

Spinoza and the Limits of Toleration

Dr. Erica Ferg (eferg@regis.edu) and Dr. Bryan Hall (bhall002@regis.edu)

Spinoza's *Theological-Political Treatise* (*TTP*) from 1670 is widely praised for its robust defense of freedom and toleration for both Christian and non-Christian religions. Although the state has absolute control over religious practice, citizens are nonetheless free to believe and espouse what they wish. The ideal republican state would establish only "true religion" which boils down to the practices of "justice and loving-kindness" (III/230).¹ This conception of "true religion" is intended to help resolve internecine Christian religious conflicts (III/179) while also appealing to a target audience—members of the Dutch Reformed Church. Spinoza's view is that the practices of justice and loving-kindness (i.e., good works intended to "strengthen our hearts in love toward our neighbors") are necessary *and* sufficient for Christian salvation (III/176). This fails to account, however, for the centrality of orthodoxy (right belief) within Christianity. The relationship between a religion and its practices will ultimately determine, for Spinoza, whether a religion ought to be tolerated.

This paper is broken into three sections. The first section will examine Spinoza's conception of "true religion," the role of the state in its promotion, and how Spinoza believes this notion could put an end to sectarian conflict while still allowing religious freedom. The second section will discuss a second tension in Spinoza's work; namely, that Spinoza's concept of "universal faith"—intended, of course, to be inclusive of Christianity—ultimately would not take sufficient account of the centrality of orthodoxy (i.e., right belief) within Christian history, doctrine, and notions of salvation, and would thus fail to incorporate what has been perhaps the central tenet of

¹ Citations refer to the Gebhardt edition of Spinoza's work. Translations come from *The Collected Works of Spinoza*, trans. Edwin Curley, vol. 2 (Princeton, 2016).

Christianity—proper belief. The third section will argue that although passages in the *TTP* suggest that proper religious belief must *motivate* justice and loving-kindness if a religion is to be tolerated (III/179), Spinoza’s considered view is that the expression of different religious beliefs should be tolerated as long as they are *consistent* with the practices of justice and loving-kindness. Under this interpretation, a religious community ought to be tolerated as long as its belief commitments do not *preclude* the practices of justice and loving-kindness. This interpretation would imply, however, that religions whose core beliefs preclude the practices of justice and loving-kindness should *not* be tolerated by Spinoza’s ideal republican state. By way of illustration, we conclude by examining a few Protestant Christian movements that Spinoza might say that the United States (a republic) ought not to tolerate since they either are inconsistent with Spinoza’s practices of justice and loving-kindness (e.g., Prosperity Theology) or actively promote the opposite of these practices (e.g., the New Apostolic Movement).

Section One: Spinoza’s “True Religion” and the State

Spinoza is rightly celebrated as having one of the most liberal views on religious freedom in the Modern period.² Not only does he argue for freedom of *conscience* (belief), but also for freedom of *speech*. People ought to be able to believe or practice what they wish, religiously, and to express those beliefs as well. For Spinoza, such freedoms are central to the achievement of a civil society that would allow humanity to realize its highest good, “the true knowledge and love of God.”³ Accordingly, for Spinoza, “defending freedom of thought and expression for all religions was central to his writings on politics and religion.”⁴

² For example, see Stephen Nadler, *A Book Forged in Hell: Spinoza's Scandalous Treatise and the Birth of the Secular Age* (Princeton, 2011), 207-208.

³ *TPP*, III/59.

⁴ See Curley’s Editorial Preface to *TTP*, 51.

This freedom of religious expression goes beyond what most philosophers of the time were willing to grant. For example, Hobbes allows for freedom of conscience but precludes its expression if this would lead to “contention,” i.e., public disagreement.⁵ In contrast, for Spinoza, ‘Men must be so governed that they can openly hold different and contrary opinions and still live in harmony.’⁶ What is impossible for Hobbes is the telos of the ideal state for Spinoza.⁷

At the same time, there are limits to this freedom of religious expression. The state has absolute authority over religion including the determination of what is pious.⁸ Seditious speech—speech that is destructive of the social contract—is forbidden, e.g., advocating for divided sovereignty with respect to religion.⁹ For Spinoza, having an ecclesiastical power separate from the civil power or the civil power establishing a religious sect which it does not control could lead to civil war. The state needs to have complete control over religion in order to minimize the possibility of sectarian violence.¹⁰

This generates the tension. If citizens really did have the religious freedom Spinoza suggests they should have, this would seem to undermine state control of religion. On the other hand, if the state really did have complete control over religion, this would seem to undermine the ability of citizens to hold and express religious beliefs that conflict with the state religion.

