Christian Thought in Sandius and Spinoza[1]

Spinoza's Christological passages have long puzzled commentators. They are too numerous to ignore, yet hard to take literally, going as they do against the apparent trend of his thought. Highlighting the Christological passages, Harry Austryn Wolfson imagines him giving a sermon in Dr. Cordes' Lutheran church one Sunday. He concludes the sermon with a prayer, composed from Spinoza's own words, concluding with a Christolatrous invocation: "In the name of Christ, the mouth of God, whose spirit is the idea of God, which alone leads us unto liberty, salvation, blessedness, and regeneration. Amen."[2] What are we to make of such passages? The possibilities run the gamut. Is Spinoza writing sincerely and frankly as an admirer of Jesus? Nay, more, is he actually writing as a Christian (though an odd one)? Or is he merely accommodating the views of his readership, writing in terms they could accept without endorsing or rejecting their views? Or yet again is he writing subversively, using Christological language to undermine Christianity. (We might imagine this last possibility on the model of Christian missionaries in North America, who spoke of *Gitche Manitou* ["The Great Spirit"] not in order to affirm Native American spiritual practices but to put an end to them.)

There are various ways to approach this question, but it might be fruitful to ask, "Did the Christians who knew Spinoza consider him a Christian?"[3] The answer, in most cases, is a

[1] The author would like to thank _____ for helping with the translation of Lech Szczucki's Polish-language article.
[2] Harry Austryn Wolfson, *The Philosophy of Spinoza*, 2 vols. (Cambrdige, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1934), 2:351.
[3] I here follow the example of the grandmother of playwright Samson Raphaelson. Raphaelson bought a yacht and proclaimed himself a captain. His grandmother is said to have responded, "By you, you're a captain. By me, you're a captain. But by the captains are you a captain?" The original words of the conversation are probably lost to history, but the incident is reported probably most reliably in John Golden, "By the Captains!" *The Rotarian* (January 1952), p. 11; see also Mike Connolly, "Shirley Temple Series Still Not Re-signed," *Toledo Blade* (August 27, 1958), p. 57.

vehement No. Most of Spinoza's Christian contemporaries considered him a dangerous atheist. Counterexamples, however, do exist. One is Jarig Jelles, a close friend of Spinoza and the author of the Preface to Spinoza's posthumous works.[4] There are also Spinozistic preachers, contemporary and subsequent to Spinoza, who served on pulpits in Reformed churches, who clearly found Christianity and Spinozism compatible.[5] One might also mention here a much later figure, Frederic Farrar, Queen Victoria's personal chaplain, who (not going quite so far as Jelles) wrote that "[n]o one can read the works of that virtuous and keen-sighted thinker without feeling that he was at any rate 'almost a Christian.'"[6] Of course, we cannot accept just any such statement from any random Christian: It must be a knowledgeable, devoted Christian who was sufficiently informed about Spinoza to make a reasonable decision. I propose to examine here the views of one such Christian: Christoph Sandius.[7]

Naturally, any such choice is likely to be controversial. One person's Christian may be another person's infidel. The Christian world of Spinoza's time was roiled by controversy.[8]

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[4] See F. Akkerman and H. G. Hubbeling, "The Preface to Spinoza's Posthumous Works 1677, and Its Author, Jarig Jelles (c. 1619/20-1683)," *Lias* 6 (1979): 103-173; and the (1684) editor's Afterword to Jarig Jelles, *Belydenisse des Algemeenen en Christelyken Geloofs* ["Confession of the Universal Christian Faith"], ed. Leen Spruit (first published 1684; Macerata, Italy: Quodlibet, 2004), p.232, where we read that he sent the work to Spinoza, asking whether his opinion agreed with the truth of the matter, upon which he received the reply that "I have read through your writings with pleasure, and find them such that I can suggest no alterations in them."

[5] M. R. Wielema, *The March of the Libertines : Spinozists and the Dutch Reformed Church (1660-1750)* (Hilversum: Verloren, 2004), esp. chapter 3.

[6] Frederic Farrar, *History of Interpretation* (London: E. P. Dutton, 1886), p. 383. Jelles perhaps had the motive of polishing Spinoza's reputation by portraying him as a Christian. Farrar surely had no such motive, so his words, though hedged, bear much weight.

[7] On Sandius see Lech Szczucki, "Praefatio" to Sandius, *Bibliotheca Antitrintariorum* (Warsaw: Państwowe Wydawnictwo Naukowe, 1967), pp. v-xvi (in Latin); Szczucki, "Sandius (Sand) Jr., Christophorus," in *Biografisch Lexicon voor het Geschiedenis van de Nederlandse Protestantisme*, ed. Doede Nauta, 6 vols. (Kampen: Kok, 1978-2006), 4:379-382; [Stephen Nye,] *A Brief History of the Unitarians, Called Also Socinians* (n.p.: n.p., 1687), pp. 35-36; Friedrich Samuel Bock, *Historia Antitrinitariorum* (Regiomonti & Lipsiae: Impensis Gottl. Lebr. Hartungii, 1774-1784), vol. 1, part 2, pp. 744-760; on the relationship between Sandius and Pierre-Daniel Huet, see April Shelford, *Transforming the Republc of Letters: Pierre-Daniel Huet and European Intellectual Life* (Rochester: University of Rochester Press, 2007), pp. 156-158. Sandius' used the vernacular name of van den Sand, but practicality now favors the Latinate form: if one does an online search for "Sand," one gets references to beaches and sandboxes.

[8] For a single example, see Gijsbert Voet's *De Atheismo*, which defines atheism so broadly that precious few Christians could escape the charge.

Sandius, as we shall see, held heretical views, and many would deny him the status of a Christian, but we, taking a less dogmatic view, can certainly call him a knowledgeable, devoted Christian; and he knew Spinoza. If Sandius considered Spinoza a Christian, then following the method proposed above, we have reason to believe that Spinoza was a Christian of some sort and that his Christolatrous statements are to be taken seriously and literally, though unconventionally.

Sandius' name is known to Spinoza scholars from the posthumous list of books in Spinoza's library. There we find *two* copies of Sandius *Nucleus Historiae Ecclesiasticae*, the first edition (1666) and the second (1676).[9] Lech Szczucki suggests that these are presentation copies from the author to his friend, Spinoza.[10] (Why else would the frugal Spinoza buy or keep two copies?) Sandius was a writer of Prussian origin who was reputed to be an adherent of the Arian heresy, though he himself refused to be characterized as such in print.[11] Fleeing Prussia, where he and his father were persecuted for their religious views, he found refuge in Amsterdam, the haven of so many religious dissenters. Sandius became the editor for the Dutch translation of Pierre-Daniel Huet's *Demonstratio Evangelica*. It was a surprising collaboration, given Huet's fervent Roman Catholicism, but they seem to have had a good working relationship. Their correspondence is preserved in manuscript in the Laurentian Library (*Biblioteca Medicea Laurenziana*) in Florence. He was by all accounts a very learned person. Huet describes him as "*viro doctissimo, diligentissimo, mihique ut spero amicissimo*" ("a most learned and most diligent man, and, as I hope, most friendly to me"), and the British Unitarian writer Stephen Nye

[9] See Jakob Freudenthal, *Die Lebensgeschichte Spinoza's* (Leipzig: Veit, 1899), and p. 162, item (104) 23, and p. 161, item (42) 18.
[10] Lech Szczucki, "W kręgu spinozjańskim (Krzysztof Sandius junior)," *Przegląd Filozoficzno-Literacki* 3-4 (2007):289-311, at p. 304.
[11] Nye, *Brief History*, p. 35. It is hardly surprising that Sandius would not characterize himself as an Arian. "Arian" was a term imposed on the Arians by their opponents and never accepted by the Arians themselves. See Wiles, *Archetypal Heresy*, p. 5.

(1648–1719) calls him "a Gentleman of prodigious Industry and Reading, and no less ingenious than learned . . . ."[12] These words might smack of flattery, but Sandius' letters to Huet make clear his intelligence and erudition.

Sandius is not as well known as he deserves to be, no doubt in part because Lech Szczucki, the most prolific contemporary writer on Sandius, has published his writings in Polish, Dutch and Latin.[13]

The special significance of figures such as Jelles and Sandius is that they knew Spinoza personally. Jelles, indeed, was one of Spinoza's closest friends, and (as we shall see) there is reason to believe that Sandius was a close friend as well. This personal acquaintance gives a person an insight into his or her friend's views that a stranger might lack. If we could resurrect Jelles or Sandius, we might ask, "What was Spinoza *really* like?" and expect an answer that could not be provided by someone only from written sources. In particular, it is certainly possible for a person to spout Christian rhetoric without being Christian at all, and just from reading Spinoza's works one might think that that was what he was doing. Marranos in particular—including Spinoza's ancestors—were in a position where their very lives depended on their ability to speak like Christians without being Christians. Only a close friend gets to observe a person's life and can perhaps discern the sham. Not that it is impossible for a friend to be mistaken about such things, but the evidence of someone who has a close relationship is more powerful than that of someone who merely reads what the person has written.

Sandius personal relationship with Spinoza is evident from one of Sandius' letters:

[12] Huet to Sandius, March 26, 1680; Nye, *Brief History*, p. 35.
[13] See note 6 above.

Jam ante aliquot annos audiveram te in opera illo refutaturum Tractatum Theologico-politicum. Illius auctorem nullus dubito quin scias esse Benedictum de Spinoza, cujus mentio extat in Stoupae libello Gallico de Religione Hollandorum, Ultrajecti ad Rhenum impress. Jam biennium effluxit, ex quo autor e vivis excessit. Contra dictum tractatum antehac multi scripserunt ex professo, ut Mansfeldius, Bredenburgius, Cuperus: quorum nemini respondit author, mihique olim dixit, sibi non opus vidivit, ut umquam eorum respeonderet; tibi vero ceu viro doctrina aliis longe eminentiori se repsondere promisit.

Some years ago I heard that you were planning in that work [the *Demonstratio Evangelica*] to refute the *Tractatus Thologico-Politicus.* Its author, as you no doubt know, is Benedictus de Spinoza, who is mentioned in Stouppe's little book written in French on the religion of the Dutch, which was printed in Utrecht.[14] Two years have passed since the author has passed away. Many have written expressly against the above-mentioned *Tractatus*, such as [Regnerus van] Mansfeld, [Johannes] Bredenburg, and [Frans] Kuyper.[15] To none of these has the author responded. *He once said to me that he did not consider it worthwhile to reply to any of them. But to you—a person far superior in learning—he promised to respond.*[16] (Sandius to Huet, 13 October 1680; emphasis added)

[14] Giovanni Battista Stoppa, *La Religion des Hollandois* (Cologne: Chez Pierre Martineau, 1673). Sandius' statement that it was printed at Utrecht may be an error; it is also possible that it was in fact printed there, and given a false imprint. Stoppa was known also by the French form of his name, *Stouppe.*

[15] Regnerus van Mansfeld, *Adversus Anonymum Theologo-Politicum* [sic] *Liber Singularis* (Amsterdam: Abraham Wolfgang, 1674); Johannes Bredenburg, the elder, *Enervatio Tractatus Theologicopolitici* [sic] *unà cum Demonstratione, Geometrico Ordine Dispositâ, Naturam Non Esse Deum, etc.* (Rotterdam: Apud I. Naeranum, 1675); Frans Kuyper, *Arcana Atheismi Revelata, Philosophice & Paradoxè Refutata, Examine Tractatus Theologico-Politici* (Rotterdam: Apud I. Naeranum, 1676).

