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The Reception of Spinoza's Theological-Political Treatise in the Islamic Republic of Iran

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Abstract: In the form of a case study and based upon novel material about the reception of Spinoza's Theological–Political Treatise (TTP) in Iran, this paper studies issues with the interactions among political, theological and philosophical ideas in the reception of Spinoza's TTP. The paper starts with the first Iranian encounters with Spinoza's philosophy in the Qajar era in the nineteenth century and then focuses on the reception of the TTP in the period after the 1979 Islamic Revolution. The first translation of the TTP was prepared in the 1990s by Muḥsin Jahāngīrī, but he withheld the manuscript from being published. I discuss the arguments that led him to withhold the publication of his translation; in this context, it will be important to consider the tumultuous religious and political debates, and broader questions as to the legitimacy of political power will also prove relevant. The first doctoral dissertation in Persian about the TTP will be described, followed by a description of a digital translation of the twentieth chapter of the TTP, which was published after the 2009 election protests. The article ends with discussing translator Ali Ferdowsi's motivation to produce the first complete Persian translation of the TTP, published in Tehran in 2017. In conclusion, it will be discussed to which extent the theocratic political context in the country caused interest in the TTP.

Keywords: Spinoza; Theological–Political Treatise; Iran; Shia; Qur'ān; chain murders; democracy; Judaism; Enlightenment; freedom of thinking



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1. Introduction: A Historical Encounter between Spinoza and Iran

Numerous publications describe the translation of Spinoza's Theological–Political Treatise in Western languages and its reception in Western countries, but the ways in which Spinoza's 'second masterpiece' has been studied in Persian remains largely unknown. The reception of Spinoza's TTP in Iran can illustrate the entanglement of the European Enlightenment and the Middle East. Iranians of different backgrounds and political orientations started to read the TTP in the 1990s; that is, after two important dates in recent Iranian history; the 1979 Islamic Revolution and the Iran–Iraq war that ended in 1988. It seems the downfall of the Shah did not influence the reception of Spinoza directly. At first, the reading remained in line with the view that was developed throughout the twentieth century in Iran, namely that of the Dutch philosopher as a metaphysician that could be understood through the lens of Islamic doctrines. In the twenty-first century, however, explicit political readings emerged and the TTP became more prevalent and was studied with the context of the Enlightenment in mind.

The first Iranian encounter with Spinoza dates back more than 150 years to the French romantic race theorist Joseph Arthur Comte de Gobineau, who twice worked as a French diplomat in the Qajar Iran, first as a chargé d'affaires (1856–1858) and then as ambassador (1862–1863). During his stay in Iran, Gobineau gave a copy of Descartes' *Discours de la méthode*—the first translation of Descartes' book into Persian—to an Iranian Jewish *Hakham* (wise man) named Mullā Lālihzār-i Hamidānī. In so far as we know, he was, probably, the first Iranian scholar to have expressed an interest in Spinoza's philosophy. Gobineau believed that the Iranian people needed the philosophy of Descartes more than the philosophies of Spinoza or Hegel because, unlike Cartesianism, they are

‘oriental’ and offer the Persian scholars nothing new [1]. Spinoza and Hegel are much closer to the thought of the peoples of ‘Le pays du soleil,’ Gobineau wrote [2] (p. 139); [3] (p. 135).¹ Instead, he wished to introduce ‘Western’ modernity to Iranians, which above all is represented by Cartesian rationalism and dualism, because these notions were unknown to the Orient, according to Gobineau.

Spinoza’s works were discussed in greater detail in the twentieth century, which mainly coincided with the Pahlavi dynasty (1925–1979). In 1931, Prime Minister Muḥammad ‘Alī Furūghī (1878–1942) authored a Persian-language history of European philosophy in three volumes titled *The History of Wisdom in Europe* (*Sayr-i hikmat dar Ūrūpā*). Forty are dedicated to Spinoza in the second volume, in which the TTP is mentioned only once without any more detail. After the biography, Furūghī introduces Spinoza’s thought, based on the *Ethics* and the *Treatise on the Emendation of the Intellect*. In other texts of the same period, by Mullā ‘Abdullāh-i Zanjānī (1891–1941) and Abul Hassan-i Sha‘arānī (1902–1973), Spinoza is characterized as a Sufi-philosopher whose ‘pantheist’ ideas are comparable to previous Islamic mystics, such as Al-Hallāj and Ibn ‘Arabī. In the Pahlavi period, however, there are no signs of Iranians paying heed to Spinoza’s political and theological philosophy. Even Western philosophers working in Iran, such as Henry Corbin, emphasized the metaphysical nature of Spinoza’s thought in comparative studies such as the comparison of Spinoza and Mullā Sadrā.² The first Persian translation of one of Spinoza’s works was of the *Ethics*. It was completed in 1955 by an engineer named Manūchihr Dāvārī. He translated the work from a Russian version, as he writes in the foreword, which gives no further information. In addition to Spinoza’s biography, the five pages of the translator’s foreword also include the reflections of his own on the book. The translator writes about the God of Spinoza: ‘The God that Spinoza introduces to us in the *Ethics* is far more logical and is superior to the one taught by most religions, and the method that Spinoza proposes is a very practical and rational, and is free from any superstition’. Using the *Ethics* IVp37s2 the translator adds: ‘One of the pristine aspects of Spinoza’s thought in the book is that, unlike the philosophers who claim that one must fight the emotions by the weapon of reason, Spinoza proves that reason cannot suppress the emotions and affects. Consequently, it results in a clear theory of state that proves that the idea of establishing a utopia is utterly baseless, and far from the facts’ [7] (pp. 3–4).³

In the first few decades after the Islamic Revolution, there began a wave of professional translations of works of Western philosophy into Persian. At first the new regime did not counter/ban Western philosophy. Spinoza is no exception to this rule. The *Ethics* (1985) [9] was translated first, followed by the *Treatise on the Emendation of the Intellect* (1995) [10]. An *unpublished* translation of the TTP was completed by Muḥsin Jahāngīrī in the 1990s. Other translations followed, e.g., chapter eight of the *Theological-Political Treatise* on the inauthenticity of the Pentateuch (1999)—in the following section, I will explain the strange choice for this little-known chapter [11], *The Principles of the Philosophy of René Descartes* (2003) [12], the twentieth chapter of the *Theological-Political Treatise* (2009) [13], the *Political Treatise* (2014) [14] and finally, in 2017, the whole of the *Theological-Political Treatise* [15]. It is notable that the TTP, translated by Ali Ferdowsi, is the last work by Spinoza to appear in Persian.

¹ ‘Mais, toutefois, les deux hommes que les philosophes de ma connaissance ont la plus grande soif de connaître, c’est Spinoza et Hegel; on le comprend sans peine. Ces deux esprits sont des esprits asiatiques et leurs théories touchent par tous les points aux doctrines connues et goûtées dans le pays du soleil. Il est vrai que, pour cette raison même, elles ne sauraient introduire là des éléments vraiment nouveaux’. Seidel [4] (p. 339); and Manāfzāda [5] (pp. 105–107) also discuss this section of Gobineau’s book.

² Notwithstanding the title of this chapter, (Did Spinoza adapt his philosophy from Mullā Sadrā?), Corbin himself does not believe that Spinoza took his philosophy from Mullā Sadrā, see [6].

³ ‘How it can happen that men who are necessarily subject to affects (by P4C), inconstant and changeable (by P33) should be able to make one another confident and have trust in one another, is clear from P7 and IIP39. No affect can be restrained except by an affect stronger than and contrary to the affect to be restrained, and everyone refrains from doing harm out of timidity regarding a greater harm. By this law, therefore, Society can be maintained, 21 provided it appropriates to itself the right everyone has of avenging himself, and of judging concerning good and evil. In this way Society has the power to prescribe a common rule of life, to make laws, and to maintain them—not by reason, which cannot restrain the affects (by P17S), but by threats. This Society, maintained by laws and the power it has of preserving itself, is called a State, and those who are defended by its law, Citizens’ [8] (p. 519). I adopt the system of the *Studia Spinozana* in referring to the *Ethics*.

