

Superstition, religion and the political

Superstição, religião e o político

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Abstract/presentation

Although a respected researcher of religion in both the European and North American intellectual scene, Michel Despland is to date still little known in Brazilian religion studies circles. Among his several publications, we name but a few: *Kant on history and religion*: with a translation of Kant's On the failure of all attempted philosophical theodicies (McGill-Queen's University Press, 1973); *The education of desire*, Plato and the philosophy of religion (University of Toronto Press, 1985); *Les hierarchies sont ebranlees*, politiques et theologies au XIXe siècle, (Fides, 1998); *Comparatisme et Christianisme*: questions d'histoire et de methode (L'Harmattan, 2002). In the paper before us, which was presented during the 12th Symposium of the Brazilian Association for the History of Religions (2011, UFJF), Professor Despland starts from the anthropological premise that religion is “something people do”. Drawing on Spinoza’s work, Despland elects the category of “superstition” as the most adequate tool for the analysis of the religious realm, rather than, for instance, “the sacred”. The author’s immediate goal is first to understand Spinoza’s own construal of the religious and political realms in their inter-relatedness – both in conceptual continuity and rupture with the Western/Christian traditions of political theology. He then proceeds to probe historically into the moral and social dimensions of religion as embedded both in its own institutions and in the ever growing third realm of civil society *vis-à-vis* the state. This discussion, enriched by the contribution of other important writers such as J.-J. Rousseau, A. de Tocqueville, B. Constant and C. Lefort, should serve as a test for his theoretical choices. Despland hopes to have shown, at the end, that a consideration of religion as inevitably rooted in human nature, together with the analysis of the particular historical configuration of the political and religious realms in modern Western civilization, provides us with “a good context for the confrontation with some of the fundamental problems of justice that remain before us today”. Religion as he sees it, therefore, is finally to be understood as psychologically and historically contingent human action. All the same, it takes place over against the irrational-rational background of some philosophically resilient categories: superstition and morality.

Keywords: Spinoza; Religion; Superstition; Politics; Civil society; History; Justice.

Resumo/apresentação

Cientista da religião reconhecido e respeitado em ambientes intelectuais da América do Norte e da Europa, Michel Despland é ainda pouco conhecido pela academia brasileira. Entre suas publicações estão, por exemplo: *Kant on history and religion*: with a translation of Kant's On the failure of all attempted philosophical theodicies (McGill-Queen's University Press, 1973); *The education of desire*, Plato and the philosophy of religion (University of Toronto Press, 1985); *Les hierarchies sont ebranlees*, politiques et theologies au XIXe siècle, (Fides, 1998); *Comparatisme et Christianisme*: questions d'histoire et de methode (L'Harmattan, 2002). No texto ora publicado, apresentado durante o XII Simpósio da Associação Brasileira de História das Religiões (2011, UFJF), o prof. Despland assume a premissa antropológica de que “a religião é algo que as pessoas fazem.” Baseando-se em Espinosa, Despland elege a categoria da “superstição” como um instrumento de análise mais adequado para a análise do religioso do que, por exemplo, a do “sagrado”. O objetivo mais imediato de Despland é primeiramente entender como o

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próprio Espinosa constrói os âmbitos político e religioso em sua inter-relação, em continuidade e ruptura com as tradições herdadas da teologia política do Ocidente/do cristianismo. A partir daí, ele passa a sondar historiograficamente as dimensões morais e sociais da religião diante do Estado, tanto em suas próprias instituições, quanto no cada vez mais conspícuo terceiro âmbito da sociedade civil. Esta discussão, enriquecida pelas contribuições de outros autores importantes, tais como J.-J. Rousseau, A. de Tocqueville, B. Constant e Lefort, deveria servir como teste para as escolhas teóricas do autor. De fato, Despland espera ter começado a mostrar, no final de seu texto, que uma consideração da religião como inevitavelmente arraigada na natureza humana, junto com a análise da particular configuração histórica dos âmbitos político e religioso na civilização ocidental-moderna, fornece-nos “um bom contexto para a confrontação com alguns dos problemas fundamentais relativos à justiça hoje remanescentes”. A religião, assim como ele a vê, há que ser finalmente entendida como ação humana psicológica e historicamente contingente. Não obstante, ela ocorre diante do pano de fundo irracional-razional de algumas categorias filosoficamente resilientes, a saber: superstição e moralidade.

