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Philosophical Religions from Plato to Spinoza: Reason, Religion, and Autonomy

Ohad Nachtomy^{ab}

^a Bar-Ilan University

^b Fordham University

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BOOK REVIEW

Carlos Fraenkel: *Philosophical Religions from Plato to Spinoza: Reason, Religion, and Autonomy*. Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013, pp. xxviii + 328. \$99.00 (hb). ISBN 9781107437371.

Carlos Fraenkel develops an original and daring thesis in this book concerning the relations between philosophy and religion. According to a traditional (at least since the Middle ages) conceptualization of their relations, philosophy is a handmaid of religion or there exists an irresolvable tension between reason and faith; or else there is a co-existence and a clear separation of epistemological tasks (as in the Christian tradition, from St. Thomas to the Council of Trent). For Fraenkel, however, the concept that best captures what many thinkers from Plato (through the Alexandrians Philo, Clement, and Origen, and the mediaeval philosophers Alfarabi, Averroes, and Maimonides) to Spinoza were doing is that of a philosophical religion.

A philosophical religion dissolves the tensions between philosophy and religion, or better, such tensions do not arise for its proponents because reason and God turn out to be one and the same. Divine laws are no other than the laws of reason. One ought to live by and believe in what is most rational and what is best, which is encapsulated in what these rational/divine laws prescribe. Learning what such laws prescribe and acting accordingly is an important part of what Fraenkel calls the perfection of reason.

Thus, Fraenkel writes: for proponents of a philosophical religion,

the projects of reason and religion cannot be meaningfully distinguished at all. The core purpose of religion is to direct us to a life that is guided by reason towards the perfection of reason. For the best and most blissful life is the life of contemplation, culminating in knowledge of God. God himself, they argue, is the perfect model of this life. Being pure Reason, he eternally knows and enjoys the truth, unencumbered by hunger, pain, ignorance and other afflictions that come with being embodied. The task of religion is to make us as much like God as possible. (Preface, ix)

To become like God, that is, become pure reason, is the ideal of philosophical religion's adherents. To the extent that this is possible, it would naturally fall to philosophers, whose nature is to love wisdom and seek truth. But since not all are of such a nature and not all are capable of these rational pursuits, the project of philosophical religion also implies a practical programme of instruction for non-philosophers (or those who are imperfectly rational) – and this is what historical religions are about. As Fraenkel clarifies, 'This program's role is to serve as *philosophy's handmaid*. It establishes

beliefs, practices, and institutions that imitate philosophy to give non-philosophers a share in the perfection that philosophy affords' (x). This distinction also marks the historical demise of philosophical religions. Once a distinction between philosophers and non-philosophers came to be unacceptable, mainly on egalitarian grounds that all humans are equally endowed with rational capacities, the project of philosophical religion lost its grip. If the spirit of Enlightenment is captured by the phrase: 'have courage to use reason', as Kant famously claimed, the distinction between philosophers and non-philosophers can no longer be sustained for the above purpose.

The original and intriguing thesis of this book, as well as its scope and historical and conceptual perspectives, make it an extremely rewarding read. Even more so are the detailed interpretations of the thinkers Fraenkel studies. Very few scholars these days, if any at all, are capable of writing with such precision, clarity, and authority on the wide variety of thinkers, intellectual traditions, and periods covered by this book. This is no doubt a major achievement. If it were only for Fraenkel's reading of Spinoza as both a continuation of and a break from the mediaeval tradition of philosophical religion, his reading of the *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus* as interpreting Christianity as a philosophical religion and at the same time criticizing revealed religion, the book would have made a very significant contribution to current research. And, as I noted, this is but one chapter in this rich book.

