

Benedict de Spinoza and E.V. Ramasamy Periyar: A Study

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Abstract

This paper aims at studying how Benedict de Spinoza and E.V. Ramasamy Periyar have responded to their socio-economic-political environment, and have produced great thoughts of freedom, equality, and social justice. Both the thinkers were powerful rationalists who viewed religion only as a political power to oppress people. They seem to be responding to oppression created by religion's social codes and have rebelled against the Establishment. Spinoza was writing against the system hiding his identity as repercussions were quite high in the Dutch Republic against texts that had content against the Establishment. Periyar was a reformer, thinker, and writer and hence, he boldly expressed his views and become the most controversial name during the twentieth century in Tamil Nadu, and his name continues to be used in controversies even now.

Keywords: Spinoza, Periyar, religion, caste, rationalism



Benedict de Spinoza (1632-1677)

Courtesy: *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*

<https://iep.utm.edu/spinoza/>

Benedict de Spinoza was born in 1632 in Amsterdam. In Hebrew, his first name was Baruch and in Latin it was Benedictus. The name means ‘blessed.’ He was from a middle class Portuguese-Jewish family. He studied in the congregation’s Talmud Torah school. In 1656, Spinoza was issued the harshest writ of herem, ban or excommunication by the Sephardic community of Amsterdam; it was never rescinded. His philosophical treatises deny the immortality of the soul and the notion of a transcendent, providential God. He claimed that the commandments of the Torah were not literally given by God. Within a few years, he left Amsterdam altogether. In 1661, he worked on the *Treatise on the Emendation of the Intellect*, an essay on philosophical method, and the *Short Treatise on God, Man and His Well-Being*. His exposition of *Descartes’s Principles of Philosophy* was the only work he published under his own name in his lifetime which was completed in 1663. By this time, he began writing his masterpiece *Ethics*. His philosophical masterpiece. He saw the principles of toleration in Holland being threatened by reactionary forces and political power of the Dutch Reformed Church and he stopped writing *Ethics*. He wrote *Theological-Political Treatise* and published anonymously. Spinoza died in 1677 and till then he was working on his “Political Treatise.” His friends published this text along with his other unpublished writings, including a *Compendium of Hebrew Grammar* (Nadler). The *Ethics* is a critique of the

traditional philosophical and theological conceptions of God, the human being and the universe, especially as these serve as the foundation of the major organized religions and their moral and ceremonial rules. What Spinoza intends to demonstrate (in the strongest sense of that word) is the truth about God, nature and especially ourselves, and the most certain and useful principles of society, religion, and the good life. Despite the great deal of metaphysics, physics, anthropology, and psychology that take up Parts One through Three, Spinoza took the crucial message of the work to be ethical in nature. It consists in showing that our happiness and well-being lie not in a life enslaved to the passions and to the transitory goods we ordinarily pursue, nor in the related unreflective attachment to the superstitions that pass as religion, but rather in the life of reason. To clarify and support these broadly ethical conclusions, however, Spinoza must first demystify the universe and show it for what it really is. This requires laying out some metaphysical foundations, the project of Part One. (Nadler)

In the ‘Ethics,’ Spinoza attempts to define the free person; he is motivated by reason; he lives to improve oneself and others; he is not a victim of hatred, greed, and envy. The free person does not worry about death much. Spinoza defines God as “VI. By God, I mean a being absolutely infinite—that is, a substance consisting of infinite attributes, of which each expresses eternal and infinite essentiality.” God is an infinite substance suggesting eternity. The definition

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Dr. S. Sridevi

Benedict de Spinoza and E.V. Ramasamy Periyar: A Study

163

is extended further by him for the concept of 'free': " VII. That thing is called free, which exists solely by the necessity of its own nature, and of which the action is determined by itself alone." (Spinoza)

An autonomous entity only can be called 'free.' The universe creates everything in a unique manner: "PROP. V. There cannot exist in the universe two or more substances having the same nature or attribute." A man is bound by his religion and is made to feel that he is a sinner and is worried how he is going to face his afterlife and this fear haunts him in reality: "PROP. LXVII. A free man thinks of death least of all things; and his wisdom is a meditation not of death but of life." God is an infinite and autonomous body and functions solely by his own laws, and men cannot create texts about this: "PROP. XVII. God acts solely by the laws of his own nature and is not constrained by anyone." (Spinoza)

Proof.—We have just shown (in Prop. xvi.), that solely from the necessity of the divine nature, or, what is the same thing, solely from the laws of his nature, an infinite number of things absolutely follow in an infinite number of ways; and we proved (in Prop. xv.), that without God nothing can be nor be conceived but that all things are in God. Wherefore nothing can exist; outside himself, whereby he can be conditioned or constrained to act. Wherefore God acts solely by the laws of his own nature and is not constrained by anyone. Q.E.D.

