

Thinking like 'blessed' philosopher Spinoza

Highland Views

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Guest columnist

Baruch or Benedictus? The Dutch philosopher Spinoza went by both names during his lifetime (1632-1677). He has been called other names, including 'satan's disciple,' but also a 'secular saint.' According to one historian, Spinoza's book, 'Theological-Political Treatise,' was received by some religious authorities as 'a book forged in hell ... by the devil himself.' Yet, since his time, generations of reasonable people have welcomed both the man and his ideas, however much he was judged an infidel and heretic.

Born into a Jewish family in Amsterdam, even as a young boy Baruch was asking uncomfortable questions of his Jewish teachers. His father Michael, a Portuguese Jewish merchant, wanted his son to be a rabbi, but Baruch pushed the limits of acceptable beliefs. Even though he studied at religious school and outwardly practiced Judaism, there was: 'a growing sense of alienation' that emerged 'from his independence of mind and exposure to wider ideas through his extensive reading and his growing acquaintance with people' beyond the restrictive boundaries of his community (Ian Buruma, 'Spinoza: Freedom's Messiah').

His interest in science and religion expanded as he was influenced by heretical Christians, humanists and Stoic thinkers. While some Jews were under pressure to convert to Christianity, Baruch

resisted joining any religious group. But his friendships with Christians and association with heretical ideas landed him in hot water with Jewish authorities. In 1656 he was thrown out of the community, cursed as a heretic. The harsh judgment meant his family could have no contact with him and his writings were forbidden. Spinoza's response sounds like a shrug: 'They do not force me to do anything that I would not have done of my own accord ... but since they want it that way, I enter gladly on the path that is opened to me ...'

He was already beginning to write down his radical views, a mixture of science, religion and philosophy. One of his most enduring ideas was that God and Nature are one in the same. As biographer Ian Buruma explains: 'He had severed God from any transcendence ... the entire universe *is* God.' So he wasn't an atheist, but he still held a kind of reverence for the natural world including humans. For some reason, perhaps to fit in better with Dutch culture, he changed his name to Benedictus, 'Blessed,' though Baruch means the same in Hebrew.

Similar to some of us who left the faith of our family, Spinoza spent his remaining years learning from other thinkers, reflecting and writing on religious themes and biblical theology. He wrote more respectfully of Jesus than the Hebrew Prophets, though he offered a summary that sounds like both: 'The worship of God and obedience to him consists only in Justice and Loving-kindness, or in love toward one's neighbor.' We can hear echoes of this innovative notion in the writings of other radical and rational thinkers like Thomas Paine, who wrote over 100 years later: 'I believe in the equality of man; and I believe that religious duties consist in doing justice, loving mercy, and endeavoring to make

our fellow-creatures happy' ('The Age of Reason').

Nearly 100 years after Paine wrote those words, Robert Ingersoll offered his personal creed that included the statement: 'Justice is the only worship' and the way to happiness is to 'make others so.' The simplicity of these views, drawn from the long line of inventive thinkers from the Hebrew prophets through Jesus, Spinoza, Paine, Ingersoll and up to our time, is clear and profound. To sum up religious faith in such a concise way closely threads together with a secular humanistic worldview.

Buruma writes of Spinoza: 'Freedom of thought was his main preoccupation.' Later, the biographer expands on this: 'The most important freedom for Spinoza was the freedom to use reason, to investigate nature, as well as human affairs...The free [person] is one who has learned to understand nature, his own and the nature of all things around him.'

Like his split name, Baruch/Benedictus Spinoza walked between worlds, yet actually became a significant voice for a worldview that questions the relevance of much religious belief, and sharply challenges traditional theology. This is one reason, as Buruma states: 'revisiting the life of a freethinker in the turbulent and contentious seventeenth century could help us come to grips with our own censorious time of dangerous political polarization.' Thankfully, this Dutch writer left us an example of standing up and speaking out, to an often hostile culture, as a fearless freethinker.

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