

Spinoza and Unitarianism

Let me begin this talk about Spinoza and Unitarianism by asking a question about his relationship to a different religion. My question is, was Spinoza a Jew? There's no single right answer to this question. How'd you'd respond answer might depend on whether you think of a person's Judaism in terms of his religion or ethnicity.

Ethnically, there is no question of Spinoza's origin. Both of his parents were Jewish, as were their parents. And indeed, Spinoza was raised as part of a thriving Sephardic Jewish community in Amsterdam. Religiously, however, many would dispute Spinoza's Jewishness. He was, after all, excommunicated by his own community, based on one heresy after another. He disputed the existence of free will. He disputed personal immortality. He disputed the idea of a loving God or a God of justice. He disputed the idea that there exists a creator separate from the creation. How could such a man be a Jew, at least in any conventional religious sense of the term?

Spinoza scholar and biographer Steven Nadler offers an interesting answer. In an interview on ABC Radio, Nadler termed Spinoza a "very good Jewish philosopher," but not a "good Jew." The first moniker is certainly easy enough to understand. As Nadler has pointed out, Spinoza's philosophy is largely a response to the fundamental questions of the Jewish intellectual tradition. He strenuously wrestles with the idea of God, which is how the people of Israel received their name. And, as Nadler points out, Spinoza's conclusions arguably are nothing more than what Maimonides would have come up with if he followed his rationalist thinking to its logical extreme, rather than feeling compelled by Jewish tradition to turn back before opening the door to heresy.

Undoubtedly, a high fraction of modern Jewish philosophers are fascinated by Spinoza. Similarly, our group here has always been replete with Jews. And yet, that doesn't answer my question. I didn't ask whether Spinoza was a philosopher of interest to Jews, or whether Spinoza's philosophy was harmonious with much that is Jewish. I asked whether Spinoza was a Jew. Nadler says that he wasn't a good one. And yet, by all indications, he was a loving, friendly, honest man who lived modestly, worked tirelessly, attempted to educate himself both Jewishly and otherwise, and was deeply devoted to his God. So how could he not be a *good Jew*, if he were Jewish?

The answer, perhaps, is that the mature Spinoza was no longer a member of *The Tribe*. At least he didn't consider himself one. Born with the name *Baruch* Spinoza, he came to see himself instead as *Benedict de Spinoza* after his excommunication, or "cherem." By all accounts, that cherem didn't bother him terribly, despite its strong language. "Cursed be he by day and cursed be he by night," declared the elders of the community, in jettisoning Spinoza from their midst. "Cursed be he when he lies down and cursed be he when he rises up. Cursed be he when he goes out and cursed be he when he comes in. The Lord will not spare him, but then the anger of the Lord and his jealousy shall smoke against that man, and all the curses that are written in this book shall lie upon him, and the Lord shall blot out his name from under heaven."

No matter, Spinoza thought. He wanted no part of the Jewish community. He went on to say some nice things about the Jewish legacy in history, and some not very nice things, but my overall impression of the post-cherem Spinoza was that he looked at the Jews from a distance. Spinoza simply stopped possessing a Jewish consciousness, which is what we have come to see as the *sin qua non* of a Jew. He did not seem himself as being at the foot of Sinai receiving the commandments, which is how Jews are commonly taught to understand themselves – less as *descendents* of the group that walked with Moses and Aaron than as people who *ourselves* walk with Moses and Aaron. Indeed, Spinoza philosophized in his *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus*, or *TTP*, that the Mosaic Law only applied to the generation who received that law, not to its descendents.

Benedict de Spinoza was no longer a Talmud student and son of a prosperous Jewish merchant. He was no longer an active member of the Spinoza family. He was a lens grinder by day and a secular philosopher by night. He hung out with a small group of liberals from a Protestant background, but he didn't join any organized Christian church either. He became, quite simply, a citizen of the world – one of the first such individuals who attained world prominence. His job was to seek the truth wherever it lay, and to work for the betterment of his fellow human beings, whether they were Jews or gentiles. His only affiliation was to his God.

Let's assume for a moment that the foremost expert on Spinoza was Spinoza himself. And if the question were asked about whether the mature Spinoza continued to be affiliated with Judaism, the answer would thus be in the negative. But if he wasn't Jewish, what was he? Should he be associated with any other organized religious community? What about communities that did not yet exist?

Some Jews like to think that the mature Spinoza would be a Reconstructionist or Reform Jew if he were alive today. But much of what binds those communities together is the ethnic identification of so many of its members, an identification that Spinoza ceased to have after the cherem. And while Reconstructionist and Reform rabbis freely accept converts who are attracted by the *religion* of Judaism, I suspect that most of these converts don't share the particular heresies expressed by Spinoza. For example, I suspect that what turns most of them on about Judaism is largely a God that is much more human, much more emotionally involved in the world, than Spinoza's. It's also fair to say that most of these converts are more apt than Spinoza to accept the doctrine of free will.

Even though I identify my philosophy as Spinozism and personally associate myself most with Reform and Reconstructionist Judaism, that doesn't mean that I think of the mature Spinoza in a similar vein. When the cherem was pronounced and he said "see ya" without much regret, one can certainly argue that he left the faith in all its forms. The question is, for what?