Corollary I.—It follows: 1. That there can be no cause which, either extrinsically or intrinsically, besides the perfection of his own nature, moves God to act.

Corollary II.—It follows: 2. That God is the sole free cause. For God alone exists by the sole necessity of his nature (by Prop. xi. and Prop. xiv., Coroll. i.), and acts by the sole necessity of his own nature, wherefore God is (by Def. vii.) the sole free cause. Q.E.D.

Note.—Others think that God is a free cause, because he can, as they think, bring it about, that those things which we have said follow from his nature—that is, which are in his power, should not come to pass, or should not be produced by him. But this is the same as if they said, that God could bring it about, that it should follow from the nature of a triangle that its three interior angles should not be equal to two right angles; or that from a given cause no effect should follow, which is absurd. (Spinoza)

Spinoza continues to say that God is a free cause and "neither intellect nor will appertain to God's nature." Many people think, he says, "that they can show, that supreme intellect and free will do appertain to God's nature." They "conceive God as actually supremely intelligent, they yet do not believe that he can bring into existence everything which he actually understands, for they think that they would thus destroy God's power." They "prefer to assert that God is

indifferent to all things, and that he creates nothing except that which he has decided, by some absolute exercise of will, to create.” Spinoza thinks differently: “from God's supreme power, or infinite nature, an infinite number of things" have “flowed” on earth “in an infinite number of ways” and may continue to “flow from the same necessity; in the same way as from the nature of a triangle it follows from eternity and for eternity, that its three interior angles are equal to two right angles.” Accordingly, the “omnipotence of God has been displayed from all eternity and will for all eternity remain in the same state of activity.” Spinoza is confident that this way of looking at the question “attributes to God an omnipotence” and he feels that this is “far more perfect.” If we look at it in the traditional way it appears that “God understands an infinite number of creatable things" and “in order to establish that God is perfect, we should be reduced to establishing at the same time, that he cannot bring to pass everything over which his power extends; this seems to be a hypothesis most absurd, and most repugnant to God's omnipotence” (Spinoza).

Further he defines the words ‘intellect’ and ‘force’ as something that “appertain to the eternal essence of God.” He argues that “these words in some significance” are “quite different” from their usual meanings. “Intellect and will,” he says, “constitute the essence of God.” They are “as far apart as the poles from the human intellect and will.” They have “nothing in common with them but the name.” (Spinoza) He goes ahead to prove this theory:

This I will prove as follows. If intellect belongs to the divine nature, it cannot be in nature, as ours is generally thought to be, posterior to, or simultaneous with the things understood, inasmuch as God is prior to all things by reason of his causality (Prop. xvi., Corollary i.). On the contrary, the truth and formal essence of things is as it is, because it exists by representation as such in the intellect of God.

Wherefore the intellect of God, in so far as it is conceived to constitute God's essence, is, in reality, the cause of things, both of their essence and of their existence. This seems to have been recognized by those who have asserted that God's intellect, God's will, and God's power, are one and the same. As, therefore, God's intellect is the sole cause of things, namely, both of their essence and existence, it must necessarily differ from them in respect to its essence, and in respect to its existence. For a cause differs from a thing it causes, precisely in the quality which the latter gains from the former. (Spinoza)

The argument is that the “intellect of God is the cause of both the essence and the existence of our intellect.” Hence, we can assume that “it is conceived to constitute the divine essence” and it “differs from our intellect: with reference to “essence” and with reference to “existence.” (Spinoza)

The most interesting statement that Spinoza brings forth is when he says: “PROP. XVIII. God is the indwelling and not the transient cause of all things” (Spinoza). He provides proof to his argument attempting a scientific method:

Proof.—All things which are, are in God, and must be conceived through God (by Prop. xv.), therefore (by Prop. xvi., Coroll i.) God is the cause of those things which are in him. This is our first point. Further, besides God there can be no substance (by Prop. xiv.), that is nothing in itself external to God. This is our second point. God, therefore, is the indwelling and not the transient cause of all things. Q.E.D. (Spinoza)

Also, he says that all the attributes of God are eternal: “PROP. XIX. God, and all the attributes of God, are eternal.” This is also followed by a proof in which he says that “God (by Def. vi.) is substance, which (by Prop. xi.) necessarily exists, that is (by Prop. vii.) existence appertains to its nature, or (what is the same thing) follows from its definition; therefore, God is eternal (by Def. viii.)” (Spinoza)

Further, by the attributes of God we must understand that which (by Def. iv.) expresses the essence of the divine substance—in other words, that which appertains to substance: that, I say, should be involved in the attributes of substance. Now eternity appertains to the nature of substance (as I have already shown in Prop. vii.); therefore, eternity must appertain to each of the attributes, and thus all are eternal. Q.E.D.

