

# *Superstition, Sedition, and Freedom in Spinoza's Res Publica*

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*There is a tension in Spinoza between a definition of superstition that makes it inherently seditious (and therefore subject to the limitations that Spinoza sets for freedom of speech) and his justification for freedom of speech in Theological Political Treatise. Here, I will explain the tension based on an interpretation of superstition I have defended in previous work; then I will show how Spinoza was aware that suppression of superstition vis-à-vis its being seditious may promote, rather than prevent, instability. Finally, I will explore how Spinoza's tenets of universal faith are attempts to inoculate a society against the spread of superstitious beliefs and offer a few suggestions on a secular alternative to Spinoza's tenets of faith.*

Keywords: *Spinoza, Philosophy, Ethics, Religion, Politics.*

## 1. *Superstition*

In 2017, I argued that Spinoza's use of the term "superstition" in TTP<sup>1</sup> is quite unique, as opposed to the use of the term in *Ethics*<sup>2</sup>. In the latter, the opposition is between superstition and true religion; in the former, Spinoza defines "superstition" in political terms, as the kind of religious attitude that undermines allegiance to one's government. As I have shown, scholarly interpretations of Spinoza's concept of superstition focus on epistemic or psychological features: the basic idea is that superstitious attitudes consist of false beliefs about the Deity accompanied by antisocial passions. The problem is that this reading is not consistent with TTP: false beliefs about the deity, and even intolerance, are praised as piety when conducive to obedience to the law, as shown in Spinoza's discussion of Moses' leadership in TTP 17. Even Spinoza's own tenets of universal faith in TTP 14 contain untruths, such as the appeal to the notion of God

<sup>1</sup> From now on, TTP. All citations from Spinoza are from *Spinoza Complete Works*, trans. by S. Shirley. Edited, with Introduction and Notes, by M.L. Morgan, Indianapolis, Hackett Academic Publishing, 2002; from now on Shirley, followed by page number.

<sup>2</sup> F. di Poppa, *Diagnosing Superstition: Superstition and Piety in Spinoza's Political Philosophy*, in M. Adams, Z. Biene, U. Feest, J. Sullivan (eds.), *Eppur si muove: Doing History and Philosophy of Science with Peter Machamer*, The Western Ontario Series in Philosophy of Science, vol 81, Cham., Springer, 2017.