[16] Spinoza was informed by Lambertus van Velthuysen in Letter 80 that Huet planned to compose a refutation of the *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus.* His eagerness to read Huet's work is revealed in Letter 83. In point of fact, Huet

Although Lech Szczucki places him in the Spinoza Circle ("w kręgu spinozjańskim") he was clearly not in the *first* circle, the circle of Spinoza's disciples. That distance in a way makes his support and admiration stand out more clearly by contrast: his positive statements are thus not simply the adulation of a disciple, but the considered appreciation of someone who has some critical distance. He was, however, a very close friend, as Szczucki argues (correctly in my estimation): Spinoza, whose motto was *caute* and his symbol the rose of silence, would not have been willing to confide his writing plans to a mere acquaintance.[17]

Sandius was clearly an admirer of Spinoza. This can be seen, for example, in a letter written by H. G. Masius, court preacher to the king of Denmark:

> Amstelodami cum Sandio versari licuit nec poenitet commercium literarum cum eo instituisse futurum ratus, ut hoc pacto omnium optime, si quid in recessu habet, ut dicimus, eliciam. . . . Nuper enim mihi Spinozsae illius scripta posthuma de meliori nota commendavit et ad legenda ea vehermenter hortatus est.

> In Amsterdam I was allowed to lodge with Sandius, and I do not regret having begun a literary relationship with him, which I expect to continue, so that in this way I may elicit the best of all which he has, as they say, in his storeroom. . . . He recently commended to

claims that Spinoza is only incidentally a target of the work in question, the *Demonstratio Evangelica*. See April Shelford, *Transforming the Republic of Letters: Pierre-Daniel Huet and European Intellectual Life, 1650-1720* (Rochester: University of Rochester Press, 2007), pp. 153-154.

[17] Szczucki, p. 304.

me in the strongest terms the posthumous works of this Spinoza and ardently urged me to read them.[18]

Commented [JA1]: On this translation: Alexander Adam, *Compendious Dictionary*, s.v. *nota*

Sandius also professed admiration for Spinoza's abilities in physics and mathematics. He writes to Huet,

> Miraris, cur Spinozam cum Democrito conferam, cum hic physicarum rerum ac artium mathematicarum fuerit longe peritissimus. Verum et harum prae aliis peritissimus aestimatur Spinoza.
>
> You wonder why I compare Spinoza to Democritus, since the latter was by far the most expert in physics and the mathematical arts. Truly, in these, too, Spinoza was the most expert of all.

One might be tempted to ask how Sandius could consider Spinoza, a person infamous as an atheist, a Christian. Clearly, Sandius was working with a very broadly inclusive definition of Christianity. For Sandius, anyone who declares that Jesus is the Christ, is a Christian. He states this in a letter to Huet concerning the *Testimonium Flavianum.* The *Testimonium Flavianum* is a passage in Flavius Josephus' *Jewish Antiquities*, in which Josephus seems to say that Jesus was

[18] Theodor Wotschke, "Der polnischen Brüder Briefwechsel mit den märkischen Enthusiasten," *Deutsche wissenschaftliche Zeitschrift für Polen* 22 (1931):1-66, at p. 15, n. 23.

the Christ—"seems to say," because the authenticity of the passage is debated.[19] Sandius in fact denies that the passage is authentic. He writes:

> Quicunque scripsit Jesum esse Christum, non solum corde idem credidit, sed & ore confessus est; & per consequens de Deo est 1 Joh. V. 1. adeoque & Christianus est. Josephus id fecit. Ergo etc. Ergo ex Synagoga ejici debuit. Sed Josephus non fuit ex Synagoga ejectus. Ergo id non scripsit.
>
> Whoever writes that Jesus was the Christ, not merely believing it in his heart but confessing it with his mouth,[20] is consequently also of God (1 John 5:1) and is consequently also a Christian. [Some say that] Josephus did this. Therefore [they conclude that he was a Christian]. Therefore he should have been expelled from the Synagogue. But Josephus was not expelled from the Synagogue. Therefore he did not write it [i.e., the *Testimonium Flavianum*]. (Sandius to Huet, 13 November 1679)

Spinoza does in fact say that Jesus was the Christ:

> [I]t is not completely necessary for salvation to know Christ according to the flesh; but one must view things far differently with regard to that eternal son of God, that is, God's eternal wisdom, . . . which manifested itself most of all in *Christ Jesus*.[21]

[19] See Flavius Josephus, *Jewish Antiquities*, ed. H. St. J. Thackeray et al., 9 vols. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998), Book 18, Chapter 3, vol. 8, pp. 48-51. The controversy over the authenticity of the passage is discussed in the footnotes to pp. 48-49.
[20] Sandius evidently equates writing and publishing with oral confession: clearly it is the public nature of the proclamation that relevant (as opposed to merely believing something inwardly), and whether one makes it public by speaking or writing or printing is irrelevant.
[21] Spinoza to Oldenburg &&&; emphasis added.

Indeed, Spinoza nearly always refers to Jesus as *Christ*, which, with his knowledge of languages, he surely knew was not a name but a title, i.e., *Messiah.* Perhaps referring to this passage, Sandius writes,

> [U]tut aliis Judaeis Christum blasphemantibus, ipse [Spinoza] eum vocet sapientiam et rationem Dei.
>
> Whereas the other Jews blaspheme Christ, [Spinoza] calls him the wisdom and reason of God.[22]

In another letter, Sandius makes the point yet more clearly. He is responding here to Huet's suggestion that even if Josephus did not believe in Jesus as the Christ, he held him to be a holy man. Sandius replies:

> Qucquid horum sit, certum videtur, Josephum debuisse exturbari ex Synagoga, si ita scripsisset, ut fertur. Vellem sane Josephum ita scripsisse, sed non video qua ratione me modo isthoc expediam. . . . Haec de Josepho. Nunc de Spinoza quaedam, qui quidem Jesum vocando Dei sapientiam, non videtur cedere Josepho; sed is Judaeus minime mansit, & à Judaeis è synagoga solemniter ejectus est, cujusmodi de Josepho nihil constat.

[22] Sandius to Huet, 3 August 1679, commenting on the *Demonstratio*, p. 2.

> Either way [whether Josephus considered Jesus to be the Messiah or merely a holy man], it seems certain that Josephus would have to have been expelled from the Synagogue, if he had written the words ascribed to him. I surely wish that Josephus had written such a thing, but I do not at all see how I can permit myself to reach such a conclusion. . . . So much for Josephus. Now something about Spinoza, who, by calling Jesus the wisdom of God, yields nothing to Josephus. But [Spinoza] did not remain a Jew, and was solemnly expelled from the Synagogue by the Jews. Such a thing we do not hear about Josephus. (Sandius to Huet, 27 September 1679)

The conclusion, though not stated, is implied clearly enough: by calling Jesus the wisdom of God, Spinoza had crossed the boundaries of Judaism and become a Christian.

For Sandius, for one to be counted as a Christian it is quite enough to call Jesus the wisdom of God. In his *Dissertation on the Word*, he writes,

> *Ho logos* cum articulo, vel *ho logos tou theou*, Ebraeis *davar*, Chaldaeis *memra'*, denotat Christum Dei Filium primogenitum omnis creaturae, Dei imaginem, Dei virtutem, sapientiam Dei, initium viarum Dei . . . .
>
> *Ho logos* ["the word"] with the definite article, or *ho logos tou Theou* ["the word of God"], *davar* in Hebrew, *memra'* in Aramaic, all denote Christ, the Son of God, firstborn

> of all creatures, the image of God, the power of God, the wisdom of God, the first of His ways [Prov. 8:22] . . . .[23]

To call Jesus the wisdom of God is thus, in Sandius' view, to call him the Christ, and thus to be a Christian. Sandius' broad definition of Christianity is clear from his correspondence with Huet, who has a much narrower definition. Sandius is willing to include all manner of heretics in the circle of Christians: commenting on p. 7, line 39 of Huet's *Demonstratio*,[24] Sandius writes:

> Dubitas utrum Carpocratiani, Ebionitae, Samosateni, . . . Sociniani Christani sunt][25] at ex definitione 7. indubitò Christiani sunt.
>
> You doubt whether the Carpocratians, Ebionites, Samosateni, . . . and Socinians are Christians] but on the basis of Definition 7 they are indubitably Christians.

Indeed, Huet's definition does seem to support this conclusion:

> Religio Christiana ea est, quae Jesum Nazarenum Messiam esse statuit, & quaecunque in Libris sacris sive Veteris, sive Novi Testamenti de eo scripta sunt, pro veris habet.

[23] Sandius, *Dissertatio de Verbo*, in *Interpretationes Paradoxae Quatuor Evangeliorum* (Cosmopolis: Apud Libertum Pacificum, 1670), p. 264. I have transliterated Sandius' Greek and Hebrew characters. The Hebrew word *davar* and the Aramaic word *memra'* both mean "word."
[24] Here and elsewhere, Sandius' page numbers refer to the first edition of the *Demonstratio Evangelica.*
[25] The square bracket is used by Sandius to separate his quotation or paraphrase from the *Demonstratio* from his comment.

> The Christian Religion is that which states that Jesus of Nazareth is the Messiah, and which holds as true everything that is written about him in the Holy Books, whether the Old Testament or the New.[26]

But Huet protests that a for a true Christian, the Messiah must be a *God-man,* a claim that the Carpocratians and the other heretics deny: indeed, Sandius himself denies it.[27] All these heretics are thus, for Sandius, legitimate Christians, and it is precisely in the category of heretic that Sandius places Spinoza—specifically, he describes him as a Nestorian.

> [I]in una vel altera epistola ad Oldenburgium, editorem olim Actorum Anglicanorum Philos. Societatis Regiae, incarnationem Christi oppugnat, nec obscure indicat se cum Nestorio sentire; at resurrectionem ascensionemque Christi secuntum literam aperte negat. Adeo non potuit penitus Judaismum eruere.

> [I]n one or another of [his] letters to Oldenburg, former editor of the *Philosophical Transactions of the British Royal Society*, [Spinoza] rejects the incarnation, nor does he hide the fact that he agrees with Nestorius. He also openly denies the literal resurrection and ascension of Christ. To that extent he was unable to extricate himself from Judaism.[28]

[26] Huet, *Demonstratio*, p. 7.
[27] Fill in citation. !!!
[28] Sandius to Huet, 13 June 1679.