This article is based on translations of Spinoza's works as well as Persian academic articles and books on the TTP. Further sources are newspaper essays and interviews with the translators, which I conducted in 2020–2021. Two major periods will be distinguished. Until 2009 the initial comparative reading of Spinoza, outlined above, dominated Iranian TTP studies. We find this view also in the first doctoral dissertation on the *Risālah Ilāhī-Sīyāsī*, as the TTP is named in Persian. It was defended in 1995 and published as a book in 2000. In the same period, the translator of the *Ethics*, Muḥsin Jahāngīrī, also translated the TTP, but he never published it. These thinkers construed Spinoza through an Islamic lens. To date, this reading of Spinoza is reflected in course syllabi on the history of philosophy at Iranian universities. The translation of the twentieth chapter of the TTP—commissioned by the Abdorrahman Boroumand Foundation—inaugurated a new reading. The translation was started before 2009 but was published after the protests that followed the contested 2009 election. Spinoza's political views gained in popularity in this period, mostly as a reaction against the Iranian theocratic government led by Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, who decreed the Islamization of the humanities in 2009.⁴ Since reformist governments promoted Western-style education, after the election and the protests that followed it, the Iranian authorities wanted to turn away from Western-style education to one more deeply rooted in Islamic Shia beliefs and values. To achieve that goal, a larger proportion of humanities curricula had to be devoted to the study of Shia Islam, while religious education also occupied a significant status both in curricular and extracurricular activities. This theocratic assault on the humanities, however, only increased demands for freedom of inquiry. In the following, I reconstruct this path to Spinoza and, in particular, the growing popularity of the TTP.

2. A Book Not to Be Given to the Vulgar

The *Ethics* was newly translated into Persian by Muḥsin Jahāngīrī in 1985. It was reprinted twelve years later when Mohammad Khatami became president. The latter's election in 1997 marks the beginning of the Reform Period (Iṣlāḥāt)⁵, which initiated a second wave of translations of philosophical works into Persian. Spinoza's works were translated and soon translations of Western commentaries on his philosophy appeared as well.⁶ This wave became possible due to the low cost of paper and the popularity of the idea of a Dialogue Among Civilizations (Guft-u-gū-yi Tamaddun-hā). Western philosophy became popular because it supported the idea of civil rights in Iran, combined with widespread protest against arbitrary governmental action. At that time, there were many protests against the regime's notorious chain murders of intellectuals and seizure of newspapers. Although the reformation project ultimately failed, during his presidency, Khatami, who himself had studied Western philosophy, supported intellectuals and stimulated them to redefine and adopt European Enlightenment thinking.

It is in this Reform Period that Muḥsin Jahāngīrī finished the translation of the TTP and gave it the title *Treatise on Religion and Government (Risālah-yi Dīn va Dawlat)*, but he left it unpublished. According to his pupils⁷, Jahāngīrī's religiosity prevented him from giving it to a publisher and thereby making the book available to a wider public. Before I examine this and other explanations, I will outline the translator's life and thought.

Muḥsin Jahāngīrī was born in 1929 in Qazvin to a rich and religious family. After some basic schooling, he left for Qom and Isfahan with the desire to learn Islamic religious sciences ('Ulūm al-dīn) such as fiqh, ḥadīth and kalām pursued by the Islamic scholarly class. At this time, he was taught by Shia jurists ('ulamā) and achieved a great command of the Arabic language and became strongly attached to Islamic mysticism. He continued

⁴ In 2009, and at the same time as the widespread protests in Iran, the current supreme leader of Iran, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, ordered the purification or cleansing of the humanities, 'Teaching many humanities in universities causes disbelief in God and Islamic teachings'.

⁵ Islamic Republic of Iran's 'reform era' lasted from 1997 to 2005—the length of Khatami's two terms in office. On the structure of power in Iran after Revolution, read more in [16].

⁶ For instance, in 1996 Muḥammad Hassan Luṭfī translated the Karl Jaspers's Spinoza, in *Die grossen Philosophen* into Persian [17]; published by Tarḥ-i Nu in Tehran.

⁷ Call interviews with Yūsuf Nawzuhūr and Muṣṭafā Shahrāeīnī in October and November 2020.

his seminary schooling through the upper Islamic grades (Ijtahād) and, thus, became a trained Shia jurist. Although Jahāngīrī studied Islamic philosophy, he was also interested in Western philosophy and, after finishing high school in 1954, entered the department of philosophy at the University of Tehran where he attended the courses of Seyyed Hossein Nasr, Abul Hassan-i Sha'arānī, Yaḥyá Maḥdawi, and Henry Corbin.

As a master's project, Jahāngīrī translated Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* and received praise for it from his supervisor, Nasr.⁸ It was not published, apparently on account of his scrupulousness in accurately translating Kant's terms. In 1972, Jahāngīrī completed his doctoral dissertation entitled 'A Comparative Study of Ibn 'Arabī's Unity of Being and Spinoza's Monism' under the supervision of Sayyid Aḥmad Fardīd and the advice of Seyyed Hossein Nasr. From 1975 onwards, Jahāngīrī taught graduate courses at the University of Tehran such as 'logic and methodology,' 'Western early modern philosophy from Bacon to Hume,' 'Theoretical Islamic Mysticism' for undergraduate students and 'Descartes' Philosophy' or 'Spinoza's Philosophy'.⁹ Unhindered by the new rulers he continued to teach Western philosophy after the Islamic Revolution.

Jahāngīrī's works can be categorized into two types; first, those related to Islamic philosophy, mysticism and kalām, and second, the works related to Western philosophy. Of the former type, his book on Ibn 'Arabī (1980) is considered high-standard research and has also been translated into Arabic and Urdu [18]. An example of the second category is *Francis Bacon: The Man and His Work* (1990) written for the course 'Early modern history of philosophy'. His compilations of Western philosophy were mainly about the early modern age. Jahāngīrī also wrote a three-volume Persian book entitled *A Collection of Essays* [19], with the third volume (2011) dedicated to Western philosophy. His last work was entitled *Three Western Philosophers: Bacon, Hobbes, Spinoza* (2019), and updated the two previous books.

After the *Ethics* and the TTP, Jahāngīrī translated *The Principles of the Philosophy of René Descartes* in 2003. He was celebrated in 2002 as a prominent figure in Spinoza and Ibn 'Arabī studies during the second festival of Immortal Figures (Chihrahā-yi Māndigār)¹⁰, before his official retirement in 2008 and passing away in 2019. According to his students, politically he was a conservative figure who never overtly supported a political party or faction and always insisted that scholars should adhere to religious principles, and that philosophy and wisdom should be separated from politics.

Spinoza was already part of Jahāngīrī's 1972 doctoral dissertation, which he wrote in three years.¹¹ He was fascinated by Spinoza's behavior, life and devotion to philosophy and always insisted that Spinoza was an outspoken and honest philosopher whose outer self and inner self were in harmony, and whose life reflected his thought and philosophy. Spinoza, according to Jahāngīrī, is rightly considered as one of the most important post-Renaissance European philosophers. In spite of being free from all revealed religious

⁸ 'After Dr. Nasr had read the translation, he told me it was very good but too much. I hope to publish this book after editing'. See the interview Mehr News Agency with Jahāngīrī.

⁹ Additionally, several other universities in Tehran, including Shahid Beheshti University (1973–1975).

¹⁰ Chihrahā-yi Māndigār is the title of an annual festival held in cooperation with Iranian academies to celebrate the leading scientific, cultural and artistic figures of the country. See [20], See also [21].

¹¹ See [22] (pp. 203–204). See also, an interview with Jahāngīrī conducted by Mehr news agency on 15 November 2007. 'I consider Spinoza the deepest and most accurate philosopher after the Renaissance. Descartes, predecessor and according to Spinoza, the brightest star of that era, was more knowledgeable than Spinoza, but Spinoza was more philosophical than Descartes. Descartes wanted to develop a philosophy based on the modern sciences of his time, which was as far as possible compatible with, or at least not opposed to, the principles of Christianity. Thus, he was always concerned and not free in his philosophical reflections. However, Spinoza had no worries, he thought completely freely and independently, his philosophical thoughts were only based on the principles and findings of human reason, and neither the Torah of Moses nor the Gospel of Jesus has any sway on him, so to speak. Although Descartes seemed more religious than him, I think he is morally superior not only to Descartes but to all Western philosophers. According to Bertrand Russell, he is the most noble and beloved great philosopher of the West. Among post-Renaissance European philosophers, I do not know any philosopher who is as fascinated by philosophy as he is. Spinoza devoted his whole life to philosophy and thought of nothing but philosophy: neither did he marry, nor amass wealth, nor seek a position. Unlike Descartes, he was indifferent to courts and courtiers and did not even accept a university professor position. He loved philosophy undeniably and was so preoccupied with scientific thought and philosophical reflections that he seemed to have forgotten everything else, so that once when he was in Rijnsburg did not even leave house for three months'; see Jahāngīrī's foreword to the *Ethics* [9] (p. 13). Frederick Pollock and Will Durant are two scholars whose works Jahāngīrī referred to.

doctrines, Jahāngīrī believed that Spinoza should be studied by Islamic philosophers, because the Dutch philosopher was a like-minded soul and had himself, in a different way, benefited from Muslim thinkers. According to Jahāngīrī, through Maimonides' *Guide for the Perplexed* and also through Thomas Aquinas, Spinoza knew al-Fārābī, Avicenna, al-Ghazālī and Averroes. To give a concrete example of how Jahāngīrī compared terms within Spinoza's philosophy with Islamic kalām; of the scholium of *Ethics* Part 2: Proposition 3, Jahāngīrī writes that it is totally consistent with Ash'arism, remarking that 'most likely Spinoza learned it from "The Guide for the Perplexed" [20] (p. 75); [22] (p. 203).