Although Spinoza advocates for state sovereignty over both civil and ecclesiastical matters, he also enjoins the state to exercise restraint in the establishment of religion. If the state uses too

⁵ Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan*, ed. Noel Malcolm (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2012), ch. 47, p. 1116 [385].

⁶ *TTP*, III/245.

⁷ For Spinoza, ‘the end of the Republic is really freedom.’ See *TTP*, III/241.

⁸ See *TTP*, III/199-200, III/233, III/238, III/300-301

⁹ See *TTP*, III/241-242. Ultimately, the bar for sedition is quite high for Spinoza and religious speech that does not encourage civil unrest should be tolerated. See also Nadler, *A Book Forged in Hell*, 211.

¹⁰ For more on the state control of religion and the dangers of divided sovereignty, see *TTP* Chapter XIX (III/228ff). Spinoza says that the practice of true religion (justice and loving-kindness) is necessary to the Republic insofar as it promotes peace and harmony (*TTP*, III/179). Nadler also argues that, for Spinoza, the state has a role to play in the moral formation of citizens. See Nadler, *A Book Forged in Hell*, 196-199. Together this suggests that the practices of justice and loving kindness morally improve citizens while also preserving the ideal state.

much force, this could itself lead to political violence. When citizens believe one thing but are forced to say another, ‘the good faith especially necessary in a Republic [Spinoza’s ideal form of government] would be corrupted.’¹¹ This problem is exacerbated when the state tries to control not only what people *do* (practice) and say but also what they *believe*. In addition to being—ostensibly—impossible (something Locke will later echo), the state attempting to impose religious belief will require a level of violence that undermines the very purpose of the state (security and freedom from fear).¹² Accordingly, Spinoza’s ideal state would establish only “true religion” or what Spinoza refers to as the ‘law of justice and loving-kindness.’¹³

This suggests that Spinoza’s resolution to the paradox trades on the difference between religious practice and religious belief. Whereas the state has absolute control over religious *practice*, citizens are free to *believe* and espouse what they wish. Insofar as historical religions instantiate ‘true religion’ through the practices of justice and loving kindness, they should (and can, for Spinoza) be tolerated by the state—even if they espouse beliefs that conflict with one another. For Spinoza, establishing ‘true religion’ (so understood) serves two functions: (1) it promotes security and freedom from fear, and (2) it helps to ensure citizens are pious.¹⁴ For Spinoza, all other practices or “ceremonies” beyond those of justice and loving-kindness are

¹¹ *TTP*, III/243. Brackets are ours.

¹² See *TTP*, III/240. The idea that it is impossible for the state to control the internal beliefs of citizen has long been controversial. For example, in the Lockean context, Jonas Proast argued that the magistrate can control the *evidence* made available to citizens for the formation of their beliefs and so can indirectly control the content of their beliefs. Proast, *The Argument of the Letter Concerning Toleration Briefly Consider’d and Answer’d The Argument of the Letter Concerning Toleration Briefly Consider’d and Answer’d* (George West and Henry Clements, 1690), 5

¹³ *TTP*, III/230. Although Spinoza uses the term “law” here and elsewhere “principle,” it is important to note that what Spinoza requires is not assent to a moral proposition, but rather moral action or *practice*. This is the upshot of Chapter XIV of *TTP* (III/173ff). For example, with universal faith, Spinoza says ‘everyone, if he is to be saved, is bound to obey and to worship by practicing justice and Loving-kindness toward his neighbor’ (III/177) and ‘if the works are bad, they are unfaithful, however much they may agree in words with other faithful people. For where there is obedience, there faith is also, and faith without works is dead’ (III/175).