A Nestorian, in Sandius' book, is a bad Christian, but a Christian nonetheless. Sandius is referring to Letter 73, where Spinoza writes,

> [F]or salvation it is not altogether necessary to know Christ according to the flesh; but with regard to the eternal son of God, that is, God's eternal wisdom, which has manifested itself in all things and chiefly in the human mind, and most of all in Christ Jesus, a very different view must be taken. For without this no one can attain to a state of blessedness . . . . As to the additional teaching of certain Churches, that God took upon himself human nature, I have expressly indicated that I do not understand what they say,[29]

and to Letter 78, where Spinoza rejects a literal reading of the resurrection and ascension.[30] What has this to do with Nestorius? Nestorius' actual views are a matter of dispute, with one prominent scholar going so far to proclaim that "Nestorius was not a 'Nestorian.'"[31] Fortunately, we need not speculate about what Nestorius himself might have thought, for Sandius makes clear his own understanding of Nestorius' views:

> Nestorius, Bishop of Constantiniple, taught, along with Paul of Samosata and Photinus [Bishop of Sirmium], that Christ was not God, but only a mere human being; that in

[29] Spinoza, *Works,* p. 943
[30] Spinoza, *Works*, p. 953.
[31] James Franklin Bethune-Baker, *Nestorius and His Teaching* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1908), p. vii.

> accord with his deserts divinity was conjoined with him [*divinitatem ei . . . collatam*]; and that God the Word dwelt in him, as in the other saints.[32]

Thus the human being, Jesus of Nazareth, and the Word of God (the second person of the Trinity) are only loosely connected, in contrast with more orthodox views. Nestorianism, thus defined, seems to undermine the doctrine of the Atonement, which claims that God Himself suffered and died on the cross as an atonement for human sin; whereas, for the Nestorians, it was only the human being, Jesus of Nazareth, who suffered and died. Still, there was and is a whole church, the Church of the East, which accepts Nestorian Christology, whose existence is noted by Sandius. Sandius even goes so far as to suggest that by virtue of their great number and long history, the Nestorian Church and those affirming a similar Christology have a claim to be called the true catholic church.[33] So it seems that he is content to call Spinoza a Christian of this sort.

Lech Szczucki is aware of all these passages drawn from Sandius' letters, but claims that Sandius has simply misunderstood, or perhaps purposely distorted, Spinoza's intentions, for (according to Szczucki) Spinoza intended this Christological language only for "people who were too intellectually immature and lacking in the power to throw off the fetters and creeds of the religion that had been handed down to them."[34] The matter, however, deserves further consideration, for it is not entirely clear what Spinoza's intentions are.

One of Szczucki's suggestions is that Sandius misunderstood Spinoza. This seems unlikely. Spinoza may have been able to fool his unsophisticated, pious landlady,[35] but fooling Sandius would be a much harder task. He was a sophisticated and extremely well-read

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[32] Christoph Sandius, *Nucleus Historiae Ecclesiasticae* (Cologne: Apud Joannem Nicolai, 1676), p. 117.
[33] Sandius, *Nucleus*, p. 119.
[34] Sandius, "Spinozian Circle," 310.
[35] See the discussion of this incident in Cook, "Did Spinoza Lie . . . ?"

intellectual—in particular, a theologian familiar with the great variety of Christian traditions. Indeed, Sandius and Huet are quite aware of the possibility that a person might affirm the Messiah-hood of Christ and not really mean it. Regarding the Testimonium Flavianum, which we have discussed above, Huet raises the possibility that when Josephus said that Jesus was the Christ, he may have meant no more than that he was the person commonly called the Christ.[36] But in a previous letter, Sandius had already rejected this possibility. A pagan, such as Suetonius, Tacitus, Pliny, or Lampridius, might well write in this way, but a Jew could not do so. Indeed, in the context of Josephus time, a Jew could not even write in praise of Jesus. Pagan theology does not include the hope for a Messiah; so a pagan who mentions the Messiah would be assumed to be referring to a person believed by some group to be the Messiah.

> At Judaeus Christum expectans [sic] Jesum non poterat appellare Christum, inprimis tempore illo, quò inter Judaeos & Christianos maxime fervebat illa controversia, utrum Jesus esset Christus.
>
> But a Jew waiting for the Messiah could not call Jesus the Christ, especially at that time, when the controversy between Jews as Christians as to whether Jesus was the Christ was at its most heated. (Sandius to Huet, 13 November 1697)

Sandius' conclusion, already mentioned, is thus reinforced. If Josephus, a Jew, had written that Jesus was the Christ, he must be taken to be expressing his own view, not merely referring to the

[36] Huet to Sandius, 26 March 1680, p. 9.

person commonly called Christ.[37] Therefore (says Sandius), Josephus wrote no such thing: the Testimonium is an interpolation by another hand. If *we* now apply the same principle to Spinoza, our conclusion about Sandius is likewise reinforced. If Spinoza, born a Jew, wrote that Jesus is the Christ, he must be taken to be expressing his own view and must thus be a Christian.

The fact that Sandius knew Spinoza personally lends further support. Irony and figurative expressions may be hard to pick up from a person's written work, depending as they do on tone of voice, facial expression, and other phenomena that can be perceived only face to face. Surely Spinoza and Sandius talked about religion and in particular about Jesus. Sandius would have noted if Spinoza had meant by "Christ" the "the person commonly called Christ."

Sandius' other suggestion is that Sandius might have understood what Spinoza meant but purposely distorted it—presumably for Huet's benefit. While not inconceivable, it seems quite unlikely that Sandius would have done such a thing. Though Huet was worlds apart from Sandius in terms of religion, he was on a par with him in terms of theological sophistication, and he was familiar with Spinoza's works—not a person, in other words, to be easily deceived. It is hard, moreover, to see any benefit that might have inured to Sandius from such a deception.

We may thus tentatively conclude: Sandius, on reasonable grounds, perceived Spinoza as a Christian.

This conclusion, however, still needs to be tested. We can, I suggest, eliminate the possibility that Sandius misunderstood Spinoza's intentions or was trying to deceive Huet. But perhaps he had succumbed to wishful thinking or, to use the current term, motivated reasoning. He knew Spinoza, respected him, apparently liked him. Wouldn't it be understandable if

[37] Even now, a Jewish writer who believes in the future coming of the Messiah must refer to people such as David Alroy or Sabbatai Zevi as "false messiahs" or "messianic claimants." A person who refers to them simply as Messiahs would be implicitly rejecting the hope of a future Messiah.

Sandius saw in Spinoza more of a fellow-traveler than he actually was? After all, Sandius' standing as a heretic put him in ill favor even in so liberal a city as Amsterdam, so he needed friends, and it's a common temptation to see oneself reflected in one's friends and to avoid seeing the real differences. All this is plausible, but Sandius' character militates against it. He was indeed religiously isolated, but he had an ability to make friends with people who differed from him considerably. As we have seen, Sandius had a productive and friendly relationship with Huet, and Huet—the future bishop of Soissons—held religious views very far from those of Sandius. Sandius felt no need at all to ingratiate himself with Huet by pretending to be more Catholic than he was. Sandius had friends in the Socinian community as well, with whom he also had serious religious differences, especially Andrzej Wiszowaty.[38] Clearly he was comfortable with these differences. So we may assume that Sandius' friendship with Spinoza could have been a warm one without Sandius' feeling a need to make Spinoza over in his image.

If it was not wishful thinking, perhaps Sandius did not really appreciate the depth of Spinoza's departure from conventional religion. This, too, seems unlikely. He had read the *Opera Posthuma.* He knew that Spinoza's works had been condemned. He knew that Spinoza was generally considered an atheist of the worst kind.[39] He would not have been naïve enough to gloss over this point.

The truth of the matter seems to be that Spinoza wrote in a way that has left some people considering him an atheist and a believer, a Christian and a destroyer of Christianity, a Jew and a person filled with contempt for the Jews. So, acute as Sandius might have been, he was facing in Spinoza's writings a puzzle that as yet remains unsolved. We cannot expect him to have solved it on the basis of Spinoza's written works. But he had one advantage that those of us now alive

[38] Szczucki, "Sandius," 380. See also Szczucki, "Praefatio," vii.
[39] One must recall the 17th-century sense of this word. See Karen Armstrong, *A History of God*, &&&

lack: He *knew* Spinoza. I have quoted above from Spinoza's letter to Jacob Ostens, in which Spinoza asserts that a person who knew what manner of life he pursued would not accuse him of atheism. Sandius *did* know what manner of life Spinoza pursued, and evidently saw him as a religious person, much as Spinoza described himself—as someone who "declares that God must be acknowledged as the highest good, and that he must be loved as such in a free spirit" and believes that "in this alone does our supreme happiness and hour highest freedom consist."[40] Thus Sandius looked at Spinoza and saw a religious person, with Spinoza's declaration that Jesus was the Christ, the only religion he could ascribe to Spinoza was Christianity. As we have said, Spinoza's writings qualify him as a Christian by Sandius' definition, and his acquaintance with Spinoza must have confirmed this description. Sandius himself was so unorthodox, denying the divinity of Jesus of Nazareth, that many Christians would deny him the honor of being considered one of their number. Huet's definition of Christianity, for example, excludes Sandius and declares him a non-Christian. So it is clear that Sandius, more than most other Christians, would be open to considering a wide variety of people as good Christians who might be rejected as heretics or non-Christians by others.

A Possible Counterexample. There is, however, one statement in Sandius' letters to Huet that might make us hesitate to say that he saw Spinoza as a Christian Sandius writes:

> Si satis penetro autoris hujus scripta, videtur mihi eo collimare, ut generi humano persuadeat, Deum esse naturam naturantem, et ut omnem religionem nomine superstitionis tollat. . . . Vellem ut Theologo vel potius Philosopho cuidam primario

[40] Ep. 43 &&&

> stipendiose id oneris imponeretur, ut haec opera à capite ad calcem refutaret, inque ejus nexibus seu concatenationibus demonstrationum mathematicarum, errores ostenderet.
>
> If I sufficiently understand this author's writings, it seems to me that he aims to persuade humankind that God is *natura naturans*, and to do away with all religion by characterizing it as superstition. . . . I would wish that some eminent theologian, or rather philosopher, could be made to undertake the task of acting with soldier-like discipline to refute these works from beginning to end and to point out the errors in the connections or concatenations of mathematical demonstrations. (Sandius to Huet, 13 June 1679)

This passage does indeed tell against the conclusion I am supporting, yet on reflection it does not undermine it. To be brief, we can say that Sandius, Spinoza's friend, saw in him an unconventional Christian, yet a Christian who had composed some writings that appeared dangerous to religion. It appears indeed that Huet had not yet sufficiently come to understand Spinoza's intentions, because Spinoza certainly did not wish to "convince humankind that God is *natura naturans*." Perhaps Sandius (like many people, myself included) had begun reading the *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus* from Chapter 1, passing over the Preface, where Spinoza states clearly that the book is intended only for philosophers, not for the masses (trans. Shirley, pp. 393-394). And Sandius may not have been aware that Spinoza took pains to suppress a rumored Dutch translation of the *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus*, fearing what would happen if it could be read by people other than scholars (Ep. 44; trans. Shirley, p. 882).