Palavras-chave: Espinosa; Religião; Superstição; Política; Sociedade civil; História; Justiça.

This paper is built on an anthropological premise. Religion is something people do. (It is also rooted in my conviction that discussions of "the sacred" have lost their usefulness in today's study of religion.) In an attempt to reorient discussions, I will draw upon a work by Spinoza. The first part will seek to show the interest of the notion of *superstition* advanced by him and give it, if I can, scientific currency. The second part will remain with Spinoza, to show his construction of the religious and the political realms. A third part will move on to subsequent and contemporary treatments of theologico-political themes.

1. Baruch Spinoza (1632-1677) places a discussion of superstition at the beginning of his *Theologico-political Treatise* of 1669 (Spinoza, 2007). Human beings avidly desire worldly goods that are, by their very nature, always uncertain and never durable. So humans always hesitate between fear and hope.¹ Fears make them anxious, hope gives them encouragement and brings some relief. Both arouse passions, stir up the imagination and lend verisimilitude to fictions. So human beings, who live in time and move toward an unknown future, become inevitably credulous. Spinoza states his conclusion firmly: humans are *by nature* prone to superstition. Superstition then is a basic, enduring anthropological category, not just a convenient label for a group of behaviours and attitudes.

This notion of superstition is a basic part of Spinoza's PHILOSOPHY. His pages summarize an argument already made by the philosophers of Antiquity as they pondered human destiny. Superstition was seen by them as a moral failure. Superstitious behaviour is an emotional agitation; it is ridiculous, shameful. Superstitious people are fretful, overexcited; they lose their composure and their self-respect. They take all the joy out of religion, writes Plutarch. And, above all, superstition renders human beings impotent.² When they surrender to it, humans lose the limited measure of power they have over their own lives. As a contemporary author puts it, "humans are naturally superstitious because they cannot be gods" (Breton, 1977, p. 16).

2. Spinoza adds that we can curb, or, even better, correct this human propensity to superstition. And for this he counts on "religion".

Right away I must emphasize that he does not use what we might call a rigorous or scientific conceptualisation of what religion is. In this second part I will use the term like him in its common usage, as in Christian or Buddhist religion. "Religion" thus means a vague group of phenomena sharing enough of a family air to be all commonly called religion. The boundaries of the group remain hazy and unclear. "Religion", in this sense, is not claimed to be rooted in human nature. It is simply an accepted way of speaking of historical realities, of what humans evidence about themselves as they pursue their lives in history.

To show that religion corrects the human bend to superstition, Spinoza examines the Scriptures (Jewish and Christian). Here he leaves the field of philosophy (strictly speaking) and offers a HERMENEUTIC. He finds in the Bible many wonderful stories that appeal to the imagination by telling of admirable things. All this is attractive to the multitude and impressive in their eyes. He also finds in the prophets of the Old and the apostles of the New Testament moral teachings that are very sound. In his eyes, the core teaching of the Bible is moral: justice and mercy is what God requires of men. He observes that the apostles preached to all and that they spread teachings rather than proclaimed the will of God. He stresses in particular that Jesus did not demand obedience but taught the truth: God is to be worshipped "from the heart".³

I cannot accept this view of the biblical contents. Moreover his account does not fit the record of two millennia of Christian history. I add that his reading

of the New Testament overlooks a feature of the teaching of Jesus and of the apostles that had a novel political significance. Christ ordered his disciples to pay the taxes to Caesar, and Paul urged Christians to obey the authorities. But when Christ said "Render unto God what belongs to God and unto Caesar what belongs to Caesar", he opened up a fresh line of conflict in the Ancient world: what belongs to God should not be given to Caesar. In fact within a generation or two, early Christians refused to render homage to the emperor as to a god and were sentenced to death for that. Pagans noted in amazement this incredible, unprecedented behaviour: Christians – and even women! – were dying the death of martyrs in the name of their principles.⁴