Despite his admiration for Spinoza, Jahāngīrī left his TTP translation unpublished. In a conversation at the beginning of a book published to honor him (2007), he explained this remarkable decision, saying 'I do not consider the publication of the TTP translation in the interest of myself and society' [23] (p. 21). About his personal interest, his pupils unanimously say that Jahāngīrī always asked God to forgive his sins in his classes, especially for translating the TTP, because he 'feared being the incarnation of the Qur'ān's verse about the fate of those who broke the covenant with God'.¹² If students showed interest in the translation, his response was that they should mind their own business. Although Jahāngīrī states that Spinoza was a deist who believed in the existence of God, he also realizes that Spinoza did not practice any religious laws (sharī'a) himself, 'however, he advised others for going to church and practicing prayer. This is a moderate deism that can be found in Spinoza'.¹³ Jahāngīrī justified his decision not to send the translated TTP to the press, by citing Spinoza's preface, arguing that the public should not gain access to it.¹⁴ For Jahāngīrī, the TTP interprets the Torah rationally and philosophically, which implies 'that Spinoza expresses opinions that are not compatible with common religious beliefs' and would arouse the emotions of the masses. Jahāngīrī was anxious, especially, that Spinoza's critique of religion would be applied to Islam's holy and revered texts.¹⁵

Another reason for not making the book available to the public is the sensitive nature of Spinoza's argument in a period of tumultuous religious and political debates on the very idea of the religious state. The question as to whether ayatollahs should rule at all, was highly controversial. So, it is not hard to imagine that the publication of an Iranian TTP would add fuel to this kind of fiery debate and probably carry it to an Iran-wide audience as even far less radical religious debates had become immensely popular. A famous participant in these debates was Abdolkarim Soroush, who denounced Islamic government. Soroush was a teacher of young Iranian scholars who were inspired by Karl Popper's fallibilism and political ideas.¹⁶ They were more interested in the form of rulership than in discussing who would be fit or unfit to lead a nation. Although Soroush has not written a text on the TTP and its criticism of priestcraft, we may in part infer his view of Spinoza's attitude towards the concept of prophecy from a Persian lecture in Paris, which also clarifies his ideas on revelation, the Qur'ān, etc. He said:

Almost all Muslim philosophers after al-Fārābī were inspired by his idea that prophets are different from philosophers. My own opinion more or less has been based on al-Fārābī's attitude. Of course, you can find the reflection of these ideas in Spinoza as well. Someone who wrote an article criticizing me said that 'Soroush has taken his words from Spinoza'. Spinoza took his words from Maimonides who took his words from al-Fārābī. The fact is that if someone does

¹² Interviews with Yūsuf Nawzuhūr and Muṣṭafā Shahrāeīnī, October and November 2020; Qur'ān 3: 193: reference to translation used 'Our Lord!, we have heard The call of one calling (Us) to faith, 'Believe ye In the Lord,' Additionally, we Have believed. Our Lord! Forgive us our sins, Blot out from us of Our iniquities, and take To Thyself our souls In the company of the righteous'.

¹³ See a short documentary on Jahāngīrī's life, February 2012, prepared by Society for the National Heritage of Iran.

¹⁴ See the interview Mehr news agency with Jahāngīrī, 'As Spinoza himself noted in the Preface to the book, he wrote it for philosophers who have the power to understand the meaning and non-philosophers he advised to refrain from reading it. I also do not consider it advisable at the moment to publish the translation that makes it available to the public'.

¹⁵ Eventually, as will be seen later on, he said so to a student who wanted to write a thesis on the TTP. It is interesting to know Ali Ferdowsi, on the contrary, translates the whole book in the hope the Shai clerics will read it.

¹⁶ For an analysis of Popper's political ideas, see [24].

not know these roots, he will wrongly attribute these ideas to Spinoza, since Spinoza took them from al-Fārābī.¹⁷

These words of Soroush, however, were criticized by other Iranian intellectuals including Ali Ferdowsi, the translator of the TTP. He argued that Soroush did not consider what is new and radical in Spinoza. 'Fārābī, Ibn Tufail, Avicenna, even Khayyam, understand philosophy and theology as equivalent; two paths that produce the same knowledge about all things. For Spinoza, philosophy produces truths that theology cannot. Theology is an imposter, not an alternative to philosophy'. In reaction to Soroush' Popperian ideas Ferdowsi held that Soroush does not understand Popper either, 'otherwise he would have been unable to make that nonsensical statement that Khomeini is the greatest leader Iran has ever had since its inception by Cyrus the Great millennia ago! Soroush missed the most crucial point in Popper, the pertinence of a judgement to a proper context or function'.¹⁸ Ferdowsi refers to Soroush's recent controversial interview in which he said 'Khomeini was the most literate and popular leader in the history of Iran'.¹⁹

Soroush's view, on government, however, was opposed by Shia jurists, during the 1990s, above all by ayatollah Mohammad-Taqi Mesbah-Yazdi²⁰, who defended the Islamic Republic's doctrine of the absolute political guardianship of an Islamic jurist, being the lieutenant of God.²¹

During these controversies, publishing a translation of the TTP would have endangered Jahāngīrī. He was certainly aware of the risks of publishing books that discussed sensitive matters, as he was living in a time of regime-orchestrated assassinations of translators and intellectuals. Mohammad-Ja'far Pouyandeh, translator of Lukács's *History and Class Consciousness*, was last seen alive leaving his office at four o'clock in the afternoon of 8 December 1998. His body was discovered 11 December in the Shahriar district of Karaj, south of Tehran, and he appeared to have been strangled. Majid Sharif, translator of *The Will to Power*²², was found dead on the side of a road in November 1998. Mohammad Mokhtari, writer, poet, and colleague of Pouyandeh in the Iranian Writers Association left his house for shopping, but a month later, in December 1998, his corpse was found on the estate of a cement factory. These and many other intellectuals were assassinated in the so-called 'chain murders'. The first philosopher killed by the regime, however, was perhaps the Baha'i professor 'Alī Murād Dāvūdī who was Jahāngīrī's former colleague. During a wave of persecution of Bahā'īs, he was kidnapped on his walk to Laleh Park in the heart of the capital on an afternoon in November 1979 and never returned home, presumably one of the first victims of the emerging Islamic Republic.²³

Yet, Jahāngīrī took the trouble to translate Spinoza's disturbing book, he saw in the TTP a guide to read the *Ethics* and found in it a device to understand its technical terms and the concept of 'method'. In addition to the translator's foreword and his footnotes to the *Ethics*, in varied works one will find Jahāngīrī's account of the TTP such as the chapter 'Spinoza's Political and Social Thoughts' in *Three Philosophers* and in two articles, 'The Life of Spinoza (in two parts)' and 'Spinoza's methods: Experience'.²⁴ For example, in order to clarify the concept of evil in Spinoza, Jahāngīrī makes use of chapter two of the TTP where 'the melancholy of Saul is called 'an evil spirit from God', i.e., a most profound

¹⁷ See the Persian lecture by Abdolkarim Soroush in Paris 'Guftan az Hiss-i Nahān', transcribed on (drsoroush.com) accessed on 12 May 2021.

¹⁸ The written English response, 15 April 2021.

¹⁹ See YouTube (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fXtRmu8EoZg>) accessed on 2 March 2019.

²⁰ He has been named as 'having encouraged or issued Fatwā, or religious orders' for the 1998 chain murders assassinations of five Iranian dissidents. See, Akbar Ganji, The 'Master Key' in Chain Murders (iran-press-service.com) accessed on 12 May 2021.

²¹ Ironically, Soroush himself, was once one of the earlier fans of orthodox movements led by the Ayatollah Khomeini to the degree that he was one of the key decision-making members in the Cultural Revolution council, which after the 1979 revolution closed universities for three years (1980–1983) and, after reopening, banned many books and purged thousands of students and lecturers from the schools.

²² Daryoush Ashouri, Iranian translator of Nietzsche's works, considers the Majid Sharif version fluent and authentic. Call conducted on January 2021.

²³ 'Alī Murād Dāvūdī was professor in ancient philosophy at the University of Tehran. One of his most enduring works is a Persian book called *The Theory of Reason in the Peripatetic School: From Aristotle to Avicenna*, which still is one of the main sources for philosophy students in Iran.