The quoted excerpt is from one of Sandius' early letters, the first one to make mention of Spinoza. The tentative phrasing—"If I sufficiently understand this author's writings, it seems to

me . . .”—suggests that Sandius himself suspected that he had not yet sufficiently studied Spinoza’s writings and was alarmed by what he had read up to that point. Sandius’ subsequent letters contain no such negative comments about Spinoza, suggesting that as he read further, he realized that Spinoza had aimed his works only at the intellectual elite, not the masses, and had no intention of persuading people like his landlady that God is *natura naturans.* Sandius might have gathered similar thoughts from Jarig Jelles’ Preface to Spinoza’s posthumous works, where he points out that there are those who are not able to understand the truths purveyed by Spinoza—as Paul points out in 2 Timothy 3:7, *always learning but never able to come to a knowledge of the truth*—and for them, Spinoza’s philosophical teaching is not intended.[41]

The truth of the matter, however, seems to be that Sandius had recognized the contradiction in Spinoza’s thought later brought to our attention by Carlos Fraenkel: Spinoza presents both a critique of religion and a philosophical reinterpretation of religion, namely, of the Christian religion. The apparent contradiction in Sandius’ understanding of Spinoza reflects a contradiction in Spinoza’s own thought.

In a way, Sandius’ affirmation of Spinoza’s Christianity—despite his condemnation of Spinoza’s apparent attempt to do away with all religion—lends credibility to our conclusion. If Sandius, who looked at Spinoza with a critical eye, was still willing to include him among the ranks of Christians, he must have read or seen something that led him to feel comfortable with that attribution and overcome his sense of the Spinoza’s work as ungodly. In this respect he differs from Spinoza’s friend, Jarig Jelles, who has no qualms at all in declaring Spinoza a Christian. In one way, therefore, Jelles’ view has more plausibility, but in another way less. The

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[41] Jarig Jelles, Preface to Spinoza’s *Opera Posthuma*, inF. Akkerman & H. G. Hubbeling, “The Preface to Spinoza’s Posthumous Works 1677 and its Author Jarig Jelles (c. 1619/20-1683),” *Lias* 6(1) (1979), pp. 103–173, §§ 64-76, and English summary of these sections on p. 163.

fact that Jelles finds nothing standing in the way of calling Spinoza a Christian makes his testimony more persuasive. But Jelles was one of Spinoza's disciples, one of his devoted followers, and would be inclined to speak well of his master. Moreover, Jelles had every motive to cast his teacher in the most positive possible light, especially when writing the preface to his posthumous works. Portraying the author as a Christian would help their sales and perhaps somewhat mitigate the censorship exercised against them. We might say the same of the various clergy with Spinozist leanings who lived and preached soon after Spinoza's death: they had every reason to portray Spinoza in a favorable—i.e., Christian—light.[42] Sandius by contrast had nothing to gain by promoting Spinoza in this way; on the contrary, it would tend to put him in ill repute with the mainstream Christian world. ("What!? He says Spinoza is a Christian? If he says that, he himself can't be much of a Christian.") Being already stigmatized as a heretic, Sandius would scarcely want to add to the opprobrium cast upon him unless he sincerely believed in Spinoza's claim to Christianity.

There is one further religious commonality between Spinoza and Sandius that we should note. In his early works, Spinoza says some things that testify to his interest in Christian theology. As Abraham Wolf notes regarding the *Short Treatise*, "[T]he *Treatise* shows an interest in specific Christian doctrines and their reinterpretation (the son of God, Regeneration, Sin in relation to the Law, and Grace). . . . The characters he introduces as ilustrations bear New Testament names, and he even devotes a chapter to Devils, in whom the Jews took very little interest."[43] But what Spinoza says about Christianity in his early writings is quite strange. In an early letter to Lodewijk Meijer, he ridicules the doctrine of the Trinity: "As to my saying that

[42] See, e.g., Wielema, *March of the Libertines*, 16-17.
[43] A. Wolf, Introduction to *Spinoza's Short Treatise on God, Man, & His Well-Being* (London: Adam and Charles Black, 1910), p. cxxvi.

the Son of God is the Father himself, I think it follows clearly from this axiom, namely, that things which agree with a third thing agree with one another."[44] And in the *Short Treatise*, he says that "*Understanding* in the thinking thing . . . is . . . a Son, Product, or immediate Creation of God,"[45] in direct contradiction of the Nicene Creed, which holds that the Son of God is *begotten, not made*, i.e., not a creation. These are doctrines that an orthodox Christian would find literally anathema. Sandius, however, would agree with them. He is, after all, a proponent of Arius' teachings, which he describes in these words:

> *Arius* Afer, filius Ammonii, presbyter Alexandrinus docuit Patrem solum esse unum verum summum Deum. Filium non esse summum Deum, nex ex essentiâ Dei Patris genitum; sed ex nihilo: & in tantum primam craturarum omnium existere, dici autem Filium, quia sit imago Dei invisibilis.
>
> Arius Afer, the son of Ammonius, elder at Alexandria, taught that the Father alone was the one true supreme God; and the Son was not the supreme God, nor born from the essence of God the Father, but came into existence *ex nihilo* and only as the first of all creatures. He is, however, called the Son because he is the image of the invisible God.[46]

The Arians frequently cited the Septuagint version of Proverbs 8:22 in support of their views: In that verse, Wisdom, identified as the pre-existent Christ, speaks and says, "Dominus *creavit* me

[44] Spinoza to Meijer, 26 July 1663, Ep. 12A, p. 792. Spinoza is referring to a sentence that had occurred in a draft of the Cogitata Metaphysica, which Meijer was editing. With Spinoza's permission, Meijer excised the sentence.
[45] KV 1:10, p. 59.
[46] Sandius, *Nucleus Historiae Ecclesiasticae* (Cosmopoli: Apud Libertum Pacificum, 1669), p. 218.

in principio viarum suarum . . . ," that is, "The Lord *created* me in the beginning of his ways. . . ."[47] Spinoza's statement that Understanding is an immediate creation of God might be taken as a more philosophical translation of this half-verse.

It was not until around 1668 that Sandius arrived in Amsterdam,[48] and we do not know when he met Spinoza. Presumably by the time the two became acquainted, Spinoza had long since abandoned these quasi-Arian sentiments—if indeed they ever represented his true views. But surely the Spinoza who wrote such things had much to discuss with the Sandius who affirmed them.

Our criterion for being a Christian, set forth above, is that a person accepted as a Christian by Christians is in fact a Christian. Sandius—an intelligent and erudite person, a pious Christian well-versed in the history of Christian thought who knew Spinoza well—looked upon Spinoza as a fellow Christian. Here, then, we have a serious piece of evidence for taking Spinoza's Christological statements seriously, though in a way that many Christians would call heretical. In particular, our conclusion lends support to the view that we should take Spinoza's Christological statements seriously, not as mere accommodations or deceptions.

Spinoza a Christian?

That Sandius saw Spinoza as a Christian provides a strong argument for saying he was one. But what kind of Christian could Spinoza have been? A full answer would call for a book, not a section of a paper. We can cover here only a few salient points, relying in a general way on

[47] See, e.g., Sandius, *Nucleus* (1669), 2:13. Many other quotations can be found by an online search. The crux is the translation of the Hebrew word *kanani*, which can mean "created me" or "possessed me," the opponents of Arius naturally preferring the latter translation. In general, see Maurice Dowling, "Proverbs 8:22-31 in the Christology of the Early Fathers," *Perichoresis* 8 (2010): 47-65.
[48] Lech Szczucki, Praefatio to Sandius, *Bibliotheca Antitrinitariorum* (Warsaw: Państwowe Wydawnictwo Naukowe, 1967), p. vi.

the work of Alexandre Matheron.[49] Matheron argues that for Spinoza, Jesus was a philosopher, indeed, a Spinozist *avant la lettre.*[50] Matheron's point is affirmed by Spinoza himself in a statement that he made to his friend, Ehrenfried Walther von Tschirnhaus, who reported it to Leibniz, who in turn recorded it. "*Christum*," says Spinoza, "*fuisse summum philosophum"*—*"*Christ was the greatest of philosophers."[51] Granted, the chain of transmission of this dictum is longer than one might wish, but the saying is so striking that we can safely credit it to Spinoza. The true teaching of Christ, then, is the true philosophy—presumably the same as that contained in the *Ethics.*[52] Consequently, in an unconventional but perfectly natural sense, Spinoza *was* a Christian—i.e., not a worshipper of God in Christ, nor a believer in Jesus as a supernatural Messiah, but one who accepted the philosophical teachings of Jesus of Nazareth. He was a Christian in the same way that Hermann Cohen was a Kantian or David Pears a Wittgensteinian.

This conclusion, however, is equivocal. All we have shown that Spinoza saw Christ as a philosophical predecessor, not that he had any particular connection with actual Christianity.

But I suggest that there is such a connection. In a general way, we can say that Christianity is a religion that has both folk and elite versions. "Folk religion" is a somewhat vague concept, probably best defined by Don Yoder:

[49] Alexandre Matheron, *Le Christ et le salut des ignorants chez Spinoza* (Paris: Aubier-Montaigne, 1971).
[50] Matheron, *Le Christ*, p. 251.
[51] Quoted in Stein, *Leibniz und Spinoza*, 283.
[52] Cf. Fraenkel, *Philosophical Religion*, 267; Pines, "Spinoza's Tractatus," 19. Compare also Spinoza's statement in the *TTP*, Chapter 4: "But doubtless, to those to whom it was granted to know the mysteries of Heaven, his teaching took the form of eternal truths, not of prescribed laws" (trans. Shirley, p. 432).

> Folk religion is the totality of all those views and practices of religion that exist among the people apart from and alongside the strictly theological and liturgical forms of the official religion.[53]

Folk religion may include elements of superstition (whether in our sense, or as characterized by elite, or as defined by Spinoza), but it may also include elements that allow a person to approach a truer understanding of the elite religion. Common Christianity may be considered the folk-religion counterpart of the elite religion constituted by the philosophical teachings of Christ, which are the philosophical teachings of Spinoza.

As to the relation between Spinozism and common Christianity there are two polar possibilities. It may be that common Christianity is a heuristic intended to lead people to philosophy; or it may be that common Christianity is a device to ensure the obedience of the unphilosophical masses and thus insure their peaceable behavior. We need not decide now which one is true. There are suggestion of both in Spinoza's works.