Christian faith had therefore political consequences, by preparing believers to resist all earthly powers on some important points. (The eschatological temper of Early Christianity would encourage this readiness.) However when the Emperor Constantine became Christian in 325, a vast theologico-political synthesis began to take shape. There are, under God, two powers on earth, the temporal and the spiritual power, the Emperor and the Pope. A huge part of Western history from 500 to 1800 consists in the push and pull between these two rival powers. The popes claimed that they received from Christ via Saint Peter a universal rule over all, including emperors and kings. More modestly, the emperors, and after them the kings, claimed only a sovereign rule on earth, but claimed this rule was given to them directly by God. Western thinkers spent centuries articulating the relationship between these two contending powers, each claiming universal scope. This experience of *power rivalry* between two different *kinds* of power was uniquely formative for the West. We are now equipped with conceptualisations to think of the distinction between worldly power and spiritual power, or, using the terms of Napoleon, between the sword and the spirit.⁵

Starting as early as the 14th century the theological part of the theologico-political constellation of ideas started weakening. A new social and political force was beginning to emerge and was strong enough to set European-wide changes in motion. A new idea was gaining currency and force: *civility*. A new class of people, burgers and merchants, jurists and humanists, were getting the levers of power in a number of free cities and small republics. The ideal of *civil rule* became the norm. The new properly civil space was being conquered by pushing to the margins two powers that were predominant in the middle ages: the

nobility, i.e. the feudal lords who lived in fortified castles, had soldiers and could raise more troops, and the Church. The monarchies (first among them England and France) moved in that direction too. Civil space then was being defined as resisting both armed violence and ecclesiastical intrigue.

The great 17th century treatises in political theory (Hobbes, Spinoza, Locke and, later on, Rousseau) drew, in their diverse ways, from the heritage of the previous centuries. The era of civil protest had begun as individuals were willing to surrender their lives, not in the traditional way by dying on the battlefield in the service of a king, but by dying for a civil and just cause and being sentenced to death in a court of law. They thus reduplicated the acts of the Christian martyrs but, this time, for a more secular cause. Thereby they imitated the courage of Antigone and of Socrates. Now that moral heroism is apparent also on the secular side, the old theologico-political whole begins to fall apart.⁶

Nuances must be made. We find in 17th century Europe two contrasted views of civility. During the English Civil War (1642-1651) the idea of civility took a clear egalitarian turn. This also happened wherever Calvinist ideas held sway. These Protestants challenged both the pope's power, and that of the king. A New England theologian stated a firm rule: "all power that is on earth is limited" (John Cotton, 1640 *apud* Hall, 2011, p. 106). But in the Catholic monarchies, most notably those in the Iberian Peninsula, the idea of society kept strong hierarchical overtones. This was also true in France until the Revolution. But after 1789 the hierarchical social structure as well as its manners were overthrown and society moved violently toward egalitarianism. In time the contest between hierarchy and equality appeared in all societies and states issued from the medieval European matrix. Another violent form of the conflict took place in the Spanish Civil War (1936-1938). In Brasil, Sergio Buarque de Hollanda (1902-1982) found that the idea of cordiality was stronger in his country than the idea of individualistic civility. The patron-client relationship remained in this case central to the functioning of society.⁷

Let us return to Spinoza. As a moralist, he remained firmly in the path opened by the philosophers of Antiquity. Philosophy is a school for living; as Foucault put it, it is a "technique of self" that develops the virtue, that is the strength of the person. (While Stoics are known for the call to self-mastery, Epicureans and others spoke more modestly of a good use of the world.)

Maintaining as a philosopher that all individuals should strive to exercise themselves a measure of control over their own life, he belonged to the egalitarian pattern.

Spinoza however also draws the lessons from the millennium of Church-State conflict in Western Europe to unfold his views on the political realm.

The work of definition of the political had started with the Greek philosophers. Aristotle is keen to establish that a *city* should not be considered as just a very large household. In a city there is a wide diversity of activities and interests. And there is a constant debate and unceasing deliberation about what is just and expedient. Politicians keep speaking of consensus but *dissensus* is the root cause of political activity (Rancière, 1995). Societies can have consensus but this is always short-lived. Conflicts of thought, of attitudes and, above all, of interests, always threaten to lead to new quarrels. The political system is what aims at the management of these conflicts.