¹⁴ For the former claim, see *TTP* III/226, 240. For the latter claim, see III/176-177. On the latter claim, Spinoza argues that “true religion” helps to ensure that citizens are pious because ‘...pious doctrines [are] doctrines which move the heart to obedience, even if many of them do not have even a shadow of the truth.’ *TPP*, III/176.

irrelevant to piety.¹⁵ Piety generally is defined as the quality of being religious. Spinoza's definitions of religion and piety are far more specific: "[true religion] does not explicitly require true doctrines, but only such doctrines which are necessary for obedience which *strengthen our hearts in love toward our neighbors.*"¹⁶

Even if (1) is true, (2) is problematic given the relationship Spinoza draws between "true religion" and Christianity, leading to another paradox. We will argue that the problems Spinoza considers eliminable from Christianity (the 'disturbance and wickedness' of doctrinal disputes)¹⁷ represent, instead, an essential feature of Christian history, doctrine and piety.

Section Two: The Indispensability of Orthodoxy in Christianity

Spinoza believes that his conception of "true religion"—the 'law of justice and loving-kindness' captures the essence of "divine law" throughout the Bible.¹⁸ Although ancient Jews (in the Old Testament), according to Spinoza's logic, were required only to practice justice and loving-kindness within their own community (something that was ironically compatible with the slaughter of other nations), Christ (in the New Testament) made this prescription universal. Christ translated Mosaic Law into a moral message that applies to all humanity.¹⁹ Spinoza's conception of "universal faith" summarizes what he believes is essential to piety: [That:]

There is a supreme being, who loves Justice and loving-kindness, and whom everyone, if he is to be saved is bound to obey and to worship by practicing justice and loving-kindness toward his neighbor.²⁰

¹⁵ *TTP* III/76.

¹⁶ *TPP* III/176, emphasis ours.

¹⁷ *TTP* III/179.

¹⁸ See *TTP*, III/165. For the 'law of justice and loving-kindness' as "True Religion," see again *TTP*, III/230.

¹⁹ See *TTP*, III/70-71.

²⁰ *TTP*, III/177.

That is the essence and extent of ‘universal faith’ for Spinoza. Following Mogens Lærke, Spinoza’s ‘universal faith’ provides the speculative foundation for his true religion while true religion provides the practical standard for his universal faith.²¹ What is essential to this faith is that it motivates the right kind of action, *viz.* the practices—and only those practices—of justice and loving-kindness. As Spinoza says, ‘the faith of each person should be considered pious or impious only on account of his obedience or stubbornness [toward ‘works that encourage us’ to ‘strengthen our hearts in love toward our neighbors’²²], not on account of its truth or falsity.’²³ It is important to note that the conditions for salvation are the same as what constitutes piety from Spinoza’s perspective: practicing justice and loving-kindness. As we will discuss below, for certain versions of Christianity, these concepts come apart.

Notably, there is nothing particularly “Christian” in Spinoza’s doctrine of universal faith.²⁴ In general form, or when broken out into its sub-doctrines, other Abrahamic beliefs would largely ascribe to the same views. Spinoza notes that ancient Jews practiced a narrow version of true religion where justice and loving-kindness were pious only relative to other Jews.²⁵ With regard to Islam, Spinoza says:

Moreover, as far as the Turks and the other nations are concerned, if they worship God with the practice of justice and with loving kindness toward their neighbor, I believe they have the spirit of Christ and are saved, whatever, in their ignorance, they may believe about Mohammed and the oracles.²⁶

²¹ Lærke, *Spinoza and the Freedom of Philosophizing*, 216. Lærke claims that Spinoza’s universal faith is essentially Christian, but that there could be other ways to encourage the practice of true religion that are non-Christian. Contra Lærke, there are conceptions of pardon and forgiveness (Spinoza’s seventh sub-doctrine) in the other Abrahamic religions. See Lærke, *Spinoza and the Freedom of Philosophizing*, 172 and 177.

²² *TTP* III/177, 176.

²³ *TTP*, III/176.