One argument for this view is empirical. A good number of Christians in Spinoza's time were in fact proposing various philosophical versions of Christianity: among these are some of Leszek Kołakowski's *Chrétiens sans église*, as well as the Collegiants described in Andrew Fix's *Prophecy and Reason.*[54] Spinoza clearly knew of such people. In a letter to Willem van Blijenberg he writes of "pure philosopher[s] who (as is granted by many who consider themselves Christians) ha[ve] no other touchstone for truth than our natural understanding, not

[53] Don Yoder, "Toward a Definition of Folk Religion," *Western Folklore* 33 (1947): 2-15, at p. 14; see also . See Charles Liebman, *The Ambivalent American Jew* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1973), pp. 45-48.
[54] Leszek Kołakowski, *Chrétiens sans église* (Paris: Gallimard, 1969); Andrew Fix, *Prophecy and Reason: The Dutch Collegiants in the Early Enlightenment* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991), especially chapters 8 and 9.

theology."[55] Spinoza's friends Jarig Jelles and Pieter Balling fall under this category. More specifically, Spinoza indicates his approval of Jarig Jelles' philosophical version of Christianity, the *Confession of the Universal Christian Faith.*[56] In the Afterword to the *Confession*, the editor, Riewertsz, writes:

> [Jelles] sent this *Confession* to a friend living out of town [sc., Spinoza], so that he might judge whether his opinion agreed with the truth of the matter itself. [Spinoza] sent this Confession back to him, declaring his agreement thereto in the following words: *I have read over your writings with pleasure, and found them such that I cannot change anything in them.*[57]

The last words might be ambiguous were they not presented as a response to the question as to whether the writings agree with the truth of the matter itself. This view is confirmed by Pierre Bayle, who writes that Spinoza "approved a confession of faith communicated to him by an intimate friend."[58] As time passed, Spinozistic preachers began to appear in the Dutch Reformed Church, including even one, Barend Hakvoord, who wrote "an expository book on the Catechism that actually served as an introduction to the Reformed faith for future church members," a book that was used in the Church for fifteen years.[59]

This fact should hardly surprise us. Spinoza himself attributes to Christ a dual method of teaching:

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[55] Ep. 23; trans. Shirley, p. 832.
[56] Jarig Jelles, *Belydenisse des Algemeenen en Christelyken Geloofs* (Amsterdam: Riewertsz, 1684); Italian trans. by Leen Spruit under the title Professione della Fede Universale e Cristiana (Macerata: Quodlibet, 2004).
[57] Jan Rieuwertsz, Na-Reden in Jelles, *Belydenisse*, p. 164. Emphasis in original.
[58] Pierre Bayle, *The Dictionary Historical and Critical*, vol. 5 (London: D. Midwinter et al, 1738), p. 218. The
[59] Michiel Wielema, *The March of the Libertines* (Hilversum: Verloren, 2004), Introduction, pp. 9-17; Hakvoord is mention on pp. 16-17.

> Christ, then, perceived truly and adequately the things revealed to him; so if ever he proclaimed these things as law, he did so because of the people's ignorance and obstinacy. Therefore in this matter he acted in God's place, adapting himself to the character of the people. So although his sayings were somewhat clearer than those of other prophets, his teaching of things revealed was still obscure and quite often took the form of parables, especially when he was addressing those to whom it had not yet been granted to understand the kingdom of Heaven (see Matth. ch. 13 v. 10, and ff.). But doubtless, to those to whom it was granted to know the mysteries of Heaven, his teaching took the form of eternal truths, not of prescribed laws. (*TTP*, Chapter 4; trans. Shirley, pp. 431-432)

This phrasing does indeed suggest that Christ's teaching was adapted to the masses as a heuristic to lead them to the philosophical truth: he speaks of "those to whom it had *not yet* been granted to understand the kingdom of Heaven," implying that they were on their way toward understanding it. But that observation is not essential to the present point.

We can conclude that, according to Spinoza, the followers of Christ consist of two groups: the elite, who understand Christ's philosophy, and the masses, who obey what they take to be the precepts of Christ. Spinoza was a part of this dual body and, in that sense, a recognizable Christian.

Spinoza's Excommunication

Barring the discovery of some hitherto unknown manuscript, we shall never know with certainty why Spinoza was excommunicated. But the Sandius-Huet correspondence suggests a reason, as the reader may have already noted. Let us review Sandius' words:

> [I]t seems certain that Josephus would have to have been expelled from the Synagogue, if he had written the [Christological] words ascribed to him. . . . Spinoza . . . by calling Jesus the wisdom of God, yields nothing to Josephus. But [Spinoza] did not remain a Jew, and was solemnly expelled from the Synagogue by the Jews. (Sandius to Huet, 27 September 1679)

In other words, Spinoza was excommunicated for Christianizing. This is something that Sandius was in a position to know, perhaps having heard it from Spinoza himself. Affirming the messiahhood of Jesus would indeed have been a scandal in the Jewish community and a cause for excommunication. Although this proposal may seem surprising, Sandius' report as to the cause of the excommunication is a rare testimony regarding that event coming from someone who was personally acquainted with the philosopher. The only other apparent such testimonies are in the *Vie de Spinosa*, usually attributed to Jean-Maximilien Lucas, and in the reports Father Thomas Solano y Robles and Captain Miguel Pérez de Maltranilla, who all give a quite different account.[60] Solano y Robles and Maltranilla may be put aside, for their one meeting with Spinoza can hardly qualify them as close acquaintances. On the other hand, the author of the *Vie de Spinoza* describes Spinoza as "an illustrious friend," which would imply a closer relationship,

[60] The *Vie de Spinosa* can be found in English translation by A. Wolf under the title, *The Oldest Biography of Spinoza* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1927), pp. 44-51. The testimonies of Solano y Robles and Pérez de Maltranilla are reproduced in I. S. Révah, *Spinoza et le Dr Juan de Prado* (Paris: Mouton, 1959), pp. 64, 67.

but Abraham Wolf, who edited Lucas' biography, speaks of "how little Lucas had really learned from Spinoza," dismissing him as a "weak disciple" who had "betrayed" his master.[61] Piet Steenbakkers gives even less credence to the *Vie de Spinosa*:

> *La Vie* may safely be disregarded as a reliable source of information about Spinoza's life. Nor was it ever intended as a biography. It is propaganda designed to demonstrate – by means of edifying and wholly fictitious anecdotes – that Spinoza was a secular saint and that Spinozism is morally superior to superstition, a delusion the author imputes mainly to Judaism. None of the details given in *La Vie* make it plausible or even likely that its author knew Spinoza personally.[62]

Accepting Steenbakker's negative assessment of the *Vie de Spinoza* we can conclude: Sandius' account of Spinoza's excommunication that stems from someone who knew Spinoza personally, and thus has the strongest claim to credibility.

Sandius' report lends support to the "Quaker connection" hypothesis of Asa Kasher and Shlomo Biderman.[63]

Is it possible? Is it really possible that the cause of Spinoza's *herem* was an involvement with Chrstianity? We can, I suggest, take Sandius' word for it, but there are also are external reasons to accept Sandius' statements. Bayle writes in the article on Spinoza that appears in his *Dictionnaire*—one of the main sources for Spinoza's biography—that Spinoza wrote an

[61] Wolf, *Oldest Biography*, pp. 42, 27.
[62] Piet Steenbakkers, "Spinoza's Life," in *The Cambridge Companion to Spinoza*, 2nd ed., ed. Don Garrett (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022), pp. 12-60, at p. 16
[63] Asa Kasher and Shlomo Biderman, "Why Was Baruch de Spinoza Excommunicated?" in *Sceptics, Millenarians, and Jews*, ed. David S. Katz et al. (Leiden: Brill, 1990), pp. 98-141 at pp. 134-137.

"apology for his leaving the synagogue," parts of which were included in the *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus.*[64] If these parts included some of the Christological statements, that would surely be sufficient cause for excommunication. Lucas, in his biography of Spinoza, writes that Spinoza "had so little intercourse with the Jews for some time that he was obliged to associate with Christians, and he formed ties of friendship with intellectual people who told him that it was a pity that he knew neither Greek nor Latin."[65] This association by itself may have been enough to raise the suspicions of the Jewish community. And Ole Borch, Professor of Philosophy, Poetry, Chemistry and Botany at the University of Copenhagen, reports in his journal record of a trip that took him to the Netherlands, among other lands, that a certain Mr. Langremann relates that

> in the vicinity of Rijnsburg there is a former Jew who turned Christian, but is now nearly an atheist. . . . He lives a pure and blameless life and is occupied with the making of telescopes and microscopes.

And one Dr. Menelaus reports similarly about Spinoza's religious affiliation:

> Spinoza, a former Jew turned Christian, now nearly an atheist, living in Rjnsburg, excels in Cartesian philosophy and in many ways surpasses Descartes himself.

[64] Pierre Bayle, *An Historical and Critical Dictionary* (abridged English translation), 4 vols. (London: Hunt and Clarke, 1826), 3:282.
[65] Jean-Maximilien Lucas, *The Oldest Biography of Spinoza*, trans. A. Wolf (London: G. Allen & Unwin, 1927), p. 51.

These reports date from September 1661.[66] Pierre Bayle, in the article on Spinoza in his famous Dictionary writes similarly:

> I have been just now informed of a pretty curious particular, viz. That after [Spinoza] had forsaken Judaism, he publickly professed Christianity, and frequented the assemblies of the Mennonites, or those of the Arminians of Amsterdam.[67]

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[66] Ole Borch, Olai Borrichii Itinerarium 1660-1665 : The Journal of the Danish Polyhistor Ole Borch, ed. H. D. Schepelern, 4 vols. (Copenhagen: Danish Society for Language and Literature,1983): 1:214, 228.
[67] Pierre Bayle, *The Dictionary Historical and Critical*, vol. 5 (London: D. Midwinter et al, 1738), pp. 217-218.

Space permits only an overview of a few salient issues; a complete discussion would call for a book, not a paper.

If Spinoza is a supporter if Christianity, it is only by virtue of a persuasive redefinition of the kind that we find in the *Ethics.* For example, in the Preface to Part 4, we read:

> As for the terms "good" and "bad," they . . . indicate nothing positive in things considered in themselves . . . . However, although this is so, these terms ought to be retained. . . .
>
> By "good" I understand that which we certainly know to be useful to us.

So Spinoza is reconceiving Christianity in some such way. It is actually not so great a stretch. Spinoza's religion calls on us to know God with an intellectual love and serve God by loving our neighbors. Spinoza's religion thus coincides with the two great commandments propounded by Jesus of Nazareth:

> And one of [the Pharisees], a lawyer, asked him a question, to test him. "Teacher, which is the great commandment in the law?" And he said to him, "You shall love the Lord

> your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the great and first commandment. And a second is like it, You shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments depend all the law and the prophets." (Matt. 22:34-40)

We can thus say that Spinoza was a follower of that great Teacher, Jesus of Nazareth. Granted, his conception of God was unconventional and completely naturalized, and he understood these commandments as dictated by reason, not supernaturally revealed. Still, someone like Sandius might well be inclined to say that if a person truly loves his neighbor as himself, it can only be the true God—most likely by way of the Holy Spirit—who is leading him to do so.[68]

The key lies, I suggest, in a statement that Spinoza made to his friend, Ehrenfried Walther von Tschirnhaus, who reported it to Leibniz, who in turn recorded it. "*Christum*," says Spinoza, "*fuisse summum philosophum"—"*Christ was the greatest of philosophers."[69] .The true teaching of Christ, then, is the true philosophy—presumably the same as that contained in the *Ethics.*[70] So, in an unconventional but perfectly natural sense, Spinoza *was* a Christian—i.e., not a worshipper of God in Christ, nor a believer in Jesus as a supernatural Messiah, but one who accepted the philosophical teachings of Jesus of Nazareth. He was a Christian in the same way that Hermann Cohen was a Kantian or David Pears a Wittgensteinian.