Note.—This proposition is also evident from the manner in which (in Prop. xi.) I demonstrated the existence of God; it is evident, I repeat, from that proof, that the existence of God, like his essence, is an eternal truth. Further (in Prop. xix. of my "Principles of Cartesian Philosophy"), I have proved the eternity of God, in another manner, which I need not repeat here. (Spinoza)

Another important summation of his ideas on God is “PROP. XX. The existence of God and his essence are one and the same” (Spinoza). He attaches a proof for this argument:

Proof.—God (by the last Prop.) and all his attributes are eternal, that is (by Def. viii.) each of his attributes expresses existence. Therefore, the same attributes of God which explain his eternal essence, explain at the same time his eternal existence—in other words, that which constitutes God's essence constitutes at the same time his existence. Wherefore God's existence and God's essence are one and the same. Q.E.D.

Corollary I.—Hence it follows that God's existence, like his essence, is an eternal truth.

Corollary II—Secondly, it follows that God, and all the attributes of God, are unchangeable. For if they could be changed in respect to existence, they must also be able to be changed in respect to essence—that is, obviously, be changed from true to false, which is absurd. (Spinoza)

God's attributes are unchangeable. They cannot be fixed in a narrow frame of a particular religion. God is eternal truth, like nature, and is unchanging. All ideologies regarding God are human imagination. Traditionally, scholars put this kind of thinking as atheism. A close reading of Spinoza reveals that actually he is a very strong theist, but not religious. To him, the eternal God is beyond time and space. The idea of God refers to the 'will' of the universe. It never dies; never is out of our nature; is implicit in our being.

Spinoza realized that his ideas were far too ahead of his time and hence decided to keep his ideas available only to the select few by writing it in the language of academia. As people have been convinced that there is only one way of looking at God, and that has to be done through a particular religion only, an autonomous reach to God would not have been received well by his society. He was not a social reformer like Periyar, who expressed similar views as his purpose was to reach the common man; he had to use vociferous language, bold critiques, anti-establishment views and other tough and hurting methods to bring down a colossal system that had changed so much in a few millennia that it had lost touch with its original vision and ideologies.

Spinoza's Dutch society too had a rigid social set up as it had a "national-Protestant Christianity pervading public life." In Holland, Catholics were treated as second-rate citizens and "full citizens' rights were withheld" and were "denied access to the most prestigious areas of public life"; and "Membership of the public Reformed Church was voluntary, although members of dissenting churches were barred from public office. The Republic became a haven for those persecuted elsewhere in Europe." The religious policies of the governments divided "the population into strictly defined religious communities" and these were "under strict discipline of a body of lay elders." The state was "officially Calvinist" and how it "treated its minorities and how this may have changed over time, in theory and in practice, is not systematically addressed" (Jo Spaans).

A consistent policy among magistrates everywhere was to divide and rule, to suppress the more disaffected elements in dissident groups and to favour those loyal to the existing regime. This assumes of course that the Calvinist magistrates closely monitored dissident communities. We know that they did so from the early years of the Revolt. They kept themselves informed of the comings, goings, and doings of dissident clergy. These were expected to preach obedience to lawful

authorities, civic morality, and the virtues of social harmony. Criticism of the political status quo, demanding bizarre devotions or causing schism and unrest within their communities could, and usually did, get dissident clergy banished. When schisms or conflicts occurred within tolerated communities' local magistrates often arbitrated to restore the peace. (Jo Spaans)

To infer another meaning, Holland became the centre for the religious minded. Thinkers who found this stifling had to suppress their views that were considered politically wrong, and hence Spinoza wrote not in Dutch, but in Latin so that his liberal thoughts will be available to a limited readership. The Dutch Republic emerged as a religious state that tolerated many branches of Christianity, but surely was repressive to an intellectual who desires for freedom from fixed routines and repression.