²⁴ See Edwin Curley, “Spinoza’s Exchange with Albert Burgh,” In *Spinoza’s Theological-Political Treatise: A Critical Guide*, eds. Yitzhak Y. Melamed and Michael A. Rosenthal (Cambridge, 2010), 24. See also Matthew J. Kisner, “Spinoza’s Defense of Toleration: The Argument from Pluralism,” *Roczniki Filozoficzne* 4 (2022): 222.

²⁵ *TTP*, III/215-216. This is compatible with the slaughter of non-Jewish populations (e.g., the retributive murder of Babylonian babies) being pious as well. Spinoza cites Psalms 137 and 139 for the piety of hating/killing other nations.

²⁶ Letter 43 to Ostens, IV/225b-226b. For more negative assessments of Islam, see *TTP*, III/7 and Letter 76 to Burgh (IV/322a).

Although this is often taken as evidence of Spinoza's religious pluralism,²⁷ it is important to note that this pluralism requires that the religions in question be grounded in what Spinoza takes to be the essence of Christianity.

It follows, therefore, that Spinoza's motto for the *TPP*, as well as his starting principle for all discussion of religion, is a fundamental orientation around the general notion of God's Loving Kindness. Indeed, Spinoza's goal in the first place of proposing the notion of 'universal faith' was to offer a solution to the entrenched religious conflicts and intolerance of his own day.²⁸ He intended for the notion of 'universal faith' to eliminate doctrinal "controversies in the Church,"²⁹ and to do so using the simplest, most fundamental terms possible. Spinoza's definition of 'universal faith', and, particularly, his motivation for proposing such a definition, is admirable. However, such a definition of 'universal faith' would not readily be recognizable by most forms of Christianity contemporaneous to Spinoza, and especially not to mainstream Protestant understanding of salvation or Justification before God.

Spinoza argues that everyone, "...if he is to be saved[,] is bound to obey and to worship *by practicing justice and loving-kindness toward his neighbor*."³⁰ Protestant notions of salvation both in Spinoza's time and our own were based on the New Testament letters of Paul, as well as on the gospels of Mark and John, and emphasize that the possession of proper *belief* about the salvific death and resurrection of Jesus are required save a person from sin and death. Spinoza argues, from a very different perspective, that justification or "saving" require the practicing of justice and loving-kindness toward one's neighbor.

²⁷ See Kisner, "Spinoza's Defense of Toleration," 222 and Lærke, *Spinoza and the Freedom of Philosophizing*, 177.

²⁸ *TTP* III/157.

²⁹ *TTP* III/177.

³⁰ *TTP*, III/177, emphasis ours.

Spinoza is not unaware of what he is arguing, and he is at pains throughout the *TPP* to highlight the actions of Jesus in the gospels (especially the Gospel of Matthew) and to tie his understanding of salvation and justification to proper Christian *action*—rather than to proper belief. Spinoza grounds his argument in the New Testament letters of James and 1 John in claiming that “works” or actions are what enable a person to be saved.³¹ This sets Spinoza at odds not only with centuries of Western and Eastern Christian doctrine and history about the essentiality of proper belief, but it places him in direct opposition to established Protestant doctrine about the principal role of faith in salvation. This is unusual to say the least, and potentially unrecognizable as Christianity, at best.

Spinoza recognizes that the religion about Christ (i.e., what historical Christianity comes to be) can deviate doctrinally from the ‘true’ religion he takes Christ to have espoused (justice and loving-kindness).³² Even so, he seems to have taken it for granted that Christianity or at least Christian piety primarily consists simply in following Christ’s moral lessons. Although Spinoza’s fundamental moral principles are not *incongruent* with the moral teachings of Jesus, Christianity is far more than simply the religion that Jesus preached.

In Christianity, not just the religious history, but the very *religion* of Christianity, itself, can be characterized as a matter of belief. This took place both early on, both in terms of beliefs about the resurrection of Jesus (and the salvation provided thereby), as well as during the coming centuries, when detailed creedal statements and the Christian notion of the Trinity—a three-person Godhead (Father, Son in Jesus Christ, and Holy Spirit) who comprises *one* God rather than three—were articulated over time. Christianity, at every point during its existence, has

³¹ *TTP* III/157.