²⁴ Many articles of *A Collection of Essays* are elaborations of publications that had appeared previously in different Iranian Journals. For example, see [25].

melancholy' [26] (p. 22); and chapter four where '... we ought to define and explain things by their proximate causes. ... we are also ignorant ... of how things are really ordered and connected' [26] (p. 58). On the TTP's method, Jahāngīrī holds that Spinoza followed the empirical method in his different books in spite of the fact that, according to Spinoza, experience does not give us true knowledge of the nature of things. Sense experience alone could never provide the information conveyed by an adequate idea, 'for instance, in the *Treatise on Religion and Government*, God does not rule people directly. Rather, His rule is through the rulers and experience confirms this' [25] (p. 14).

3. Spinoza's Critique of All Revealed Religion

Jahāngīrī not only translated the *Ethics* and the TTP but also supervised the first Ph.D. research about the TTP. In 1995, Jahāngīrī's pupil, Yūsuf Nawzuhūr (b. 1967), was the first to defend a thesis on the TTP. It dealt with pre-modern issues such as the relation between reason and revelation and between religion and government [27].²⁵ After his graduation and becoming an assistant professor at the University of Tabriz, the thesis was published in book form in 2000. At the University of Tabriz, Nawzuhūr taught early modern philosophy to undergraduates and gave courses to more advanced students on Spinoza's and Kant's philosophy. In 2015, when he was appointed social secretary to the Minister of Science for two years, Nawzuhūr, associated with the reform-wing tendency (Iṣlāḥāt) in Iranian politics, came to Tehran and, simultaneously, carried on teaching Spinoza's philosophy at the largest public university leading in the humanities, the 'Allāmah Tabātabā'i University.

Although Jahāngīrī had eventually approved the idea of writing a thesis on the TTP, he warned his pupil to 'be aware that Spinoza's critique of religion concerns only Judaism and Christianity. Although Spinoza had sufficient knowledge of Islam and the Qur'ān, his critique had nothing to do with our religion'.²⁶ Not only did Nawzuhūr want to write a thesis, but he was also eager to translate the TTP, but at his supervisor's advice he refrained from doing so. However, in his thesis he discussed Spinoza's main ideas in the TTP²⁷, such as 'Spinoza's method of interpretation'; 'Spinoza and the concept of divine law and the laws of religious tradition'; 'Spinoza's critique of Jewish exclusivity'; and 'The government in Spinoza's philosophy'.

More than twenty years later, Nawzuhūr, politely disagreed with Jahāngīrī's distinction between the Abrahamic religions, because, as he said, the need to reconcile science and revealed religion applied to all monotheistic religions both in 17th century Holland as well as in modern Iran.²⁸ In the preface, Nawzuhūr explained his motivation to do research as follows:

During the doctoral course in philosophy at the University of Tehran, I felt the need to dedicate my doctoral thesis to that part of Spinoza's philosophy that is not welcome in Iranian academic research, that is, his theories of reason, revelation, religion, and government. [27] (p. 2)

In the last two pages of the preface, he makes two points that are clearly in line with Jahāngīrī's thoughts. He first reminds the reader that he is by no means an advocate of Spinoza's philosophy, and continues by saying that the purpose of academic research is not to defend, but to criticize ideas, and of course the first step in a critique of Spinoza is to understand his system. Nawzuhūr said that he had tried to express Spinoza's views with a kind of empathy, with Spinoza writing, 'in this research, I have tried to bring my written language somewhat closer to the language of theology and politics' [27] (p. 3). However,

²⁵ He used the English version of the TTP by Elwes, and the secondary literature of Pollock, Alisson, Parkinson and Wolfson.

²⁶ The interviews in October and November 2020. See also, An interview in the short documentary on Jahāngīrī's life. See also, Jahāngīrī's foreword to the *Ethics*, [9] (p. 17), 'although Spinoza benefited from great philosophers such as al-Fārābī and Avicenna, he remained alien to Islam during his life'.

²⁷ The interviews, October and November 2020.

²⁸ Call interview, January 2021, 'the scientific need of the early modern time was clearly in conflict with the religious prevailing, especially with regard to natural laws, and it appears to be a fact that Spinoza sought to resolve theological problems of his era through scientific interpretation of the Bible, which is to be found in all Abrahamic monotheistic religions'.

Nawzuhūr's critical view of Spinoza²⁹ simultaneously approved Jahāngīrī's words and reflects the academic climate in the departments of philosophy during the 1990s up until the present. Thus, there is nowhere in Nawzuhūr's works a direct reference to the idea that Spinoza's method of interpretation applies to the holy texts of all monotheistic religions. However, his argument indirectly implies that Spinoza's views could be extended to all these religions. Furthermore, there is a section in Nawzuhūr's book titled 'Is reason subject to the sacred texts or are the sacred texts subject to reason?' that tried to explain the notion of kalām.³⁰ He believes that Spinoza rejects the views of Jehuda al-Fakhar and Maimonides because neither observed the distinction between kalām and philosophy; for the realm of reason is truth and wisdom, and the realm of kalām is piety and obedience.³¹

We have reason to assume that although Nawzuhūr expressed his thoughts in the interviews more than two decades later, as far back as 1995 he believed that a critique of religion provides the only way out of the current crises of Iran, because if theological traditions remain untouched by reason, they will prevent the integration of Enlightenment values, such as the rule of law and human rights into Iranian culture. For him, the humanities and religion have different methodologies or are different kinds of scholarship. That would imply, we may conclude, that 'Islamizing the humanities', as the regime wanted, is opposed to the separation of theology and philosophy for which Spinoza argued in the TTP.³²

4. Spinoza and Judaism

In November 2011, *Mihr-Nāmih*—a magazine in humanities affiliated with a now defunct reformist Iranian party—published an introduction to the philosophy of Spinoza in which six people were involved. It included the interview with Jahāngīrī cited in the previous section. Nawzuhūr also had a short note entitled 'The Origin and Nature of Civil Society in Spinoza' which helps us to understand his descriptive account of Spinoza's political philosophy.³³

However, for Nawzuhūr, Spinoza's critique of religion does not imply an anti-religious stance, instead Spinoza puts forth a universal religion that captures the moral core. In his thesis, Nawzuhūr described Spinoza's critique of Jewish exclusivity and argued that 'Spinoza supports the possibility of distortion in the texts' of Judaism [27] (p. 247), i.e., a well-known Islamic trope.³⁴ It was another scholar, however, who used Spinoza's ideas to underpin Islamic anti-semitism.

In the spring of 1999, almost at the same time as Nawzuhūr's dissertation was published, chapter eight of the TTP was translated by an anonymous Shia mullah in the first issue of *Haft Āsimān*, a journal edited by the University of Religions and Denominations in Qom. Two other articles in this issue are devoted to Judaism; 'Jewish Revelation and Prophecy' and 'Proofs of the Penal Claim in Judaism'. This suggests an explanation as to

²⁹ See [27] (pp. 3–4), 'Although explicitly stated in the text, it is important to note here that Spinoza's assessment of revelatory knowledge, prophecy, miracles, etc. in the context of 17th-century European thought, especially his philosophy in relation to Judaism and Christianity are understandable. Since Spinoza, like many Western philosophers, did not well know the truths of the religion of Islam and the Holy Qur'an, his philosophy has nothing to do with this comprehensive religion with its divine dimensions. Therefore, it is not even applicable to Islam. Everything Spinoza has thought and written is only about Judaism and Christianity'.

³⁰ See [27] (p. 245), where he argues that 'according to Spinoza, those who do not observe the distinction between philosophy and theology are inevitably caught up in the debate over whether to make the sacred texts subject to reason or vice versa. That is, whether the themes of the Bible should be reconciled with reason, or whether reason should be used in such a way that it would not come into conflict with the contents of the scripture'.

³¹ See [27] (pp. 248–249), 'This means that the task of the Kalām is to determine the principles of human belief because they are necessary for obedience. ... what Spinoza means by Kalām here is revelation, and in this view there is no conflict between the precepts of revelation and reason, but not in the sense that they are compatible with each other, because each forms an independent domain'.

³² Call interview, 10 January 2021.

³³ See [22] (p. 207), 'in Spinoza's political philosophy, there is an element of libertarianism, and this is what distinguishes him from Hobbes, and brings him closer to Locke and Rousseau. According to Spinoza, religion can also play a social role and support civil society by pervading the moral life of the masses promoting justice and goodness'.