Despite being perhaps the most tolerant country in early-modern Europe—a sanctuary for free thinkers and members of religious minorities—the United Provinces were riven by religious conflict, as the Dutch sought to establish their identity after gaining independence from Spain. The confessional rifts of the seventeenth century were certainly an important part of the context in which Spinoza composed his *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus*. (Steinberg)

Spinoza was “excommunicated” from his Jewish community in Amsterdam in 1656 and “famously cautious” and published his “works in Dutch: and thereby he made them inaccessible to the “general literate public” and mostly he did not publish under his own name (Steinberg).

Holland emerged as a religious asylum for protestants, and slowly it took the position of mainstream religion and also religion by itself became the main engagement of social thinking. Spinoza and intellectuals like him found this environment oppressive and their writings show a longing for freedom to live and practice any ideology without the state's influence. This perspective is generally interpreted as atheism, though it is only a kind of intellectual response to a particular mode of believing in God. Faith has been presented by religion as an element of healing, but after some time religiosity begins to suspect any different faith. Humanity expects an individual to follow the code of a particular religion, and if one does not do so, he is branded as an atheist.

The environment in which Spinoza lived was dominated by science and academic research along with a religious atmosphere. In the Dutch Republic during the seventeenth century scholars and craftsmen mingled and art and science came together. The universities emerged as a location of teaching and empirical and scholarly research. Commerce brought in a

“congruence of scientific and mercantile values in the early modern Dutch trading communities” (Berkel).

At least in anglophone countries, Spinoza’s reputation as a political thinker is eclipsed by his reputation as a rationalist metaphysician. Nevertheless, Spinoza was a penetrating political theorist whose writings have enduring significance. In his two political treatises, Spinoza advances a number of forceful and original arguments in defense of democratic governance, freedom of thought and expression, and the subordination of religion to the state. On the basis of his naturalistic metaphysics, Spinoza also offers trenchant criticisms of ordinary conceptions of right and duty. And his account of civil organization stands as an important contribution to the development of constitutionalism and the rule of law. (Steinberg)

Benedict de Spinoza believed that “texts and authors are the products of their times and that the thoughts authors set down on the page” are “affected by, the ideological currents that accompany and allow for the satisfaction of needs in a specific era,” says Steven Nadler, one of the specialists on Spinoza studies (Nadler).



Periyar’s formative years and his budding consciousness of *untouchability* in India are well-documented in Tamil texts. He continues to inspire young intellectuals and his power to incite hatred and bring forth respect is enormous even now.

It is hard to establish the exact origins of Periyar’s atheism. ...The Madras Secular Society, which originated from the ‘Hindu Free Thought Union,’ was very active for a decade between 1878 and 1888. ... Critical debates on the Hindu religion, whether it was to be reformed or done away with altogether, took place in the last decades of the 19th century, spilling over to the 20th century. ...The

Tamil poet Bharathidasan's *Iraniyan Allathu Inaiyattru Veeran* (Iraniyan, *The Hero Without Parallel*) was a popular play in 1934 that revered the asura Hiranyakashipu as a noble figure and saw Narasimha, the man-lion avatar of the Hindu god Vishnu, as a deceitful being. In the play "The asura is seen as representing the once-subjugated Dravidians whereas the god and his avatara are nothing but a hoax" (Kaali 2018, p. 47). Similarly, several plays were also composed by pro-Dravidian writers glorifying Ravana, the asura king and prime antagonist of the Hindu epic Ramayana, despite attempts at state-censorship. Periyar operated in such a socio-political scenario...Chidambaranar speculates that two local personalities might have influenced Periyar's approach to religion and politics. One was Maruthaiya Pillai, a Tamil scholar, a strong opponent of caste, rituals, and religion, who also belonged to Periyar's hometown Erode and was known as a blunt and bold intellectual (Chidambaranar 2016, p. 92). The other was Kaivolyasamiyar, a fierce critic of *Brahmanism* (ibid.). Periyar also registered with the Anti-Religious Propaganda Office in Moscow (Pandian 2007, p. 192). On his return, Periyar published translated works advocating atheism and socialism like *The Communist Manifesto*, Bhagat Singh's "Why I am an Atheist," Bertrand Russell's "Why I am not a Christian," Lenin's works on religion, Robert Ingersoll's essays and so on (Venkatachalapathy 2018, p. 9). (Manoharan)

Periyar visited many countries and argued that in the USA, England, and Germany people have begun groups that do not believe in God; they have begun to write books on this ideology and circulate them as books; scholars have understood that religion blocks human progress and societal development; even before 2000 years sages have expounded the fact that wise men do not need God; this is written by them in *vedic* texts; wisdom also has been associated with religious faith now-a-days, and hence all progressive ideas are caught in the web of religious faith; only if there is oil in the lamp the wick will burn, and similarly only if there is original thinking is applied, we will understand the real truth (Periyar 153).

