, as is also evident from the remarkable history of Dutch, radical Republicanism, which after 1672, and especially after the Glorious Revolution, turned broadly Orangist as Jonathan Israel has also noted.²³ After 1672, Dutch Republicans appear to have agreed that the foreign policies of Louis XIV in particular simply necessitated the punching power of a Prince such as William III.

After the death of William III, during the second stadholderless period, the overriding concern of many educated Dutchmen became the rapid *decline* of the Republic.²⁴ The literature on its economic, military and cultural denouement is truly massive and opinions vary for instance as to the crucial dates involved, for when exactly set the rot in and how bad was it really? Meanwhile, there can be no doubt as to the fervour with which Dutch eighteenth-century intellectuals set out to find adequate diagnoses and suitable remedies. Apparently, the philosophy of Spinoza was not considered part of the equation. What is more, Spinoza had no role to play either in the continuing eighteenth-century debate on religious toleration. According to one expert, Joris van Eijnatten, it would not have made any difference to the eighteenth-century debate on toleration such as it evolved in the Dutch

183-200 and E.G.E. van der Wall, 'Newtonianism and Religion in the Netherlands', *Studies in the History and Philosophy of Science* 35 (2004), pp. 493-514.

²³ Jonathan I. Israel, *Monarchy, Orangism and Republicanism in the Later Dutch Golden Age* (Amsterdam, 2004) and *Enlightenment Contested. Philosophy, Modernity, and the Emancipation of Man, 1670-1752* (Oxford, 2006), Ch. 10.

²⁴ See on the economic history of the early modern Netherlands: Jan de Vries and Ad van der Woude, *The First Modern Economy. Success, Failure and Perseverance of the Dutch Economy, 1500-1815* (Cambridge, 1997). See also Margaret C. Jacob and Wijnand W. Mijnhardt (eds.), *The Dutch Republic in the Eighteenth Century. Decline, Enlightenment, and Revolution* (Ithaca-London, 1992); Joost Kloek and Wijnand Mijnhardt, *1800: Blueprints for a National Community* (Assen-Basingstoke, 2004) and Wijnand Mijnhardt, 'The Construction of Silence. Religious and Political Radicalism in the Dutch Republic', Wiep van Bunge (ed.), *The Early Enlightenment in the Dutch Republic* (Leiden-Boston, 2003), pp. 231-262.d.

Republic, had Spinoza never existed.²⁵

In fact, it was only during the second half of the *nineteenth* century that Spinoza's philosophy again started to acquire any significance to Dutch culture. By this time, a powerful movement of freethinkers had emerged, who seized upon his naturalism, his critique of revealed religion, and during the 1860s its most vociferous proponent, Johannes van Vloten, did not hesitate to proclaim Darwin's *The Origin of Species* as the logical outcome of Spinoza's philosophy.²⁶ His aggressive, highly polemical stance, however, added considerably to his growing isolation: if anything, his many attacks on Kant in particular appear to have resulted mainly in bolstering the position of German idealism in the Netherlands. In itself a remarkable achievement, in view of the lukewarm reception Kant and his successors had received earlier at Dutch universities.²⁷

While Spinoza's philosophy failed to make any impact on Dutch academic curricula, by the end of the nineteenth century Van Vloten's successors succeeded in creating a society which to this day has been serving as a platform on which a wide variety of activities related to Spinoza are being staged. Today, the *Vereniging Het Spinozahuis* has become by far the largest philosophical society of the Netherlands. It counts some 1200 members, the huge majority of which, of course, are no professional philosophers. Indeed, in the early twenty first century there is only a handful of Dutch academics studying Spinoza professionally, and I am afraid that at the moment I know of only a *single* colleague, Piet Steenbakkers, to whom Spinoza represents his main area of interest. And Piet Steenbakkers, I hasten to add, is a *historian* of philosophy, just as I am, and just as Henri Krop and Han van Ruler are, to mention some of the names you may be familiar with. (In Belgium, I should add, the situation is even worse: for decades, Herman de Dijn has been the *sole* authority on Spinoza, and he retired two years ago.)²⁸

I should like to emphasise this obvious lack of symmetry in the appreciation of Spinoza among the wider reading public and the professional academics in order to

²⁵ Joris van Eijnatten, 'What If Spinoza Never Happened?', *De Achttiende Eeuw* 41 (2009), 144-149. See also his *Liberty and Concord in the United Provinces. Religious Toleration and the Public in the Eighteenth-Century Netherlands* (Leiden-Boston, 2003). On the absence of Spinoza in Dutch eighteenth-century political thought, see Wyger Velema, *Republicans. Essays on Eighteenth-Century Dutch Political Thought* (Leiden-Boston, 2007).

²⁶ Siebe Thissen, *De Spinozisten. Wijsgerige beweging in Nederland, 185-1907* (The Hague, 2000). See also my 'Johannes van Vloten et le "premier" spinozisme néerlandais au XIXe siècle', André Tosel, Pierre-François Moreau, and Jean Salem (eds.), *Spinoza au XIXe siècle* (Paris, 2007), pp. 427-440.