³⁴ The importance of this trope can be seen as fear of censorship forced Ali Ferdowsi, the translator of complete Persian translation of the TTP, to delete a discussion of it in the introduction of his TTP translation, as he wrote to the author of this paper.

why this little-known chapter of the TTP was translated. The claim of ‘Distorted Scriptures’ has always been a topic in Islamic kalām. Shia theologians, citing verses from the Qur’ān, argue that the holy texts of Christianity and Judaism are distorted, although according to the Qur’ān, both the Old and New Testaments are the word of God.³⁵ If only the Qur’ān is free from any distortion, the argument goes, it manifests the true word of God all the more. If Islamic theologians are asked by which criteria the word of God in the Old Testament, the New Testament, and the Qur’ān should be judged, the answer will inevitably be that the word in which there has been no distortion is truer than the rest.

Accordingly, one of the best ways for Islamic theologians to justify the claim of distortion is to cite the words of people with a Christian or Jewish origin. Therefore, the importance of chapter eighth of the TTP is that a Jew has taken a critically eyed look at the Pentateuch and other books of the scripture, asking whether they were written by several authors or by one, and who they were. To the reader unfamiliar with the Iranian context, the suggestion that chapter eight was translated for use in inter-confessional polemics may seem far-fetched, but anti-semitism is deeply ingrained in Shia Islam and its populist contemporary forms. During Mahmoud Ahmadinejad’s presidency, it was even argued that the Jewish people invented the Holocaust and Israel was denounced as the ‘Little Satan’. The attitudes behind the things Ahmadinejad said are shocking but not unusual in Iran. Iranian politicians routinely describe Israel as a ‘tumor’ in the region. In 2001, Khamenei delivered a speech arguing that Zionists had collaborated with the Nazis in order to produce ‘exaggerated statistics on Jewish killings’ and thus facilitate the establishment of a Zionist state in Palestine [28] (p. 389).

As an example, in this context of political–religious anti-semitism, Spinoza was called anti-semitic by Abdollah Shahbazi, a well-known historian in Iran and a former key member of Hizb-i Tūdiḥ-i Iran, the Iranian communist party before the revolution. Shahbazi became a Tawwāb after the revolution, which is someone who has repented or regretted their past involvement. In 1988, he founded the Political Studies and Research Institute (PSRI). He was and probably still is one of the advisors of Khamenei. Under Khamenei’s command, Shahbazi became the director of the center for archives at the Mostazafan Foundation of the Islamic Revolution in 1995. The Mostazafan Foundation is a charitable foundation in the Islamic Republic of Iran that is affiliated with the intelligence organization of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC). Later, Shahbazi reorganized and changed the center’s name to the Institute for Iranian Contemporary Historical Studies (IICHS). He denied the Holocaust and described Spinoza as anti-Jewish in the second volume, ‘The Jewish Oligarchy and the Genius of Global Plutocrats,’ of his book, *The Jewish and Parsi Plutocrats, British Imperialism and Iran* (1998–2004) in 5 volumes (Zarsālārān-i Yahūdī va Pārsī, Isti’ mā-r-i Birītānīā va Irān) which contains conspiratorial anti-Jewish themes related to modern Iranian history, and which has been uploaded to his website³⁶ [29]; [30] (p. 210). Moreover, he regularly translated the title of Spinoza’s Theological-Political Treatise as *A Treatise on Metaphysics and Politics* (Risālah dar bāb-i Mitāfizik va Sīyāsāt), in which no passage in the TTP gives rise to these kind of remarks [29] (p. 222).³⁷

Shahbazi gave a scathing anti-semitic description of Spinoza, and to do so, without giving detailed attention to the TTP and even without giving a correct Persian translation of its title, he aimed to show Spinoza as supporting anti-semitism by using secondary sources. He quotes from *A History of the Jewish People* edited by Ben Sasson—I give his quotation in the English original with additional words in Shahbazi’s Persian translation in parenthesis:

According to him (Spinoza), the Jews hate all other peoples. This hatred has become second nature to them because they foster it every day in their liturgy.

³⁵ See verse 3 of Surah Āl ‘Imrān: ‘It is He Who sent down To thee (step by step), In truth, the Book, Confirming what went before it; And He sent down the Torah (Of Moses) and the Gospel (Of Jesus)’.

³⁶ See (shahbazi.org) accessed on 12 May 2021.

³⁷ See Jewish Studies Center (jscenter.ir) accessed on 12 May 2021.

Their manner of worshipping God not only differs from that of other peoples but is also contrary to them. . . . Even good qualities that he may find among his brethren derive from their (Satan) evil nature. (In Spinoza's view) The unity of Jewry and their present affection for one another derive from their hatred for all other peoples, and as a result all other peoples hate them. The destruction of their kingdom (Palestine) was because the Lord also hated them'. [31] (p. 721 in the original); [29] (p. 223)³⁸

However, this highly selective use of the TTP's rationalistic method of reading the Old Testament is a double-edged sword. As we saw in Nawzuhūr's case, it might provoke Muslims to ask questions about the Qur'ān, similar to those Spinoza asked. Unlike the eighth chapter, the translation of the twentieth chapter opened a new view to the Iranian reader.

5. A New Reading of the TTP

In 2009, the translation of the twentieth chapter of the TTP entitled *Freedom of Thought and Speech in a Free Government (Āzādī-i Andīshah va Guftār dar yek Hukūmat-i Āzād)*, was published on the website of the Abdorrahman Boroumand Foundation.³⁹ To honor the memory of their father, Abdorrahman Boroumand, and all other victims of state violence, his daughters Ladan and Roya established a foundation dedicated to the promotion of human rights and democracy in Iran in March 2001 [33] (p. 214). It was awarded the Lech Walesa prize for human rights in 2009. Ladan Boroumand is research director at The Abdorrahman Boroumand Foundation for the Promotion of Human Rights and Democracy in Iran. A former visiting fellow at the International Forum for Democratic Studies, she studied history at École des hautes études en sciences sociales in Paris with Claude Lefort, Mona Ozouf and François Furet. She is the author of *La Guerre des Principes* (1999) and has written several articles on the French Revolution, the Iranian Revolution, and the nature of Islamist terrorism [33]. She met Khomeini when he went to Paris in October 1978 and was horrified by his ideas, saying:

After reading Khomeini's ideas on the notion of the theologian as political guardian of the people (Vilāyat-i Faqīh), I was petrified. I started to ask questions about the hijāb and human rights, but Khomeini said 'now is not time to think about that'.⁴⁰

My father was sent to Paris by the [Iranian] National Front to figure out what Khomeini's plans were. Khomeini told him to tell his friends that they would know about his plans in due time. [33] (p. 194)

Her father Abdorrahman was an important pro-democracy figure, who was assassinated by agents of the Islamic Republic on 18 April 1991 in a brutal knife attack at his home in Paris. In 1979, he had supported the government of the social-democrat Shapur Bakhtiar, who opposed Ayatollah Khomeini's idea of an Islamic republic and whose government was overthrown on 19 February of that year.

The translation of chapter twenty of the TTP started before 2009 but was published after the uprising of the so-called Green Movement (Junbish-i Sabz), which started in response to the proclaimed results of the elections held on 12 June 2009. Within a few days, the number of protestors grew to hundreds of thousands, and there were estimated to be a million or more on 15 June.⁴¹ Alleged election fraud⁴², the violations of women's

³⁸ See also the TTP 17, § 80, [32] (p. 1105).

³⁹ See (iranrights.org) accessed 12 May 2021.

⁴⁰ Call interview with Ladan Boroumand, conducted in August 2020.

⁴¹ In Persian, 25 Khurdād 1388. A presidential election took place on 12 June 2009 and caused a significant controversy when the office of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad almost immediately announced that the sitting president had won the election as he had received approximately two-thirds of the votes.

⁴² See 'How Iran is trying to win back the youth', by Narges Bajoghli, in *The Guardian*.

and LGBT rights, and the high number of political prisoners during Ahmadinejad's first presidency, pushed people onto the streets.

The Green Movement caused a legitimacy crisis for the government, which undermined civil freedoms. The reason is clear, the Islamic Republic of Iran is axiomatically and constitutionally undemocratic, because the will of the people expressed through elections does not determine the nature of the ruling government. It also became obvious that the regime had no intention to protect the rights of its citizens. In this political climate, the TTP's twentieth chapter, with the famous lines, inspired the Iranian reader that 'from the foundations of the Republic . . . it follows most clearly that its ultimate end is not to dominate, restraining men by fear, and making them subject to another's control, but on the contrary to free each person from fear, so that he can live securely, as far as possible, i.e., so that he retains to the utmost his natural right to exist and operate without harm to himself or anyone else' [32] (p. 1127).