In the days of Spinoza, the State has a new, clear conceptual tool with which to legitimate its management of human affairs: the idea of sovereignty. It has become widely accepted, pragmatically, that there must always be in human societies an absolute and final authority, namely a sovereign authority that can settle issues and has force at its disposal. This is the new modern State, sometimes called the Westphalian State since it emerged with the peace of Westphalia that put an end to the 30-years war in Germany. A mosaic of confessional States supports either the Catholic or the Protestant religion. Force is the ultimate ground of their power. *Ultima Ratio Regis* is the motto inscribed on the guns of the *Ancien Régimes*. The use of the death penalty signals the authority to all. What become called "reason of State" authorises any breach of what we now know as human rights.

Following Hobbes, Spinoza endorses this view of the secular state. But he stresses that such state exercises its rule only over bodies. It punishes only criminal behaviour. The state, argued Spinoza, must be allowed "to regulate all things, sacred as well as profane". Spinoza gives however a very firm limit to such regulation: it is over things. Everyone is to remain master of his own thoughts and free to express them, as he or she sees fit (provided they are not a seditious call to arms). Spinoza is, as always, a realist. How could the state control all tongues, when people, at times, can't even control their own?⁸

Spinoza ends his *Theologico-political Treatise* with a piece of RHETORIC. He warmly praises the tolerance of the Dutch Government that lets all religious groups pursue their affairs as long as they do not break any law. He knows that the Dutch Republic is about the only regime that pursues such policy. He prudently avoids stirring the anger of French, English, Spanish or German authors who argue against any idea of tolerance. He also published his treatise anonymously. The reception proved his prudence was grounded in fact: the treatise was labelled impious.⁹

A few years later, John Locke published his famous *Letter on Toleration* (1686). He argues there that the mark of a true Church is charity and benevolence toward all, including toward those who do not share the faith. Those who hail his treatise usually forget to mention that Locke mentions two exceptions to his rule of toleration. The State should not tolerate either atheists or Roman Catholics. The former because their oaths are not credible; the latter because they hold an allegiance to a foreign monarch. Churches should be tolerant, but the State must make exceptions. Sovereignty cannot be divided. The Catholic monarchs (Portugal first among them) believed in the same principle when they demanded of the pope to dissolve the Jesuit order (1773).

3. Important new developments occurred after Spinoza in what he established as the theologico-political domain of thought. They all have to do with an assessment of what goes on in the new "civil society" that has taken shape in the post medieval society. Society appears as a self ordering whole, in which, discussion of ideas and negotiations of interests provide means for the organisation of human affairs. Societies are made of a mixture of mores, rules, customs and ways of doing things. Discussions of Church and State cannot proceed very far now, in the abstract, without consideration of the historical practises in the society where Church and State are to pursue their mission.

A first, now classical, discussion is found in Rousseau's *Social Contract* (1762). Born and raised in Geneva, a Republic, he read a wide range of authors and drew the implications for religion in modern society by making clear distinctions between three kinds of religion (Rousseau, 1994 [1762], book 4, chapter 8). First the *religion of man*, which has no temples, no altars; it is a purely internal cult that individuals render to God and to "eternal moral duties".

It is the religion Jesus taught. It corresponds to Spinoza's affirmation that each human being must both own his or her own soul, and know that he or she does. There is also *the religion of the priest* which is bad because it always seeks to make itself into a rival of the State. (Rousseau had in mind the Roman Catholic Church but his page should now be read as establishing a sociological type.) To these two contrasted religions he adds a third one which is a novel idea: the *civil religion*.¹⁰ This religion does not have many dogmas and consists primarily in "sentiments of sociability". Beside the authority of the rulers exercised vertically on the people, Rousseau acknowledges the presence of social customs that exercise their authority horizontally. Civil religion, entrenched in ways of life, teaches mutual tolerance to the citizens and instils in them a love of the laws. Thus it feeds the willingness to live together, all being associated in a peaceful group.