God has no physical qualities. He is a 'beyond.' He is an autonomous entity. He is beyond philosophy, truth, mental qualities, power and human nature. He is eternal. (Periyar 152)

We are reminded of Spinoza's definition of God. The philosopher has attempted to give an empirical definition to the concept of God, and the reformer does not delve much into intellectual discussions. He gets to the point straight and tells people that a God cannot have human qualities. We cannot attribute a mind to God in the style of human living. God is a 'beyond,' and he goes beyond all thinking processes. Hence, we need not be controlled by one religion, and we need not be controlled by rules that have been created by certain religious groups. God is a totally different matter altogether. Thus, religion for Periyar, becomes a political tool to control, organize, suppress, or oppress the common man. Instead of explaining his intellectual position in objective language, he chooses illustrations from live, practical life and every one of these illustrations have been picked up for building hatred against him. When we

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Dr. S. Sridevi

Benedict de Spinoza and E.V. Ramasamy Periyar: A Study

170

compare the cautious Spinoza with him, we realize how the purposes of both these individuals have decided their methodologies of writing, and publishing. Periyar wanted to ‘uproot’ a banyan tree and used all types of cutting processes which brought a lot of pain to lots of established ideologies. The paradigm shift did not take place easily in Tamil Nadu and this history of rationalism in Tamil Nadu is a record of the change that came over South India with the powerful and acid attacks on traditional practices that oppressed fellow humanity.

God cannot be understood by thinking. He is beyond thoughts emanating from our consciousness. If we bring the idea of God within a consciousness, a language and a region, then we will not be able to understand him. Approaching God as a human being will not pave the way to the development of intelligence and wisdom. (Periyar 153)

The codes of religion are communicated to people by its proponents spending lots of wealth. Books of various types are written – stories of various types, mythologies, rules and regulations and other forms of literary works that slowly feed people into believing a particular religion. The intelligentsia is surely aware of this fact – how religious literature is produced in huge amounts and sold – but is not really bothered about it; people do not worry how such publications will affect the society in the long run. Religion is marketed by people who are insincere and are money minded (Periyar 154).

Religious poets have written vehemently against other religions and have sung to God asking him to kill people belonging to other religions (Periyar 155). Such texts are breeding religious disharmony and they will destroy society’s peace and civic order. Writers and poets need an ethical stand and universality; they cannot write against other races, or other religions and other people as well. Contemporary writing is very conscious about these things especially after Edward Said wrote *Orientalism* (1978) and *Culture and Imperialism* (1993). Edward Said explained in detail how Aeschylus presented the Athenian hatred for Persia in his play *The Persians*, and how it created certain prejudices in the Greek audience and generations of readers. Jane Austen, Joseph Conrad, E.M. Forster, and Rudyard Kipling also consciously or unconsciously had written about their personal prejudices which influenced all the people who read them and put seeds of European imperialism into their thoughts. From this perspective, Periyar’s arguments are very relevant, as a writer has to be conscious about world peace. But the period in which Aeschylus and others wrote did not have globalised economies, and those writers did not have global consciousnesses which a modern writer has by default. We have to contextualize Periyar’s writings too as a response to his society, just as the creative writers all over the world have responded to the needs of their socio-political environment.

People all over the world have behaved like unthinking fools; they have been superstitious, and conducted themselves like savages; religious fundamentalism is found in all

countries. Every religious leader interprets religion in a different way; in course of time these interpretations themselves become separate religions; a common man, if he searches for God in the Vedas, he will not be able to find him there. The Vedas talk about the five energies of earth – space, water, air, light, and earth. Later each group of people created a god for each of these natural elements and slowly we notice the birth of religions (Periyar 155). The universe continues to exist in the same old manner, without being affected by any of the manmade renaming and classifications.

Thinkers including Spinoza and social reformers and political activists like Periyar have responded to the paradigm shift in society brought by science and democracy along with their regional socio-political-religious environment, and all texts either oral or written do have a historical beginning and are ultimately decided or even created by a particular space and time. Rationalism has been strengthened with empirical research in universities and the emerging world travel, commerce, and human migration.

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