The Abdorrahman Boroumand Foundation already began selecting classical Western political philosophical texts for translation in 2006, such as texts by Locke, Hobbes, Spinoza, and Arendt. The translations were made available online in a period that witnessed the rise of Twitter and Facebook in Iran. The foundation sought to make a virtual library of the most important human rights instruments and classical texts on democracy [33] (p. 215). Sīrūs-i Ārīān-Pūr (1938–2013) translated the twentieth chapter of the TTP, and Ladan Boroumand compared it to the French 1965 version of Charles Appuhn. According to translator Ārīān-Pūr's friend Daryoush Ashouri, he lived in France from the 1980s until his death. Ārīān-Pūr had obtained a doctorate in economics in Austria and knew German, English, and French, and probably used these languages to translate Spinoza's TTP.⁴³ However, his translation begins with introductory lines by the foundation:

If the shocking message of the execution of a young Kurdish Iranian fighter⁴⁴ proves the correctness of the philosophical ideas of Spinoza who lived and thought and wrote in another language more than three hundred years ago, it is because they are both warriors in a constant human battle. They are unknown friends of each other who unite to defend the natural right to freedom of thought and judgment. The weapon of one is thought and pen, and of the other action and life.⁴⁵

These lines imply that chapter twenty is translated to defend freedom of inquiry and to overcome theocratic obstacles to democratization. Therefore, it is clear that, in 2009, Spinoza's TTP began to be read more politically and, from that year onwards, Spinoza's political philosophy received increasing public attention to such an extent that the TTP was used at least once, in response to Spinoza's popularity among government critics, to defend clerical positions and to deny human rights. A decade after the events of the Green Movement, a mullah⁴⁶ highlighted the issue of women in the last and unfinished chapter of Spinoza's *Political Treatise*, probably with the intention to criticize the Iranian sympathizers of Spinoza, or the enlightened features in his philosophy, saying 'Women have no any place in Spinoza's political theory, ... the Persian translators of the book thought that if Spinoza lived to finish the book, perhaps he would reconsider his views on women, but

⁴³ Call interview with Daryoush Ashouri, conducted in January 2021.

⁴⁴ Ehsan Fatahian was a Kurdish Iranian activist, who was executed on Wednesday, 11 November 2009, in Sanandaj Central Prison after being sentenced to death by the Judiciary of the Islamic Republic for allegedly being a member of the armed wing of Komalah. He was 28 years old.

⁴⁵ See (iranrights.org) accessed on 12 May 2021.

⁴⁶ Named Dāvūd Mahdāvī-Zādīgān.

that is completely ruled out'.⁴⁷ It is a bit of ironic that contemporary Shia jurists share the presumed anti-feminism of Spinoza.⁴⁸

The online translation of chapter 20 was widely shared among Persian speakers. The Boroumand foundation provided a webpage statistics report, showing that the translation was viewed over 9500 times between 2010–2014. In an interview, Ladan Boroumand argued that one of the main motivations to publish this chapter was that Iran faces the same crisis that took place four centuries ago in the Netherlands and other parts of war-torn and wounded Europe. So much so that, in 2009, according to a report by Reporters Without Borders, Iran ranked 172nd in the world in censorship, press freedom and freedom of expression. Indeed, she believes that Spinoza, in his criticism of the De Witt brothers' killers, conveyed his concern to us that we should never cease to stand up for freedom of thought and expression. The twentieth chapter is for Boroumand one of the most important texts on human rights and she believes every Iranian should read it.⁴⁹ As she stated in a 2020 article, by suppressing protests, the regime intensifies anger and pushes people toward behavior that may be less visible but will, by the same token, be more radical and subversive [37] (p. 178). She also explained in an interview⁵⁰ that Spinoza's defense of the freedom to philosophize, to think in liberty, combined with his interest in the problems of mass superstition and state-religion relations, invite us to consider the future role of religion in Iranian society and politics. Learning to understand sacred texts as natural, human, and historical phenomena, she believes, is a key to stimulate critical thinking about Iran's past, present, and future. In addition, Boroumand pointed to the secularization of Iranian society as another reason why she believes Spinoza's ideas can be relevant for democratization. She defines secularism not as being antireligious, but as a call on the state to be neutral in religious affairs. According to her, we are now also witnessing the development of a secular, liberal, and democracy-friendly theology within Shia Islam [37] (p. 175).

As we noted already, 2009, the year the translation of the TTP's twentieth chapter appeared, coincided with an order by Iran's Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei to Islamize the humanities. However, people remained interested in political ideas of the Radical Enlightenment. An overview of Persian graduate theses and articles about the TTP points to the increasing attention given to Spinoza's political philosophy among Persian reading audiences.⁵¹ *The Political Treatise* (TP) was published in 2014 and in 2017, finally, the TTP was translated into Persian.

⁴⁷ See (qudsonline.ir) accessed on 12 May 2021.

⁴⁸ Read Hasana Sharp's view for more precise discussions on Spinoza and women: Spinoza's paternalistic concern in the Political Treatise is that women depend on men to such an extent that they cannot desire their own advantage because they are constrained to reflect the desires of those on whom they rely to survive. If this is grounds for excluding them from the commonwealth, it is because this dependency obscures in women an adequate knowledge of what is genuinely good for them, and thus what is good for all. Likewise, Spinoza notes that male rationality is undermined by female presence, and men, too, are prone not to desire the genuine conditions of freedom, but instead to pursue the parochial pleasures of feminine favor. Spinoza seems concerned that men and women legislating together would result in an inability to live by the divine and rational precept that is imaginatively conveyed in the history of the first man: "He who does good from a true knowledge of good, acts freely with a constant purpose, but he who does good from fear of suffering injury, is simply driven to avoid what is bad, such as a slave, and lives at the command of another [*sub imperio alterius vivit*] [34] (p. 577). In the final words of the Political Treatise, he presents women as provokers of irrationality, and thereby, similar to beasts, contrary to the nature of men. He observes that feminine beauty arouses passion in men such that they become changeable, inconstant, and contrary to one another and even to themselves [34] (p. 578). See also [35].

⁴⁹ Another contemporary Iranian thinker who emphasizes the importance of the twentieth chapter of Spinoza's TTP is Sayyid Javād Tabāṭabāī who called it 'a declaration of freedom of philosophizing and critical thought'; read more in [36].

⁵⁰ Video call interviews with Ladan Boroumand, August 2020 and January 2021.

⁵¹ According to the Iranian Research Institute for Information Science and Technology (IranDoc), since 1991, about 46 theses on Spinoza have been defended in Persian. Many universities have not registered student theses in this database for many years. Therefore, it is assumed that the number of theses about philosophy of Spinoza, which are mainly Master's theses, is more numerous. There are also 75 Persian articles about Spinoza registered at the Institute for Humanities and Cultural Studies Tehran. Most of these theses and articles reflect topics that are most frequent in Spinoza courses in Iranian philosophy departments. Based on a document provided by the Supreme Planning Council of the Ministry of Science of Iran—revised 2 May 2017 at the University of Tehran, (p. 35)—the Ph.D. curriculum in the major of Early Modern Philosophy, Spinoza course, mainly dealt with traditional topics. The first master thesis dates back to 1991. It is only in recent decades that the popularity of Spinoza's political and theological views has increased among humanities departments and non-academic approaches to Spinoza have been applied through Marxist readings.

However, years before these translations were made, we already see a growing interest in Spinoza's political ideas. In January 2005, Ramin Jahanbegloo, Iranian philosopher and currently director of the Mahatma Gandhi Centre for Peace, organized a conference at the Iranian Artists Forum with the participation of Antonio Negri, his teacher, and the Italian ambassador Roberto Toscano. Two hundred people, including families, journalists, and students, arrived for the first day under the banner 'Spinoza and Democracy'. Jahanbegloo presented the case for Spinoza as an eminently liberal, secular and even ecological thinker, pointing to a progressivist understanding of politics.⁵²

Jahanbegloo also later became one of six authors invited to write about Spinoza in a special section of *Mihr-Nāmih* [22]. In two columns he dealt with the concept of 'democracy' in Spinoza, based on various parts of the TTP and TP. After referring to Spinoza's idea that the purpose of a democratic state is 'to avoid the follies of appetite and as much as possible to bring men within the limits of reason' [26] (p. 201), Jahanbegloo argued that the state is a rational system which is directly related to Spinoza's definition of politics as the science of state survival [22] (p. 214). Relying on the notion of 'potentia agendi' and that no one unconditionally transfers his natural right to another, Jahanbegloo explains that, in Spinoza, unlike Hobbes, there is no such thing as 'transferring rights' and therefore, no conflict between natural and civil rights [22] (p. 214). Based on the contents of chapter twenty, above all, this idea that the true purpose of the state (*res publica*) is in fact freedom [26] (p. 252), Jahanbegloo shares with Boroumand the opinion that 'the most important part of TTP is the last chapter and his support for free thinking. This is how Spinoza should resonate in today's Iranian society'.⁵³ This need is also demonstrated in the table of contents of the magazine, which did not name Jahanbegloo or publish his picture due to censorship and to avoid bringing attention to Jahanbegloo, who was himself abducted and imprisoned in 2006.⁵⁴