This third notion created a field of inquiry for sociologists. When de Tocqueville visited the United States in the 1830ies he saw this civil religion at work, and argued that far from enslaving minds, this civil religion made it possible for democracy to work (Tocqueville, 2002). The discussion of the theologico-political whole has now moved much beyond discussion of Pope versus Emperor by including consideration of social realities, of mores and "habits of the heart" (Tocqueville) as they are learned in any given society, and of the enduring needs of a stable and decent social life.

In an important article Claude Lefort (1924-2010) examines the current state of the matters discussed by Rousseau and de Tocqueville (Lefort, 1986). He can give a long list of 19th century authors (Hegel, de Tocqueville, Auguste Comte) who doubted that social morality could remain strong (or that a new one could be developed) without a religious flavour, or some sort of religious support. We can list today many social and intellectual movements that try all over the globe to restore the strength of national identity, by looking for some source of unity, for some pole providing a common orientation and thus doing for the society what religion used to do. The State, with all its power, appears too pragmatic for that stirring of hearts and minds.

To this empirical observation, Lefort's article adds one large question: is theologico-political thinking really dead in our secular age? Lefort develops a philosophical argument, based on a major current in the philosophies elaborated

in the second half of the 20th century. What is the meaning of the *human insertion into the world*? Can we think about the world as if we were not part of it? Is our cognitive achievement based only on our placing ourselves in front of the world, cutting it and measuring it, while setting aside we are also a part of it? Can the subject produce, for instance, theories of superstition, of religion and of politics by positing itself as if exterior to all three and detached from them all? Our contemporary culture and art is full of vivid expressions of symbolic events. Those events that constituted our traditional relationships to the world are still around and some new ones are created. Can we accept the rule that all this is to remain *private* since it is "subjective" and cannot be quantified, or since it is either religious or purely poetic?

Some secularist thinkers today argue just that. In secular society religion, they say, must remain private. It can be tolerated if it does not manifest itself in the public realm, does not make itself and its views known in the public debate on human affairs. It is taken for granted that such visibility would stir fanatical passions and give strength to intolerance. But early liberal theories of democracy, such as found in Benjamin Constant for instance, argued just the opposite. Religious feeling accompanies humans throughout their history, and religious institutions adapt themselves to the state of civilisation they live in.¹¹ Civil society is capable of discussing matters other than the price of beef and sugar. It can share thoughts on what human care most about. Institutions that guarantee freedom of expression, support literature and the arts can also safely support the peaceful expression of all conscientious religious views.¹²

To put it bluntly, the point is that politicians should not have a monopoly on discourse on the just and the expedient. Democratic politics are to be conducted in the open, in sharp contrast to the days when Machiavel advised the prince to keep his designs secret (Manent, 1977). Today the political is a major part of contemporary life and constantly seeks to persuade people. Political debates places citizens in front of a rich tapestry of lively symbolic expressions that strive to shape the relationship people entertain to the world and to each other. This characteristic they share with religion.

Modern media however have transformed the practises of rhetoric that took for granted that speakers and listeners would stand in the same place, see each other and communicate without microphones and speakers. With radio and

television, propaganda has become a radically new phenomenon. Manipulation of images has been taken to the level of a fine art and "sound bites" pass for straightforward thinking. Occult financing of political parties makes the views of Machiavel relevant again. Who does not see how easy it is to rule people by fooling them?¹³

This is the point where I can see that thinking in theologico-political thinking can become relevant. What Spinoza called the religion of the prophets and Rousseau the religion of the priests are both *institutions* that are still here. They have members, leaders and articulate spokespersons. They own some real estate and can sign checks. They include intellectuals in their ranks. They can exert some influence on the public and social scene within the rules of democratic debate. They can influence voters. I see here a realistic basis for a critical stance toward some of the processes of politics. Denouncing corruptions, unveiling of hypocrisies, requiring accountability will give plenty opportunity for open, informed criticism and for advocacy of better practices.

Religious institutions can be relevant on a second scene. States have sovereignty but their power is limited to a territory. The modern theories of sovereignty have drawn imaginary lines on the surface of earth. A whole range of problems, from narco-traffic, ecological issues and nuclear clouds, make of territorial sovereignties an obstacle instead of being a solution. It is noteworthy that many religions of priests and prophets have international reach. This is a second, positive asset characteristic of these religions.