Of course, the Bible is written in terms that are acceptable to the masses of Christians, but they can be deciphered. Spinoza says that Jesus is the Christ, which we may take as meaning

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[68] See, e.g., Polyander et al., *Synopsis*, Disp. 34, §§ 4-5, pp. 424-425.
[69] Quoted in Stein, *Leibniz und Spinoza*, 283. Although the transmission of this statement resembles a game of telephone, still the saying itself is so pithy and striking that it seems unlikely to have suffered in transmission.
[70] Cf. Fraenkel, *Philosophical Religion*, 267; Pines, "Spinoza's Tractatus," 19. Compare also Spinoza's statement in the *TTP*, Chapter 4: "But doubtless, to those to whom it was granted to know the mysteries of Heaven, his teaching took the form of eternal truths, not of prescribed laws" (trans. Shirley, p. 432).

that Jesus has a uniquely salvific role. For Spinoza, this would mean that Jesus' philosophical teachings, if understood, lead a person to the third kind of knowledge, the intellectual love of God, and the eternity of the mind. The famous verse, John 3:16—"For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life" (AV)—can be understood in line with the view of Jesus as supreme philosopher: one who understands the teachings of Jesus and thereby attains the intellectual love of God will be loved by God and will not perish, but will have a mind the greater part of which is eternal.[71]

Some might be content to call Spinozism a philosophical religion, and there is much to be said for that view.[72] But Spinoza seems to be connected to Christianity in another way. Common Christianity may be considered the folk-religion counterpart of the elite religion constituted by the philosophical teachings of Christ, which are the philosophical teachings of Spinoza. "Folk religion" is a somewhat vague concept, probably best defined by Don Yoder:

> Folk religion is the totality of all those views and practices of religion that exist among the people apart from and alongside the strictly theological and liturgical forms of the official religion.[73]

Folk religion in this sense is to be contrasted with *elite* religion.[74] Folk religion may include elements of superstition (whether in our sense, or as characterized by elite, or as defined by

[71] On God's love of humans, see E 5p36c, *Complete Works,* p. 378. Compare *TTP* Chapter 4, p. 432, where Spinoza cites St. Paul, who "says that no one becomes blessed unless he has in himself the mind of Christ (Rom. ch. 8 v. 9), meaning that he would hereby perceive the laws of God as eternal truths."
[72] Carlos Fraenkel,
[73] Don Yoder, "Toward a Definition of Folk Religion," *Western Folklore* 33 (1947): 2-15, at p. 14.
[74] Some theorists contrast *folk religion* with *universal religion*, but that contrast is not what is at issue here. See Charles Liebman, *The Ambivalent American Jew* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1973), pp. 45-48.

Spinoza), but it may also include elements that allow a person to approach a truer understanding of the elite religion. The same phenomenon occurs in virtually every field of study. A physics teacher may say that "water seeks its own level," knowing full well that water, being an inanimate substance, does not seek anything; a horticulturist may say that a certain plant "enjoys full sun," not believing that the plant experiences enjoyment, but merely intending that it grows better in the sun than in the shade. simple-minded person may at first believe such statements literally, and thus have an erroneous impression of water or plants. Yet the simple-minded person may in this way be brought closer to a true understanding of the behavior of fluids and plants. Such locutions may in fact be more effective in teaching than an attempt to teach the literal truth from the start. And as the student advances, he or she may come to understand them as heuristically useful figurative expressions of a literal truth.[75] In a similar way a person who learns the truths of religion in the figurative way that characterizes folk religion may indeed be brought closer to true religion, which is the philosophical teaching of Jesus.

Spinoza's Excommunication

Barring the discovery of some hitherto unknown manuscript, we shall never know with certainty why Spinoza was excommunicated. But the Sandius-Huet correspondence suggests a reason, as the reader may have already noted. As we have seen, according to Sandius, Spinoza "called Jesus the wisdom of God" and was expelled from the Synagogue. Sandius admittedly does not explicitly say that the former was the cause or occasion for the latter, but the implication is clear: Spinoza was excommunicated for Christianizing. This is something that Sandius was in

[75] Cf. E 4p1, p. 323: "Nothing positive contained in a false idea can be annulled by the presence of what is true, insofar as it is true." Anyone who has struggled through the mathematical textbooks of Nicolas Bourbaki, which are devoid of illustrations, will appreciate the heuristic value of such visual aids, even though they appeal to the imagination rather than the intellect. See Marjorie Senechal, "The Continuing Silence of Bourbaki—An Interview with Pierre Cartier, June 18, 1997," *Mathematical Intelligencer* 20.1 (1998): 22-28 at p. 27.

a position to know, perhaps having heard it from Spinoza himself. Affirming the messiahhood of Jesus would indeed have been a scandal in the Jewish community and a cause for excommunication. Although this proposal may seem surprising, Sandius' report as to the cause of the excommunication is the only testimony regarding that event that we have from someone who was personally acquainted with the philosopher.[76] Sandius' report lends support to the "Quaker connection" hypothesis of Asa Kasher and Shlomo Biderman.[77]

Spinoza's statements about Judaism and Christ in the Tractatus Theologico-Politicus lend credence to this view. His bitter statements about Judaism, contrasted with his warm praises of Christ, suggest long-held feelings. It is worth noting that he sometimes goes out of his way to speak ill of Judaism. According to Spinoza, "The Pharisees . . . vigorously contend that this divine gift [of prophecy] was peculiar to their nation, whereas other nations (such is the ingenuity of superstition!) foretold the future with the aid of some diabolical power." But Spinoza chose not to cite the Babylonian Talmud, Tractate Bava Batra, p. 15b, where the "Pharisees" say that "[s]even prophets prophesied to the heathen, namely, Balaam and his father, Job, Eliphaz the Temanite, Bildad the Shuhite, Zophar the Naamathite, and Elihu the son of Barachel the Buzite," at least some of whom must have been Gentiles. Similarly, Spinoza writes that "the Jews . . . maintain that true beliefs and a true way of life contribute nothing to blessedness as long as men embrace them only from the natural light of reason, and not as teachings revealed to Moses by prophetic inspiration," citing Maimonides' *Mishneh Torah* in support of this view.[78] Yet Maimonides himself elsewhere states the opposite:

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[76] I exclude the reports of Father Thomas Solano y Robles and Captain Miguel Perez de Matranilla, who did interview Spinoza but who hardly can be said to have been personal acquaintances of the philosopher. On them see I. S. Revah, *Spinoza et le Dr. Juan de Prado* (Paris: Mouton, 1959), pp. 30-35.
[77] Asa Kasher and Shlomo Biderman, "Why Was Baruch de Spinoza Excommunicated?" in *Sceptics, Millenarians, and Jews*, ed. David S. Katz et al. (Leiden: Brill, 1990), pp. 98-141 at pp. 134-137.
[78] Spinoza, *TTP*, chapter 5, p. 443.

> As for us, we believe that all the human circumstances are according to the deserts, that He is exalted above injustice . . . . [A]n obedient individual receives compensation for all the pious and righteous actions he has accomplished, even if he was not ordered by a prophet to do them, and that he is punished for all the evil acts committed by him, even if he was not forbidden by a prophet to do them; this being forbidden by the *intellect*—I refer to the prohibition against wrongdoing and injustice.[79]

This hard-bitten attitude—one might say prejudice—suggests not the fruit of calm reflection but the expression of resentment against the community he left behind. If we accept the reports that the *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus* contains excerpts from Spinoza's unpublished *Apologia to Justify his Departure from the Synagogue*,[80] it is likely that some of the Christological statements date from before the time of the excommunication.

As I have suggested, Christ's teaching for Spinoza is essentially a philosophical teaching, representing freedom from the strictures of Jewish law and universal truth over tribal allegiance. As Daniel Swetchinski notes,

> By and large, . . . the reintegration of former New Christians into a Jewish community proceeded rather smoothly. . . . The matter of collective identity became a burning issue . . . only in Amsterdam and only during the brief period from the early 1640s until

[79] Maimonides, *Guide of the Perplexed* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1963), part 3, chapter 17, p. 470, emphasis added. I have modified Pines' translation in accordance with Samuel ibn Tibbon's Hebrew translation, which is what Spinoza would have read: in place of Pines' *inborn translation* I have put *intellect* (Heb. *sekhel*). See Maimonides, *Sefer Moreh Nevukhim* (Warsaw: Goldmann, 1872), 3:25a.
[80] Salomon van Til, *Het Voor-Hof der Heydenen* (Dordrecht: Goris, 1714), pp. 5-6.

> the mid-1660s, solely because only then and there did several so diverse groups of New Christians come together to form a single social, cultural, and religious entity.[81]

A community striving for a collective identity would not be a congenial place for the author of the *Treatise on the Emendation of the Intellect*, who disdained what he calls "honour," because "to attain it we must conduct our lives to suit other men, avoiding what the masses avoid and seeking what the masses seek."[82] Nor would he feel inspired by a community whose identity was bound up with the observance of religious ceremonies, of which Spinoza says that "it is quite indisputable that ceremonial observances contribute nothing to blessedness . . . ."[83]

Spinoza may have found more congenial companions, perhaps even while still living within the Jewish community, in radical Protestants like Jarig Jelles and Pieter Balling. As Tammy Nyden-Bullock points out, Jelles in particular expresses a worldview much like that of found at the beginning of the *Emendation of the Intellect.* Jelles writes,

> Whoever loves this world, which is to say, whoever loves idle fame, pleasure and riches, will pay the highest penalty; he will not be able to inherit the Kingdom of God. The kingdom of Mercy, however, which leads to the kingdom of Glory involves achieving dominion over the emotions. And we enter into this kingdom when we are led by the Spirit, by the light of the understanding, by truth.[84]

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[81] Daniel Swetschinski, *Reluctant Cosmopolitans* (London: Littman Library, 2000), p. 277.
[82] Spinoza *TIE*, §5.
[83] Spinoza *TTP*, chapter 5, p. 440.
[84] Tammy Nyden-Bullock, *Spinoza's Radical Cartesian Mind* (London: Continuum, 2007), pp. 30-32. The passage from Jelles is quoted in Nyden-Bullock, pp. 30-31.