³² For Spinoza, Christ’s fundamental moral message (justice and loving-kindness) is clear from scripture, but ‘the fact that Apostles build religion on different foundations gave rise to many disputes and schisms.’ (*TTP* III/158). See also Lærke, *Spinoza and the Freedom of Philosophizing*, 170-171.

consisted of beliefs—specific mental propositions, like creeds, doctrines, or a particular theological framework—to which one assents.

This is an issue that Spinoza acknowledges, but he argues that the salvific power of works is more consistent with Christ’s moral message and scripture overall than is the notion of *sola fide* salvation.³³ He even goes so far as to claim that ‘loving Justice and Loving-kindness are enough to make a man faithful.’³⁴ This is stronger than saying that faith is necessary but insufficient for piety (i.e., that good works are a necessary and jointly sufficient condition with faith). Rather, the idea seems to be that the practices of justice and loving-kindness (which involve good works) are necessary and sufficient for piety. This conception of “true religion,” however, ignores what is both essential to and distinctive of Christianity. Specifically, the view overlooks the relationship between orthodoxy and piety, discussed above. Whereas Spinoza believes that doctrinal disputes over orthodoxy (right belief) should be eliminated from Christianity, we have argued that they constitute instead the essence of Christian doctrine and are inextricably linked as well to Christian piety.³⁵ Adopting Spinoza’s view on Christianity does not take sufficient account of the indispensability of orthodoxy for Christian doctrine and notions of salvation.

This deepens rather than resolves the second paradox of piety from a Christian perspective. As noted above, Spinoza thinks that Christ’s moral message is the essence of Christianity and constitutes true religion. True religion, so understood, is something the ideal state (republican) should establish.³⁶ A Christian’s beliefs (e.g., concerning the Nicene Creed) are irrelevant to

³³ See Spinoza’s discussion of Paul (*sola fide*) vs. James (works have salvific value) in *TTP*, III/157-158. See also III/175.

³⁴ *TTP*, III/176. Although Spinoza calls atheists impious, he also seems to recognize that someone could practice justice and loving-kindness (i.e., do what they ought to do) simply through the natural light of reason (*TTP*, III/78). For more on Spinoza’s toleration of atheism, see Nadler, *A Book forged in Hell*, 210-211 and Kisner, “Spinoza’s Defense of Toleration,” 222-223.

³⁵ For Spinoza’s negative view of Christian disputes over orthodoxy, see III/97-98, III/157-158, and III/179.

³⁶ See *TTP*, (III/179, III/226, III/232-233, and III/247.

piety, from Spinoza's perspective. Although the 'true religion' of Spinoza's ideal state certainly does capture some essential elements of Christianity (as it does with respect to other religions), eliminating the orthodox nature of Christian piety would arguably have a nullifying impact on Christianity. The exclusive nature of Christianity—the fact that, since the time of the Nicene creed, Christian salvation has *required* the acceptance of certain theological propositions—is something Spinoza passes over in silence.³⁷

Section III: Whether Toleration Requires Religious Belief to *Motivate* or Simply Not to Preclude Justice and Loving-kindness

Holding aside the apparent inconsistency of Spinoza's notion of 'universal faith' with Christian doctrines about salvation, we can say that, for Spinoza, it would seem that different religious beliefs and their expression should be tolerated *just in case they are consistent with* state establishment (true religion) of justice and loving-kindness. This provides a tidy resolution to the paradox above since the essence of Christian piety (right *belief*) could be disconnected from Spinoza's true religion (right *action*). Ignoring Spinoza's own view on Christianity, he seems to suggest just this resolution:

We conclude that nothing is safer for the republic than that piety and Religion should include only the practice of Loving-kindness and Equity, and that the right of the supreme powers concerning both sacred and secular matters should relate only to actions. For the rest, everyone should be granted the right to think what he wants and to say what he thinks.³⁸

What kind of connection (if any) must there be between religious belief and the practice of justice and loving-kindness for the state to tolerate the belief? There are points where Spinoza suggests that the connection must be motivational; i.e., religious beliefs must *motivate* justice

³⁷ See Curley's Introduction to *TTP*, xivn1.