There is another side to the coin of theologico-political thinking. The modern states claim the right to punish leaders of prophetic and priestly churches who commit crimes and, in fact, they sometimes do judge them for their crimes. Sexual exploitation of minors by ecclesiastics is probably a very old story but it is now becoming exposed and prosecuted. Benedict XVI stated that accused priests should be tried in secular courts. This is just part of a broader process of victims being allowed to speak. Equally difficult is the public investigation of the finances of some religious groups where the money of the church and that of the leader are not kept distinct. I note that the financial practises of the Church of Scientology start being scrutinised in the United States. Consumer protection is thus extended beyond those who sell poisonous food to the religious experts and charismatic figures who commit fraud and

exploit credulity to their own very visible and tangible advantage. I admit that police investigation of those forms of criminality is very difficult and requires educated police.¹⁴

To conclude. I hope that my starting point with superstition being rooted in human nature, along with the survey of the history of the tensions between the theological and the political provides a good context for the confrontation with some of the fundamental problems of justice that remain before us today. The idea of superstition provides a solid basis of understanding of universal human nature. The religious (or theological) and the political take us into realms of history, where matters become practical – and where my talk becomes an effort to persuade. In the realms of history things change, and to-morrow need not be like today.

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¹ Plato had already said that fear and hope are two imprudent counselors.

² See Dale B. Martin (2004), *Inventing Superstition. From the Hippocratics to the Christians*. These philosophers thought that women are more extreme in their superstitions than men.

³ This view was also expressed by left-wing Protestants in Holland. Deists also spread the notion of Jesus as great moral teacher. Thomas Jefferson wrote an anthology of Gospel texts that went in the same direction.

⁴ Spinoza stressing that Jesus placed religion in the heart does not notice this.

⁵ Defeated and exiled in Saint Helena's island, he affirmed that the spirit will always prevail against the sword.

⁶ The interest of Spinoza's treatise is that it tries to prolong its life by advancing the view that religion must become centered on moral teachings and must be subject to the laws edited by the sovereign. The sovereign rules bodies and leaves the minds free to think and free to say what they think as long as it is not seditious.

⁷ I thank professor Steven Engler for drawing my attention to this point.

⁸ Spinoza (2007, 20) adds that to legislate against free expression of opinions is no threat to criminals, since they keep their thoughts to themselves.

⁹ One of Spinoza's friends was condemned for heresy by the synagogue he attended and publicly flogged; the young man then committed suicide. Spinoza resigned from the synagogue. Should he have argued that flogging a heretic is a crime and that the rabbis that ordered it should have been sanctioned?

¹⁰ This idea has roots in views held in Antiquity by Roman thinkers.

¹¹ B. Constant is the author of five volumes *De la religion, considérée dans sa source, ses formes et ses développements* (Paris, 1824-1831). See Brian Garsten (2009), "Constant on the Religious Spirit of Liberalism". Also Helen Rosenblatt (2008), *Liberal Values: Benjamin Constant and the Politics of Religion*.

¹² Truth will be respected when all can freely attest to what they believe is true. Such is the argument formulated in 1826 by Alexandre Vinet (1928) in *Essai sur la manifestation des convictions religieuses*. The essay was translated in German.

¹³ Spinoza notes that playing upon fears and hopes is the easiest way for rulers to govern a multitude.

¹⁴ A historical footnote may be useful. There has been an enduring problem among Christians on how the Church should be governed. The popes built for the Church monarchical structure parallel to that of the Roman emperors, and, in principle superior. In times of crisis Luther asked the protestant princes to be "emergency bishops" for the emerging protestant churches. Calvin however built from the bottom up a system whereby the congregations became part of a larger institution, with authority at all levels being the result of votes by all members. The internal governance of religious groups should become an important part of all studies of the life of those groups. There is likely to be resistance from some believers inclined to believe that only enemies of the faith will want to know about the internal governance of a group. Still I believe tendencies that favor openness are at work everywhere.

Submitted in 2011/08/12, evaluated in 2011/10/10, accepted in 2011/10/10.