The interest in Spinoza's politics continued in another event held on 22 May 2011. *Bukhārā*, a well-known cultural journal of art, literature, and Iranian studies, hosted Spinoza Night (Shab-i Spinoza) at the Dutch Embassy in Tehran. It was the second international event focusing on Spinoza's political philosophy. While Michiel Leezenberg, Dutch philosopher, spoke on the metaphysics of Mullā Sadrā and Spinoza, 'Izatullāh Fūlādvand, Iranian translator and author, dealt with Spinoza's political philosophy. The latter described Spinoza as a realist who preferred politicians to philosophers and democracy to both monarchy and aristocracy. Fūlādvand argued that, for Spinoza, democracy was superior because it is the better protector of the equality and freedom of the people and the stronger guarantor of wise legislation. He concluded that many of Spinoza's ideas about democracy are contained in the TTP, writing that 'further discussion of this subject was to take place in his last purely philosophical work, the *Political Treatise*, which was left unfinished with the utmost regret with his death on 21 February 1677, at the age of 44'.⁵⁵

6. The First Complete Translation of the TTP

In a climate of growing interest in religious-political questions and the legitimacy of the theocratic regime, the TTP was translated and published in 2017. The translator, Ali Ferdowsi, is an emeritus professor of sociology living in the United States. Ferdowsi was born in Isfahan, and grew up in Torbat-e Jam, Iran.⁵⁶ He obtained a doctorate in sociology from the University of Pennsylvania in 1985 and has taught at the University of Notre Dame de Namur. He also spent five years as a visiting professor at the Tokyo University of Foreign Studies, among others. In addition to the TTP, he translated other works, including

⁵² See Nina Power: Antonio Negri in Iran, 4–6 January 2005, House of Artists and Centre for Dialogue Among Civilizations, Tehran; 7 January 2005, Isfahan/Radical Philosophy. See also the online session about Spinoza in the Agora Philosophical Forum (in Persian) organized by Jahanbegloo. A year later, he was kidnapped on his way to an international conference in Brussels by agents of the Islamic Republic.

⁵³ The written English response to the author of this article, 26 January 2021.

⁵⁴ See 'I Am Not a Spy. I Am a Philosopher.' (chronicle.com) accessed on 12 May 2021.

⁵⁵ See (bukharamag.com) accessed on 12 May 2021.

⁵⁶ I interviewed Ali Ferdowsi twice, on 1 September and 15 December 2020.

Philosophy and the Event by Alain Badiou, and *New Jerusalem, The Interrogation of Baruch de Spinoza at Talmud Torah Congregation, Amsterdam, 27 July 1656*, a drama by David Ives [38]. He is currently editing the Divan of Sultan Ahmad.⁵⁷

Ferdowsi's translation of the TTP was published by Sahāmī-i Intishār in Tehran. This press was founded in 1958 by academicians describing themselves as Muslims, Iranians, constitutionalists and followers of the Iranian National Front. To the surprise of various intellectuals and translators, Ferdowsi's translation was not censored and was even reprinted five times at the time of writing this article.

The study of sociology helped Ferdowsi, in his own words, 'to examine the social impact of philosophers in their own context and their role in the future'. The Persian translation of Spinoza's TTP also serves this purpose and attempts to change the Shia political and ideological discourse in contemporary Iran. Unlike Jahāngīrī, he translated the book for the public and, above all, for the seminarians to read. Asked by me he explains:

I translated the book for the public, and as an intervention in the current situation in Iran and, god-willing, Afghanistan, and not for a scholarly audience . . . my face was turned more in the direction of the seminarians than the university students, sort of the Collegiants and Socinians of our own out of joint time. So, I was trying to hint that Spinoza's original insight into the salutary or at least acceptable function of religion, that is obedience to God and charity to one's fellows, is in harmony with the Qur'ān and in reading the Qur'ān in light of Spinoza's approach, they might very well begin with this verse.⁵⁸

Ferdowsi is referring to verse 177 of the second Surah (the Cow), which appears on the front page of his translation above Hegel's famous saying 'You are either a Spinozist or not a philosopher at all'. The subject of this verse is 'absolute piety' and was revealed to the Prophet Muhammad when the prayer direction was changed from Jerusalem to Mecca. God points out:

It is not righteousness That ye turn your faces Towards East or West; But it is righteousness To believe in Allah And the Last Day, And the Angels, And the Book, And the Messengers; To spend of your substance, Out of love for Him, For your kin, For orphans, For the needy, For the wayfarer, For those who ask, And for the ransom of slaves; To be steadfast in prayer, And give Zakat, To fulfil the contracts Which ye have made; And to be firm and patient, In pain (or suffering) And adversity, And throughout All periods of panic. Such are the people of truth, the God-fearing.⁵⁹

By quoting this verse, it seems that Ferdowsi wants to make clear that, according to Spinoza, piety is not specific to Muslims, Jewish people, and Christians, and religion neither belongs to the East nor the West. Muslims should acknowledge that true religion is universal. According to Ferdowsi, the word 'piety', which performs a pivotal and strategic function in TTP, helps the believer in holy texts to acknowledge that the core of prophecy is a moral one. Piety teaches men obedience and charity, demonstrating that Spinoza is not anti-religious, let alone denouncing a particular religion, such as Judaism.⁶⁰ Ferdowsi had two purposes. One is to communicate that TTP is not against the core teaching of any religion, including Islam, and hence put the censors' minds and pieties at ease and, secondly, in his own words, he wanted to establish, right off the bat (before all else), that

⁵⁷ A collection of poems by Sultan Ahmad, a Jalayirid king who ruled parts of the present-day Iran and Iraq in late 14th and early 15th century, and corresponded with Hafiz, his great contemporary poet.

⁵⁸ The written English response, 17 December 2020.

⁵⁹ Qur'ān 2: 177.

⁶⁰ The written English response to my questions, 17 December 2020. 'I do believe that what Spinoza says about the Old Testament and Moses and all the other prophets applies to the Qur'ān and to Mohammad and wished to suggest that one could profitably extend the whole method, most of the arguments, and the book's core understanding of the place of religion in the life of our species to Islam too. In other words, I was trying to direct the reader's attention inward, and foreclose the often defensive move of reading such books as if they are about other religions, or peoples or times and not ours. More specifically, I did not want TTP read as if it was simply a rejection of Judaism, and an endorsement of any other religion. One can never be sufficiently careful about anti-semitism'.

Islam is and should be, *mutatis mutandis*, subject to what Spinoza says about religion and scripture, both about its core teachings, as well as its history of textual transmissions, the appetites of its priesthood, and its entanglements with philosophy and politics. He writes:

I was after denouncing theology, not ordinary people's religion, as I believe that Spinoza identifies religious evil at the dawn of modernity not with religion per se, but more with theology and the lofty political and intellectual ambitions of those who wish to exclude our understanding of religion from our understanding of nature, in the sense he has of nature, of course. So, I was at the same time honest when I placed that verse at the beginning of the book to protect it from evil eye! But I also placed a verse of Quran as the epitaph of the book to, performatively as it were, nail Islam and its holy book right inside and onto the TTP's translation and graft it into the reader's mind throughout the entirety of the course of reading it. I wanted to foreclose any possibility of evasion and distanciation, and to make sure, in so far as possible without provoking unwelcome reaction, that the reader was unable to avoid thinking about himself, his own faith and his own time, that is of Islam, Muslim scripture, the political ambitions of Muslim theologians, and the ruling theocracy, while reading about them in the stories of others.⁶¹

Although the main purpose of using a Qur'ān verse on the front page might be to circumvent censorship⁶², Ferdowsi returned to the idea that the TTP is directed to all the faithful. Spinoza had at least basic knowledge of the Qur'ān and theological literature in Islam, and Muslims will definitely find the TTP 'familiar', he argues in the translator's foreword [15] (p. 11). In order to illustrate Spinoza's only reference to the Qur'ān in the fifth chapter⁶³, Ferdowsi writes in a footnote:

Never does Spinoza intend to insult the Qur'ān here; this is a mockery of the readers of the Bible who read the Qur'ān superficially and casually. As if it were a book from a strange land that, although it has exciting adventures, its moral teachings have nothing to do with themselves. By now it should be clear to the reader that, to Spinoza, reading scriptures in such a way means reading them in an inappropriate and superstitious manner. [15] (p. 205)

Ferdowsi is one of those Iranian intellectuals who are critical of the comparative philosophy the regime popularized. For him, comparisons, for example, between Spinoza and Mullā Sadrā, simply because they lived in the same time, neglect such works' social roles and 'suspend' their system of thought in the air.⁶⁴ In Iran, comparative philosophy is both political window-dressing and of purely academic value:

Spinoza did not complete his TTP for a scholarly purpose, because it is a book of practical wisdom. This becomes clear when we understand why Spinoza put aside the Ethics for a while in order to compose the TTP, of course without abandoning his fundamental philosophical insights. Spinoza aimed to intervene in the affairs of his time and to contribute to the betterment of his world.⁶⁵

Ferdowsi translated the TTP after the four English translations by Edwin Curley, Michael Silverthorne and Jonathan Israel, Samuel Shirley, and R.H.M. Elwes. The seven-

⁶¹ The written English response, 15 April 2021.