³⁸ *TTP*, III/247.

and loving-kindness if they are to be tolerated.³⁹ The problem here is that certain sects of Christianity do not claim a connection (motivational or otherwise) between the doctrinal beliefs required for salvation and pietistic practices of justice and loving-kindness.⁴⁰ Of greatest concern, from Spinoza's perspective, would be the Dutch Reformed Church, which subscribes to the doctrine of *sola fide* salvation (salvation by/through *faith alone*), emphasizes that salvation is attained through faith in Jesus Christ, not through human works or merit. Put pointedly, within the Dutch Reformed Church, right belief (e.g., having belief in the tenets of the Nicene Creed), irrespective of any action, is both necessary and sufficient for salvation. If religious beliefs must motivate good works for the beliefs to be tolerated, *sola fide* would not meet this condition for toleration. It ought to be noted, however, that even if good works are not required for salvation according to the Dutch Reformed Church, they still could be said to be the natural outgrowth of a Christian life. Moreover, it certainly would be ironic, and contrary to Spinoza's intent, if the religious audience he had hoped to attract through the *TTP* would not be tolerated under the strictures of *TTP*.⁴¹

A more charitable interpretation, one consistent with the quote above as well as Spinoza's high bar for sedition, would hold that the expression of different religious beliefs should be tolerated as long as they are *consistent* with the practices of justice and loving-kindness. Under

³⁹ For example, Spinoza claims that 'faith requires piety more than it does truth' and suggests that limiting the toleration of religious belief to those beliefs that are motivational of true religion (justice and loving kindness) is 'necessary in the republic if people are to live peacefully and harmoniously' (*TTP*, III/179). Some commentators also endorse this limitation on religious toleration for Spinoza. For example, see Kisner, "Spinoza's Defense of Toleration," 233 and Lærke, "*Spinoza and the Freedom of Philosophizing*," 231.

⁴⁰ Although Catholicism does require good works for salvation, it is unclear to what extent the beliefs required for grace (where grace is a requirement for works to have salvific value) are themselves motivational of good works. See *Catechisms of the Catholic Church*, 1993, 2008, and 2009.

⁴¹ Nadler explains Spinoza's flattering portrayal of Christianity in terms of the audience he hoped to attract, *viz.* members of the Dutch Reformed Church and other Protestant sects. See Nadler, *A Book Forged in Hell*, 172. Other commentators (e.g., Kisner) are wrong to claim that the doctrine of good works (i.e., that they are salvific) is widely shared by Christians. See Kisner, "Spinoza's Defense of Toleration," 233.

this interpretation, the Dutch Reformed Church should be tolerated as long as its endorsement of *sola fide* salvation does not preclude the practices of justice and loving-kindness.⁴² Put even more generally, differing Christian sects should be allowed to evangelize (belief) and other religious traditions should be allowed their “ceremonies” (practice) as long as doing so does not violate the state’s own prescriptions for justice and loving-kindness.⁴³

This interpretation does imply, however, that religions whose core beliefs *preclude* the practices of justice and loving-kindness should not be tolerated by Spinoza’s ideal republican state. Spinoza believes that ‘the end of the Republic is really freedom’ (III/241). The practices of true religion (justice and loving-kindness) promote the peace and harmony that constitute the background conditions for religious freedom (III/179). By way of illustration, we conclude here by examining a few Protestant movements that Spinoza might say the United States (a republic) ought not to tolerate since they either are inconsistent with Spinoza’s practices of justice and loving-kindness (e.g., Prosperity Theology) or that actively promote the opposite of these practices (e.g., the New Apostolic Movement).

Prosperity Theology, also known as the prosperity gospel, the health and wealth gospel, or the gospel of success, refers to a theological perspective that focuses on the notion that financial and physical wellbeing are the intent of true Christianity. Prosperity Theology teachings emerged

⁴² If what a religion believes *conflicts* with the practice of justice and loving kindness, then it should not be tolerated by Spinoza’s lights. For example, Southern Baptists incorporated slavery and white supremacy into their theology which would seem to conflict with Spinoza’s moral principle. See Tom Gjelten, ‘Southern Baptist Seminary Confronts History Of Slaveholding And ‘Deep Racism,’ *NPR*, December 13, 2018, <https://www.npr.org/2018/12/13/676333342/southern-baptist-seminary-confronts-history-of-slaveholding-and-deep-racism>.