²⁷ See most recently Viktoria E. Franke, *Een gedeelde wereld? Duitse theologie en filosofie in het verlichte debat in Nederlandse recensietijdschriften, 1774-1837* (Amsterdam-Utrecht, 2009), Ch. 3.

²⁸ Cf. Wiep van Bunge, "'Geleerd" spinozisme in Nederland en Vlaanderen, 1945-2000', *Tijdschrift voor Filosofie* 71 (2009), pp. 13-38 and 'Spinoza en de Nederlandse canon', Theo van der Werf (ed.), *Herdenking van de 375^{ste} geboortedag van Benedictus de Spinoza, Mededelingen vanwege Het Spinozahuis* 93 (2007), pp. 11-24.

explain what Spinoza's so-called recent 'popularity' actually amounts to. It is true that popular introductions to Spinoza's philosophy and translations of his work sell well in the Netherlands, and seminars and courses on Spinoza also draw considerable crowds. But Dutch professors of philosophy could not care less. Today, the large majority of Dutch professional philosophers – and you would be surprised to find out how many professors of philosophy there are in the Netherlands these days – are doing more or less what their colleagues in Britain, Scandinavia, Australia and the United States are doing: they publish papers in English and American journals on technical details relating to Logic, Philosophy of Mind and Moral Philosophy. They are hardly interested in the history of philosophy as such, and I know not of a single Dutch philosopher of any repute to whom Spinoza holds any special meaning. As far as I can see, there is only one country on the European Continent, in which Spinoza continues to be present as a genuine 'force', inspiring current philosophy and that is France, but the impact of French philosophy in the Netherlands has now become almost negligible, which leaves us with the odd conclusion, that while Spinoza is probably the most popular philosopher in the Netherlands today, Dutch professional philosophers largely ignore him.²⁹

Conclusion

If Spinoza means anything to the Netherlands today, it would appear to me he does so for two reasons: on the one hand, many Dutchmen studying Spinoza today, seem to be doing so in the wake of the massive secularisation which hit the Netherlands from the 1960s to the 1980s: within one generation, the Netherlands turned into the European country in which the largest percentage of the population belonged to one confession or another to the country with the smallest percentage of believers registered with some denomination.³⁰ This left many Dutchmen, no longer satisfied with the answers churches had to offer, looking for an alternative '*levensbeschouwing*'. To some, Spinozism appears to have filled the void. (Only the other day one of the members of *Het Spinozahuis* actually told me so: 'I enjoy the lectures and the summer courses of the *Vereniging* so much', he mused, 'since they allow me to talk about God without having to believe in Him!')

More recently, Spinoza took centre stage in the remarkable debate that was raging mostly

²⁹ For a recent survey, see Lorenzo Vinciguerra, 'The Renewal of Spinozism in France (1950-2000)', *Historia Philosophica* 7 (2009), pp. 133-150.

³⁰ See in particular Peter van Rooden, *Religieuze regimes. Over godsdienst en maatschappij in Nederland 1570-1990* (Amsterdam, 1996) and 'Long-Term Religious Developments in the Netherlands, 1750-2000', Hugh McLeod and W. Ustorff (eds.), *The Decline of Christendom in the Western World, 1750-2000* (Cambridge, 2002), pp. 113-129.

in news papers and quality weeklies on the relevance of the Enlightenment. Following 9-11 and the assassination of Pim Fortuyn and Theo van Gogh, Jonathan Israel's *Radical Enlightenment* was referred to and discussed by journalists and other opinion makers hardly known for their insight into Spinoza's philosophy or into the history of eighteenth-century thought.³¹ As a direct consequence of the sudden debate on the pros and cons of 'multiculturalism', Spinoza's life and work suddenly appeared to take on a topicality all of its own, in particular when Ayaan Hirsi Ali let it be known that she was a great admirer of *Radical Enlightenment* and of Spinoza.³² The outcome of both developments seems uncertain to say the least. Much has been said recently about the 'return of religion', but nobody knows what its future in Western Europe or anywhere else will actually amount to. Much the same holds for the popular polemics relating to *Radical Enlightenment*, which have subdued by now, but the issues involved have not. So I don't think it is possible to make any viable prediction as to what Spinoza will mean to the Dutch for the coming decades. As far as I can see, the future of Dutch Spinozism is open.³³

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³¹ See for some of the backgrounds Ian Buruma, *Murder in Amsterdam. The Death of Theo van Gogh and the Limits of Tolerance* (New York, 2006).

³² Cf. Wiep van Bunge, *De Nederlandse Republiek, Spinoza en de radicale Verlichting* (Brussels, 2010) and 'Radical Enlightenment. A Dutch Perspective', forthcoming.

³³ Cf. Wiep van Bunge, 'Spinoza Past and Present', G.A.J. Rogers, Tom Sorrell and Jill Kraye (eds.), *Insiders and Outsiders in Seventeenth-Century Philosophy* (New York-London, 2009), pp. 223-237.