⁶² 'To assuage any fears the censors might have by showing that this book is not against the Qur'ān as a religious book. I could do so because this did not contradict my own beliefs. TTP is against theology, a misreading and misappropriation of the holy books, and not the books themselves' (the written English response, 17 December 2020).

⁶³ See [26] (p. 78), 'Hence if anyone reads the stories of holy Scripture and believes all of them without paying attention to the doctrine that the Bible uses them to teach, and without amending his life, he might just as well read the Koran or the dramatic plays of the poets . . . '.

⁶⁴ ' . . . although I cannot deny that I was tired of the kind of appropriation that (forgetting ontology, epistemology and historical context) compares Sadra and Spinoza as if they were modern university professors in the analytical tradition debating scholarly theories. Spinoza was not a scholar of that sort, as were neither Nietzsche or Marx. I believed then at the time of deciding to translate the TTP, and believe it even more strongly today, that Spinoza himself too saw TTP as an urgent and timely intervention in the course of history. This choice of objective by Spinoza, which I assumed to belong to the very nature of TTP, had implications for my approach to the translation'; the written English response, 17 December 2020.

⁶⁵ Call interview, 15 December 2020.

page translator's foreword was adapted to the Iranian context. Furthermore, Ferdowsi added a chronology of Spinoza and an introduction based on Jonathan Israel's introduction and Curley's preface [15] (p. 21). He explains in the translator's foreword that Jonathan Israel's *Radical Enlightenment* motivated him to translate the TTP into Persian. Given the importance of Spinoza in the Enlightenment movement, Ferdowsi argued that his philosophy will make Iranians feel the need to reconsider the Enlightenment project in contemporary Iran [15] (pp. 7–8). He writes:

If we look at the growing number of translations of his [Spinoza's] work, and the books and papers published on his life and philosophy, we see clearly that his thought is becoming ever more popular. One could perhaps attribute this welcome to the necessity for the rethinking of the Enlightenment project in our time, a time that if we cannot say is altogether bewildered, we can say of it that it sees in astonishment that the problems it thought it had put behind for good are catching up with it, and confront it once again, as if the specter of the past is out pacing it into the future. Consequently, such problems as the relationship between state and religion, religion and morality, and morality and state are once again occupying our minds. Luckily, our country and our language Persian are expeditiously making us a contemporary of the world, such that it can be confidently said that we are more than ever before in modern times close to the edge of human progress and its troubles to an extent that it is no longer possible to disentangle our destiny from the destiny of the world It is for this reason that Spinoza is no longer unknown among us. [15] (p. 8)

Regardless of the potential influence of Spinoza on Iran's theological discourse, Ferdowsi believes that we should not overlook the importance of the concept of security in Spinoza's TTP. Ferdowsi gives the example of the Federalist paper, No. 51, in which James Madison emphasized that a system of checks and balances is necessary because all men are not necessarily angels. It is as if Madison quoted from the TTP. Ferdowsi says that 'I know for a fact that is indeed very likely that Madison might have quoted Spinoza. Both he and Jefferson had read Spinoza, and regarded him highly'.⁶⁶ To adopt Spinoza's concepts of security and multitude in Iranian philosophical debates, Ferdowsi says:

If you were a Bahā'ī⁶⁷ in Iran, you would precisely understand what a predator the multitude can be. I am therefore a complete Spinozist and Machiavellian. And I consider Spinoza to be a completely revolutionary philosopher because of his emphasis on the concept of security and the paradigm shift in the philosophy of politics. This strand of Spinoza's thoughts is important for us Iranians now not to enter it as a stereotype, but to enrich our thought by entering into an augmenting relation with the thought of Spinoza, in other words, to make a comparable philosophical attempt.⁶⁸

The protection of the rights of minorities and their religious practices, such as the Bahā'ī in Iran, as Ferdowsi argued for, is not excluded by Spinoza's own focus on security and transforming the multitude into a unanimous citizenry. To single out the guaranteeing of stability and security as the highest function of state, Ferdowsi believes, is not, however, to suggest that it is its only function, or that the state is not obligated to protect the rights of its minorities. 'Concretely speaking, if a state is going to be legitimate, and hence genuinely stable and secure, it must be just to all its citizens, which requires a particular degree of

⁶⁶ The written English response, 15 April 2021.

⁶⁷ As discussed earlier, 'Alī Murād Dāvūdī was one of the first victims of violence against the Bahā'ī. 'Bahā'ism emerged as an independent religion in the 1860s from the heterodox Shī'ī sects of Shaykhism and Bābism and was named after its founder Husayn 'Alī Nūrī Bahā'ullah (1817–1892). Bahā'ism promoted a cosmopolitan worldview which stood in contrast to Islam's claim to universality and Shī'ism's ethos as a persecuted minority [39] (p. 234). 'The 1979 Revolution and the establishment of the Islamic Republic elevated the otherization of the Bahā'īs into an integral component of the official state ideology and policy. Although the Shī'ī clergy now dominated a powerful state apparatus, they still regarded the small Bahai minority as both an ideological and political threat to Iran and Islam' [39] (p. 238).

⁶⁸ Call interview, 1 September 2020.

vigilance when it comes to protecting the rights of its minorities, because here not only the state itself, but the majority must be kept in check'.⁶⁹ This is precisely why, along with Ferdowsi and Jahanbegloo, and above all according to Spinoza himself, with whom the author of this paper is truly in agreement, democracy is the best, that is, the most secure and stable, of all forms of state.

The Spinozistic critique of religion in the TTP, which aims at limiting religious–political power, is considered fundamental to the democratization of Iran in the new Iranian approach to Spinoza. On this point, it seems, the more recent readers of Spinoza are all in agreement. Jahanbegloo, for instance, has argued that Spinoza is a philosopher who rejected a church, which is a 'state within a state', because it would destroy the institution of the state. This means that 'Spinoza, by departing from the theological–political logic and secularizing the logic of politics in the modern age, allows us to form a political subject and highlights the ability to shape democratic action'.⁷⁰ Moreover, according to the TTP, chapter nineteen, authority in sacred matters belongs wholly to the sovereignty. However, this does not mean that the sovereign powers abrogate man's natural rights, according to Jahanbegloo. This might imply that a religious minority has a natural right to survive, as Spinoza wrote in the TP '... those who are attached to another religion must certainly be allowed to build as many houses of worship as they wish, but these should be small, of some definite size, and at some distance from one another' [40] (pp. 1338–1339).

7. Conclusions

Opposed to traditional readings of the *Ethics* that mainly emphasize the pantheist strands in Spinoza, to be easily compared with Muslim thinkers, the TTP recently provided Iran with a unique conceptual and argumentative apparatus to face its theological and political crises. Supporters of today's theocracy in Iran make use of the TTP for inter-confessional polemics on behalf of the Islamic regime, as we find in the references in the section Spinoza and Judaism, or in the reference to Spinoza's view towards women in order to establish the non-enlightened nature of his thought. Yet, there are still other thinkers who, looking into the mirror of the TTP, have suggested that the state cannot foster support for itself by using religion and that freedom of thought would not undermine the stability of society and piety. It is truly sad that the Iran of today, in a Hobbesian sense, remains in a state of war, where the freedom of judging and thinking is severely restricted. As Spinoza expresses in the last chapter of the TTP, 'what is more dangerous than for people to be treated as enemies and led off to death, not for misdeeds or wrongdoing, but because they make a free use of their intelligence ...?' The fact that the freedom of expressing one's ideas and opinions is under pressure in today's Islamic Republic of Iran may, therefore, help to explain the growing interest in Spinoza's TTP.

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⁶⁹ The written English response, 15 April 2021.

⁷⁰ See (blogfa.com) accessed on 12 May 2021; see also the online session about Spinoza in the Agora Philosophical Forum (in Persian) organized by Jahanbegloo.

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