Since there is no space here to discuss any of the book's topics in detail, let me make a brief comment regarding the main theme of the book via the chapter on Spinoza. In this chapter, entitled 'Christianity as a philosophical religion in Spinoza', Fraenkel writes:

Like the *nomoi* of Magnesia according to Plato, and like the beliefs, practices, and institutions, of Jews, Christians, and Muslims, according to the Alexandrians and the *falâsifa*, Spinoza's Divine Law directs the community to what is best – a life ordered by reason towards the perfection of reason, culminating in the apprehension of God. (213)

A well ordered state can be described as 'God's Kingdom' according to Spinoza because it is ordered by the 'precepts of true reason' which are 'the very precepts of God'. (263)

The crucial identification of the precepts of reason with the precepts of God is apparent here. The obvious question to raise is whether the God of Spinoza is quite the God of Plato (if God is at all the right word to use in Plato's case); nor is the God of the Jews, Christians, and Muslims exactly the same God (certainly not for most Jews, Christians, and Muslims). The question applies to other thinkers treated by Fraenkel as well, but the contrast with Spinoza's God sharpens the issue, since the notion of God, as Fraenkel suggests, is not the same even within Spinoza's writings. Fraenkel is well aware of this problem and his complex response is this: Spinoza 'seems to

engage in both the critique of biblical religion and in its philosophical reinterpretation (216). ‘Taken literally, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob is part of a pedagogical program for non-philosophers. Allegorically, however, he is *Deus sive Natura*’ (216). This is the starting point for his subtle and rich interpretation of Spinoza’s works.

But, let us leave the non-philosophers’ God aside for a moment. If we press the comparison regarding the God of the philosophers, defined in the *Ethics* as ‘a being absolutely infinite, that is, a substance consisting of an infinity of attributes, of which each one expresses an eternal and infinite essence’ (Ide6), which Spinoza identifies with the whole of nature in the *Ethics*, one wonders what similarity this God of the *Ethics* bears to that of Plato (again, to the extent that one may justly use the word God with regard to Plato)? It goes without saying that Plato’s metaphysics of immaterial forms as the eternal definitions of truths is very remote from Spinoza’s metaphysics of immanent causation.

This consideration gives rise to the following worry: does not the definition of a philosophical religion as based on the identification of God with reason operate at such a high level of generality that it risks becoming too vague, not to say empty? Incidentally, is not it true that the identification of God with reason has been used as a rhetorical device to draw sceptics back to the warm hands of religion (rather than as a sound philosophical argument)?

In a similar vein, should not philosophers suspect a philosophical religion if it operates at the level of generality of perfecting reason without specifying what reason is or what its perfection would consist in independently of the specific context of a particular religion or tradition? Using Fraenkel’s analogy, just as one would rely on a doctor’s prescriptions to guide one’s health, so we ought to rely on philosophers for guidance to the good life. But what do philosophers actually know in particular? I suppose we have to turn to mathematicians if we want to become good in mathematics; to architects to design our houses; and to musicians if we want to have decent musical instruction. In the end, what are philosophers good for if they are no good at anything in particular?

Following Socrates’ example, we should refrain from accepting anything that does not pass the strictures of logic and solid reasoning. For Socrates, this implied the humble admission that he knows nothing (but of course fails to be convinced by those who pretend to know). Plato has tried to convince us that one can transcend the Socratic scepticism by contemplating the Good, the Just and the other eternal virtues. As Fraenkel has shown, a whole tradition of philosophical religion was initiated by Plato’s heroic attempt. But, for my own part, I remain rather sceptical about the Platonic move and of the project of philosophical religion that ensued. Not because it could be carried out by philosophers alone, as its proponents would have us believe; but rather because the project seems to be flawed on *philosophical* grounds, namely the identification of reason with God remains rather general and vague.

This, of course, is not a critique of Fraenkel's lucid, rich, and daring book; rather, it is a critique that his book makes it possible to articulate. It is also a further invitation to examine the unfolding history of philosophical religions in the historical figures and texts Fraenkel presents. Here, as elsewhere, the devil is in the detail. The book's general thesis can be summarized in such a review but for the many details that make up the full picture, the reader must be referred to the book itself.

Ohad Nachtomy

Bar-Ilan University

Fordham University

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