The Spirit here is the Spirit of Christ:

> [D]e . . . Geest van onzen Heere Jesus Christus/ en de H. Geest of Gods Heiligen Geest/ een zelfde Geest, en een zelfde Wezen is . . . .
>
> The Spirit of our Lord Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit, that is, God's Holy Spirit, are one and the same Spirit and one and the same Entity . . . .[85]

Jelles identifies this Sprit with God's wisdom, God's understanding, or the truth, terms less provocative from the Jewish point of view. Yet "Spirit of Christ" is a term that Spinoza used in his printed works. Admittedly, he used it in a philosophical and unorthodox point of view. Still, if he had used it when he was still in the Jewish community of Amsterdam, his welcome would have been short indeed.

Spinoza's alignment with Christianity—to the extent that it existed—was surely not with any orthodox Christian view. But even the most liberal imaginable form of Christianity would have been unacceptable in the Jewish community, and if Spinoza had taught any doctrine in the name of Jesus of Nazareth, his welcome in the Jewish community would have been short-lived. As Sandius points out, even praising Christ as a great teacher would be enough to get a person put under the ban. I suggest that something of this sort is exactly what happened.

[85] Jarig Jelles, *Belydenisse des Algemeenen en Christelyken Geloofs* (Amsterdam: Jan Rieuwertsz, 1684), p. 24.

If one may draw a parallel, Spinoza's attraction

Assyria the work of my hands, and Israel my inheritance," (Isaiah 19:24-25)

indicating that whatever chosenness Israel had was simply a matter of temporal priority. It seems to suggest indeed that "The good which every man who pursues virtue aims at for himself he will also desire for the rest of mankind . . . ."[86] No doubt, however, he tired of hearing in the Synagogue every Sabbath morning prayers such as the following:

> Y no lo diste .A. nuestro Dio a gentes de las tierras, y no lo hiziste heredar nuestro Rey à sirvientes doladizos: tambien en su holgança no moraran incircuncisos, que à tu pueblo lo diste con amor, à simiente de Iahacob que en ellos escogiste.

> You, Lord our God, have not given [the Sabbath] to the nations of the world; you, our King, have not given it as a heritage to those who worship idols; nor do the uncircumcized enjoy its rest; but with love You have given it to Your people, to the seed of Jacob whom you have chosen.[87]

[86] *E* 4p37, p. 339.
[87] *Orden de las Oraciones del Mes, Hilhoth Sehita*, ed. Menasseh Ben Israel (Amsterdam: Menasseh Ben Israel, 1646), p. 240.

And the most universalistic passage in the prayers, the end of the *ʿAlenu*, is not found in the rite presented in Menasseh's prayer book.[88] Christianity, by contrast, is a universalistic religion:

> Paul concludes that, since God is the God of all nations—that is, he is equally gracious to all—and since all mankind were equally under the law and under sin, it was for all nations that God sent his Christ to free all men alike from the bondage of the law, so that no longer would they act righteously from the law's command but from the unwavering resolution of the heart. Thus Paul's teaching coincides exactly with ours.[89]

The main obstacle to considering Spinoza a sincere supporter of Christianity is the possibility that he is an atheist—not in the 17th-century sense, but as we use the word now. On this view, Spinoza's use of the word "God" is so eviscerated that it has nothing to do with the God of religion. This objection has been recently presented in a forceful way by Steven Nadler.[90] Of course, as the late Ronald Dworkin reminds us, it is possible to be a *religious* atheist,[91] but it's clear that Nadler wants to portray him as a non-religious atheist. Nadler argues that "[t]here is no place in Spinoza's system for a reverential sense of mystery in the face of Nature," taking this reverential attitude as a defining characteristic of pantheism (as distinguished from atheism). And it is surely true that we do not find in Spinoza the kind of statements of such reference that we find, for example, in Einstein:

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[88] See *Orden de las Oraciones*, pp. 258-259. The passage, found in most Jewish prayer rites, looks forward to a time when all human beings will turn to God, ending with a quotation from Zechariah (14:9): "The Lord shall be King over all the earth; on that day the Lord shall be One and his name One" (*Daily Prayer Book,* ed. Philip Birnbaum [New York: Hebrew Publishing Company, 1949], p. 414). Where one would expect the cited passage, Menasseh's prayer book says only, "Fin de la Thephilah de Sabath" ("End of the Sabbath Prayers").
[89] *TTP* Chapter 3, p. 423.
[90] Nadler, "Whatever Is," 66-70.
[91] Dworkin, *Religion without God*, 1-43.

> Try and penetrate with our limited means the secrets of nature and you will find that, behind all the discernible concatenations, there remains something intangible and inexplicable. Veneration for this force beyond anything we can comprehend is my religion. To that extent I am, in point of fact, religious.[92]

But Spinoza does express other ways a reverential attitudes towards God:

> [T]he fourth kind of knowledge . . . evokes Love. So that when we get to know God after this manner then (as he cannot reveal himself, nor become known to us otherwise than as the *most glorious* and best of all) we must necessarily become united with him. And only in this union . . . does our blessedness consist.[93]

Nadler seem in part to base his argument on what I would claim is a mistaken understanding of a key word in Spinoza. Nadler suggests that the pantheist's reverential attitude towards God/Nature is captured by the word *wonder* ("admiratio" in Spinoza's Latin; "verwondering" in the Dutch translations), and Spinoza does indeed look askance at the attitude toward God described by this word (in Curley's translation):

> [W]hen [ignorant people] see the structure of the human body, they are struck by a foolish wonder, and because they do not know the causes of so great an art, they infer that it is constructed . . . by divine, or supernatural art.

[92] Kessler, *Berlin in Lights,* 322; quoted in Jammer, *Einstein and Religion*, 39-40.
[93] Spinoza, *Korte Verhandeling* 2:22; *Works*, 93-94 (emphasis attitude).

> Hence it happens that one who seeks the true causes of miracles, and is eager, like an educated man, to understand natural things, not to wonder at them, like a fool, is generally considered and denounced as an impious heretic . . . .[94]

But the classic Lewis and Short *Latin Dictionary* proposes, besides "wonder" and "admiration," the translations of "surprise" or "astonishment,"[95] and in this spirit Samuel Shirley translates:

> [W]hen [ignorant people] consider the structure of the human body, they are astonished . . . .
>
> As a result, he who seeks the true cause of miracles and is eager to understand the works of Nature as a scholar, and not just to gape at them like a fool . . . .[96]

Astonishment and gaping are the attitude of a person looking for miracles, violations of the usual course of nature. Wise persons, however, seeks to understand these things, and the more they understand them, the more they attain blessedness and the love of God, and the more they are freed from the fear of death. Are these not religious attitudes? And the person who has them—is he or she not a religious person?[97]

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[94] Spinoza, *Ethics* 1 Appendix; *Collected Works*, 443.
[95] Lewis and Short, *A Latin Dictionary*, s.v. *admiratio.* The English word *wonder* also includes the senses of "surprise" and "astonishment," as as "admiration." See the *Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v. *wonder.*
[96] Spinoza, *Ethics* 1 Appendix; *Works,* 241.
[97] In defense of Nadler, it must be conceded that *religion*, *God*, and *Christianity* are all essentially contested concepts, so that there are reasonable conceptions of all three according to which Spinoza is a non-religious atheist. &&&

But is such a person a *Christian*? If we are speaking of Spinoza, he is in a conventional sense not a Christian, and it is probably just a provocation to call him one. Yet he is a religious follower of Jesus of Nazareth, in the senses described above. Probably his most revealing statement about Jesus is one that he made in conversation with his friend, Ehrenfried Walther von Tschirnhaus, which Tschirnhaus then reported to Leibniz, who recorded it: "*Christum*," says Spinoza, "*fuisse summum philosophum"—"*Christ was the greatest of philosophers."[98] .The true teaching of Christ, then, is the true philosophy—presumably the same as that contained in the *Ethics.*[99] So, in an ironic sense, Spinoza *was* a Christian—i.e., not a worshipper of God in Christ, nor a believer in Jesus as Messiah, but one who accepted the philosophical teachings of Jesus of Nazareth. He was a Christian in the same way that Hermann Cohen was a Kantian or David Pears a Wittgensteinian.

Some might be content to call Spinozism a philosophical religion, and there is much to be said for that view.[100] But Spinoza seems to be connected to Christianity in another way. Spinozism can be viewed as the elite counterpart of folk Christianity. The idea of folk vs. elite religion was articulated in the 1970s by Charles Liebman, the sociologist of religion, though the concept has earlier roots (as we shall see). Liebman writes:

> Elite religion is the symbols and rituals (the cult) and beliefs which the leaders acknowledge as legitimate. . . .

[98] Quoted in Stein, *Leibniz und Spinoza*, 283. One may wish to be cautious in crediting this dictum as an authentic statement of Spinoza's, transmitted as it was through two intermediaries; but it is so pithy and remarkable that it is unlikely to have suffered in transmission
[99] Cf. Fraenkel, *Philosophical Religion*, 267; Pines, "Spinoza's Tractatus," 19.
[100] Carlos Fraenkel,

> For various reasons—the evolution of religion, the conflict of different cultures, differentiated levels of religious and even nonreligious education, and psychological propensities—large numbers of people may affiliate with a particular religious institution, and even identify themselves as part of that religion, without really accepting all aspects of its elitist formulation. What is more, a kind of subculture may exist within a religion which the acknowledged leaders ignore or even condemn, but in which a majority of the members participate. This is called folk religion. . . . As far as elite religion is concerned, folk religion is not a movement but an error, or a set of errors, shared by many people.
>
> Folk religion is expressed primarily through rituals and symbols. These rituals may be rooted in superstition; they may originate from an older localized religion which has been replaced by the elite religion . . . .[101]

I should note here that I am not referring to what one might call *elitist* religion, a subgroup which the masses are not *permitted* to join. Rather the masses are not *inclined* to accept the elite religious formation.

One configuration that this divide can take is a contrast between a desupernaturalized elite religion, focusing on ethics rather than ritual, which coexists with an often older folk version, retaining the supernatural and ritualistic aspects discarded by the elite.[102] As long ago as 1827 Hegel briefly suggested viewing Spinoza in these terms:

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[101] Liebman, *The Ambivalent Jew*, 46-47. An earlier and somewhat different version of the distinction can be found in Bock, "Symbols in Conflict."
[102] Williams, *Popular Religion*, 12-13.

> In all higher religions, but particularly in the Christian religion, God is the one and absolute substance; but at the same time God is also subject, and that is something more. Just as the human being has personality, there enters into God the character of subjectivity, personality, spirit, absolute spirit. That is a higher determination, although spirit remains nevertheless substance, the one substance. This abstract substance, the ultimate element of Spinoza's philosophy, this substance that is thought, that is only for thinking, cannot be the content of a folk religion; it cannot be the belief of a concrete spirit.[103]

One way, then, of viewing what Jesus did is that he organized a folk religion that is compatible with, and even draws a person closer to, the elite religion which is Christ's truest message. Alexandre Matheron has laid out the studied ambiguity of Spinoza's definition of the articles of faith, which can be understood in one way by the elite and in another by the masses. Althought Spinoza usually presents the impression that the elite and the multitude are two discrete groups, the multitude being incapable of true philosophical enlightenment, he indicates on occasion that some of the masses may rise to a higher level of understanding. The clearest indication of this possibility is in Spinoza's discussion of the role of the Apostles, who are both prophets and teachers. We thus read—rather remarkably—in Chapter 11 of the *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus* that

[103] Hegel, *Lectures*, 2:575. The German term here translated as "folk religion" is *Volksreligion*, which Thomas A. Lewis suggests should be better translated as "religion of a people" or even "civil religion." While the difference is not negligible, the point remains even if we accept Lewis's translation.