⁴³ Although Spinoza praises the religious tolerance of Amsterdam (*TTP*, III/246), forcing Catholics (under the influence of the Dutch Reformed Church) into clandestine churches would likely make the state less than ideal from his considered perspective. Although he does not think churches like this should be purchased at city expense, in his *Political Treatise* (1677), he holds that they should be able to be built openly with private funds (VI.40).

in the 19th century and grew in popularity during the 20th century within American Pentecostal and Charismatic movements, and have spread throughout the United States, Africa, and Asia.

Prosperity Theology teaches that the way to gain riches is to give more money to the “kingdom,” by which is usually meant donations to one’s own churches and ministries. The quantity of material and financial prosperity one can be expected to gain is equal in proportion to what one gives, and it’s believed that, in this life, if someone exercises enough faith, he will no longer have to be subject to the crippling effects of sickness and disease. However, if individuals continue to suffer afflictions or poverty, those conditions are due to that person’s lack of faith.

Hebrew Bible and New Testament scriptures teach that a person may experience both times of prosperity and of suffering, that Jesus died to atone for the sins of his people (Acts 2:38; 5:31; 10:43; 13:38; 26:18) rather than for this-worldly success. The emphasis of the moral and religious messages in both collections of texts is never on physical, financial, or material prosperity in this life—Christians generally are taught to focus on the hope of *eternal* blessing and that the full benefits of the death of Christ come only through the resurrection on the last day. Holding aside issues of orthodoxy/right belief or of normative claims about Christianity, one could certainly agree that the core beliefs in Prosperity Theology that enrich only a few (usually not the poor), and that sickness, poverty, and disease are evidence of God’s displeasure and a person’s lack of faith would seem at the very least to be inconsistent with Spinoza’s practices of justice and loving-kindness—and perhaps even to preclude them.

Certainly, one could say that the tenets of a Christian movement such as the New Apostolic Reformation, which actively promote the opposite of Spinoza’s practices of justice and loving-kindness, ought not be tolerated by Spinoza’s ideal republican state. The New Apostolic Reformation (NAR) is a Christian theocratic movement that emerged in American in the mid-

1990s with roots in 1950s Pentecostal Christianity. The aim of the NAR is to destroy secular government and society in order to achieve Christian ‘dominion’ over the ‘Seven Mountains’ of life: government, education, business, media, family, arts, and religion (this is known as “Dominionism”). Its goal, politically and governmentally, is to implement a government grounded in “Biblical laws”; i.e., a Christian theocratic government. The New Apostolic Reformation teaches that economic and societal problems exist because of “demons” (such as secular society and its agents), and that God will remedy all social ills once Christian dominion over the ‘Seven Mountains’ of society is complete. The NAR is a surprisingly robust religious movement in the United States. Russell Vought is the current Director of the United States Office of Management and Budget and the named successor for the so-called Department of Government Efficiency (DOGE). Vought is the primary author of Project 2025, a policy project currently being enacted in the United States that largely involves the dismantling of Federal government institutions. Vought is a self-described Christian nationalist whose involvement in projects like Project 2025, that align with NAR goals, as well as his association with prominent NAR figures, offer an example of the reach of the NAR in American government.

The NAR movement excludes all non-Christian members of society, atheists, Muslims, Buddhists, democrats, journalists, and all those who do not share the NAR vision for society and government. Both its goals of the destruction of secular government and society and its exclusion of / desire to reform all non-Christians and non-members would suggest that the NAR is a movement that actively precludes Spinoza’s practices of justice and loving-kindness and ought not be tolerated in Spinoza’s ideal republican state. Such a conclusion is relevant not only if one accepts Spinoza’s view on the freedom that constitutes the goal of the republican state and the

conditions for achieving that goal, but also because Spinoza's concerns about and views on religious freedom remain relevant to our own day.