> Although religion as preached by the Apostles—who simply related the story of Christ—does not come within the scope of reason, yet its substance, which consists essentially in moral teachings as does the whole of Christ's doctrine, can be readily grasped by everyone by the natural light of reason.[104]

And it is clear that at least Paul sometimes taught philosophically when addressing the Gentiles, to whom philosophy was more acceptable than to the Jews.[105] We may also note what Spinoza writes in Chapter 4:

> [D]oubtless, to those to whom it was granted to know the mysteries of Heaven, [Jesus'] teaching took the form of eternal truths, not of prescribed laws. In this way he freed them from bondage to the law . . . ."[106]

If such people were freed from bondage to the law, it must be that they previously had been in bondage. That is to say, by means of Jesus' teachings this select group was raised to philosophical knowledge.

The process of rising from folk religion to Jesus' elite religion can apparently be discerned in the following passage:

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[104] Spinoza, *Works*, 502.
[105] Spinoza, *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus*, Ch. 11; *Works*, 503.
[106] Spinoza, *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus* Ch. 4; *Works*, 432. See also the *Treatise on the Emendation of the Intellect*, §17, where Spinoza lays down the rule "[t]o speak to the understanding of the multitude . . . . In this way they will give a more favorable hearing to the truth"—which assumes that they may actually come to accept the truth."

> [W]e cannot know anyone except by his works. He who abounds in these fruits—charity, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control . . . , whether he be taught by reason alone or by Scripture alone, is in truth taught by God, and is altogether blessed [*omnino beatus*] . . . .[107]

Unless Spinoza is writing deviously, we must take him as saying that someone whose *behavior* exhibits the qualities of charity, joy, and so on, is altogether blessed. This is odd: is not true blessedness reserved for those who have philosophical understanding? We must, it seems, assume that someone who acts only from superstitious fear could produce only a simulacrum of charity, joy, and the rest. If, for example, such superstitious persons were to become convinced that God wanted them to do something uncharitable or unjust they would do the uncharitable or unjust thing, secure in the conviction that God had commanded it. If, on the contrary, someone were consistently to exhibit all those good qualities in his or her behavior, it could only be because the person has at least an implicit true knowledge of God. A person of this sort, faced with a recalcitrant scripture—say, one requiring the stoning of an adulteress—would say something like, "The God that I know would not ask people to do such a thing; it is easier to believe that I misunderstand Scripture than to suppose that God would wish one of His creatures to suffer in such a way." A person in this state still has an anthropomorphic conception of God, but ascribes to this God a different set of views, and so seems to be on the way to a more philosophical understanding of the message of Scripture.[108]

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[107] Spinoza, *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus* Ch. 5; *Works,* 444.
[108] Such a person has attained—approximately, if not precisely—what Matheron calls "obedience in the weak sense," which involves obedience to God without the aspect of constraint, or fear of punishment; Matheron, *Le Christ*, 181-182.

Spinoza thus differs from those ancient and early modern theorists mentioned by Jan Assmann, who claim that the religion of the multitude is simply false, instilled manipulatively by the elite for political purposes.[109] For Spinoza, I argue, the religion of the multitude, though not exactly true, has at least the potential to lead its followers to the truth, though only those who are open to being led will arrive there.

This view of Spinoza's project explains his apparent contradictions in interpreting the Bible. Spinoza famously maintains both that theology and philosophy have nothing to do with each other and that the teachings of Scripture are consistent with the teachings of philosophy. He maintains that one should interpret scripture by scripture, yet, without scriptural warrant, he interprets allegorically the resurrection of Christ.[110] These contradictions can result from the different methods of reading that characterize the multitude and the elite. The multitude read it in a more or less straightforward manner, interpreting scripture by scripture. The elite understand that many of the teachings of the Bible are parabolic and so take them that way. The method of the elite need not abandon the principle of interpreting Scripture by scripture. The Protestant scholastics

> argue for the presence of "*loci communes*", a series of central passages whose cumulative clarity is such that it can provide the means by which other and less clearn passages of Scripture may be understood. The criterion for the interpretation of of Scripture in this tradition becomes a collation of passages and their collective agreement with the totality of Holy Scripture.[111]

[109] Assmann, "Political Theology."
[110] &&&; Ep. 78; *Works*, 953. Shlomo Pines points out various such contradictions in the *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus*: see Pines, "Spinoza's Tractatus," 8, 19, 21, 45.
[111] Rice, "Introduction," 2-3.

It is the genius of Jesus of Nazareth to recast the Scriptures in this way, teaching both the simple-minded and the sophisticated, each in the way he or she needs. One might compare it to a physics teacher who says, "Water seeks its own level," or a botanist who says, "This plant enjoys sun and that one prefers shade" or "This tree hates to have its feet wet." Clearly, water does not literally seek anything, nor do plants enjoy or prefer or hate anything. Yet these are useful ways of explaining the behavior of water and plants. It would be comparatively hard to describe the same phenomena without resorting to such figures of speech. It is true that some may never get beyond the stage of taking the figurative language literally, [112] and others—at the other end of the spectrum—may have no need of such figurative teaching.

By purifying common Christianity of its superstitious and figurative elements, one arrives at the true philosophy, the philosophy propounded by Jesus of Nazareth, which coincides (so Spinoza seems to believe) with that propounded by Spinoza. The pinnacle of elite Christianity is simply philosophy. We may call it Christianity by a kind of courtesy. If one were to arrive at it by purely philosophical means there would be no reason to call it Christian. Perhaps in such a case it is fair to call it a kind of religion, in that it plays the role in the life of such a philosopher

[112] See, e.g., Tompkins and Bird, *Secret Life of Plants*, whose authors seem to believe literally in the consciousness of plants. To add a bit of anecdotal evidence, my aunt, Rose Fishman, was once working in her garden, surrounded by buzzing bees. As a boy of about eight years, I was afraid of the bees and was surprised to see Aunt Rose so calmly surrounded by them. I said, "Aren't you afraid of the bees?" She replied, "No, the bees are my friends." I expect there was no more effective way of teaching me that honeybees are not aggressive and will not sting unless provoked. It also conveyed to me the false belief, which took a while to dispel, that Aunt Rose knew each bee personally as her friend. In other words, her anthropomorphic discussion of bees was an effective teaching tool, and any misunderstanding it created could be cleared up later.

that religion plays in the role of more conventionally religious persons.[113] Let us call it a philosophical religion. But in the whole structure erected by Jesus of Nazareth, this philosophical religion takes on by association a distinctively Christian coloration, since it arises out of Christianity.

For the person who begins with Christianity as a folk religion and rises to a higher level, the beliefs of the folk religion function much like Wittgenstein's ladder:

> My propositions serve as elucidations in the following way: anyone who understands me eventually recognizes them as nonsensical, when he has used them—as steps—to climb beyond them. (He must, so to speak, throw away the ladder after he has climbed up it.)
>
> He must transcend these propositions, and then he will see the world aright.[114]

Once one has risen to the level of philosophy, folk Christianity must be discarded.

We may suppose that this is what Sandius saw that evoked such contrary reactions—Spinoza as a Nestorian atheist. Given what I have suggested here, the reaction is natural. Spinoza's philosophy, which would have struck Sandius as atheistic, was embedded in a matrix of folk Christianity, which served in most cases to bring simple people to obedience and in some

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[113] Compare the decision of the United States Supreme Court in the case of *U.S. v. Seeger,* 380 U.S. 163 (1965), where the Court ruled that the defendant Daniel Andrew Seeger (one of three defendants in the case) was entitled to Conscientious Objector status on the basis of his "belief in and devotion to goodness and virtue for their own sakes, and a religious faith in a purely ethical creed," in support of which he cited, *inter alia*, Spinoza (*U.S. v. Seeger,* 166).

[114] Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, 6.54.

cases also to bring them closer to a true philosophical view of the world. Sandius' paradoxical description is thus entirely correct.

ABSTRACT

Christoph Sandius (1644 – 1680) was a Christian of heretical tendencies who lived his last years in Amsterdam—and a friend of Spinoza. Most Spinoza scholars know of him only from the fact that two editions of his book, *Nucleus Historiae Ecclesiasticae* ("The Kernel of Ecclesiastical History,"

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"But doubtless, to those to whom it was granted to know the mysteries of Heaven, his teaching took the form of eternal truths, not of prescribed laws. In this way he freed them from bondage to the law . . . ."

"[W]e cannot know anyone except by his works. He who abounds in these fruits—charity, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control . .. , whether he be

taught by reason alone or by Scripture alone, is in truth taught by God, and is altogether blessed."

(p.444, end of ch. 5)

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It is suggestive also that Sandius cites the *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus* in his work, *De Origine Animae,* published only a year after the appearance of the *Tractatus,* and he cites *approvingly* the translation of a Hebrew phrase offered in this infamous work, a work which most others would only denounce. (Sandius, *Tractatus de Origine Animae*, 7.) Given the short time span,

But Steven Nadler might have countered that Spinoza's "Christian" behavior consisted only in knowing God—which for Spinoza amounts only to gaining knowledge of the second and third kind— and in love of one's neighbor. Even if this were the case, Sandius would still probably have seen Spinoza as a Christian. We need only note that, for Spinoza, to know God is to love God.[115] Spinoza thus fulfills the two great commandments proclaimed by Jesus of Nazareth:

> 5 And one of [the Pharisees], a lawyer, asked him a question, to test him. "Teacher, which is the great commandment in the law?" And he said to him, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the great and first commandment. And a second is like it, You shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments depend all the law and the prophets." (Matt. 22:34-40)

Spinoza, in other words, was carrying out the two great commandments of the Teacher of Christianity, and in that sense might be reasonably called a follower of Christ, i.e., a Christian. Granted, his conception of God was unconventional and (let us say for the sake of argument) completely naturalized. Still, someone like Sandius might well be inclined to say that if a person truly loves his neighbor as himself, it can only be the true God who is leading him to do so.

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[115] *Ethics* 5 p32c; *Works*, 377.

There is first of all the strange disparity i

n Sandius' views on the *Ethics* as compared with what he finds in the *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus* and the correspondence. For the *Ethics*, he longs for a champion who might refute it, for it "does away with all religion." Yet are not Spinoza's favorable statements about Christ to be put in the same context? For who is Christ if not the son (or wisdom) of God, and who is God if not the God of the *Ethics*? Perhaps, however, Sandius did not assume that a writer's views are entirely consistent, or he simply was able to bracket the irreligious views he found in the *Ethics* and value the religious views he found in the *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus* and the correspondence.