Like many modern Spinozists, I have long answered that question with the word "Unitarianism." To my knowledge, Unitarianism wasn't around in 17th century Amsterdam, and even if it were, I'm not sure Spinoza would have signed up. After all, he wasn't much of a "joiner." But when I think about all the religious communities

today, none seem to match Spinoza's philosophy and disposition as closely as Unitarian Universalism, or "UU," as it is commonly known. This past year, as I've studied the relationship between Spinoza and modern Unitarianism, I've been convinced more and more that this group should claim him as one of their own.

In short, Spinoza may have been *influenced* above all else by Judaism. Yet when he combined that influence with his passionate pursuit of truth and struck out on his own, I would argue that he left his heritage aside and adopted a religious philosophy that harmonizes well with what has later come to be known as UU. But before explaining the relationship between Spinoza's philosophy and the UU denomination, allow me some autobiographical notes.

My involvement with the UU movement goes back to my childhood. I was born in 1960, one year before the Unitarians and Universalists merged to form the UU denomination. I grew up in a North Bethesda neighborhood where there were families of essentially three types. There were the families with two Jewish parents, the families with no Jewish parents, and the UUs. My impression of the UUs was that they were extremely well-educated, committed to progressive politics, and not particularly observant of religious rituals.

In 1988, when my Methodist fiancé and I were looking for a place to get married, we decided upon a UU church. We were treated warmly there and were allowed to design our own ceremony. I wore a kephah and even stepped on a glass – or actually a wrapped up light bulb – just as you'd see in a Jewish wedding. I've never since considered leaving the Jewish faith, but I've always held a strong sense of gratitude to the UUs for providing a place for Kathy and me to join together spiritually. My assumption was that I could never repay the UUs for what they did for us. But a little over a year ago, I stumbled on a way in which I could begin to return the favor.

I was having coffee with some UU friends who I met as part of our Spinoza Society, and who were bemoaning the lack of spirituality in their community. They were concerned with the role of God in the UU movement. They didn't think the movement was contributing much to people's love for God. It wasn't providing a truly worshipful space.

They suggested that I go to the Southeastern Unitarian Universalist Summer Institute, otherwise known as "SUUSI," and address the community about a topic that is dear to my heart – the God of Spinoza. My UU friends shared my love for Spinoza's God, and they thought I might be able to express the basis of that love to other UUs who were wrestling with the idea of divinity. So I drafted a workshop proposal, and SUUSI accepted it. The workshop was entitled "Was Spinoza a U-U?" Let me tell you, it didn't take long before everyone in attendance would answer that question with a resounding *yes*. I was asked to extend the time of the workshop by an extra day and have since sermonized about Spinoza at different UU churches.

The more I think about the UU's interest in learning about Spinoza, the more I realize how much sense it makes. Truly great philosophers are often way ahead of their times

and can only be fully appreciated centuries after their deaths. Aristotle, for example, enjoyed an incredible renaissance in the late Middle Ages, and Spinoza is receiving an upsurge of notoriety today, as our world becomes more fractured and beset by fundamentalism. His teachings should have an appeal across many religious communities. But again, if I were to identify a single community that could gain most from embracing him as a spiritual ancestor, it would be the UUs.

There happens to be no official UU Scripture, but if there were, it might well be Spinoza's TTP. Just think for a moment about that book's basic doctrines. They've become the bedrock of modern liberal thought, which is the foundation of Unitarian Universalism.

"The true aim of government is liberty," Spinoza wrote. Government must "free every man from fear that he may live in all possible security." And that requires preserving certain basic freedoms --- the freedoms of speech, thought, expression and religion.

How, Spinoza asked, do we preserve those liberties?

- By freeing the state from any type of control whatsoever by the church.
- By freeing our personal philosophies from the yoke of Biblical literalism.
- By freeing our minds from superstition and prejudice.
- By recognizing that philosophy and religion are completely separate domains. One deals with the universal teachings of reason; the other with inculcating certain values, like obedience and piety.
- And, by stopping to look for a reasonable inner meaning behind every Scriptural passage. Spinoza was an original intent guy: he wanted to learn about the Bible's meaning by studying it historically, linguistically and scientifically, as if he were examining an archeological treasure. It's OK, he wrote, if we find that Scripture doesn't comport with reason, because, after all, the Bible is not a philosophy book. (This is the kind of stance you'd never encounter in Judaism -- not even in modern, progressive Judaism, where "Torah" and "truth" are still treated as synonyms.)

To the author of the TTP, the Biblical Hebrews were *not* distinguished by their metaphysical wisdom. They were distinguished only by their social organization -- their enlightened decisions to ensure security in property, develop techniques to alleviate poverty, and practice the separation of powers. In fact, Spinoza saw in ancient Hebrew civilization a political model for generations to come. He was an early advocate of democracy and taught that when power vests in a small group, it is wielded according to their passions, but when all citizens share power, they will more likely act according to reason.

All of those teachings fit well within what I have found to be the spirit of Unitarian Universalism -- an intellectual, progressive, and secular spirit, which nonetheless seeks to appreciate the unity and holiness of life, rather than simply to dissect it coldly like a pedestrian scientist. But let us not limit ourselves to comparing Spinoza's teachings to a

general impression of the UU mentality. Let's take a look at the seven official principles of the UU movement in the context of Spinoza's philosophy. I think you'd be hard pressed to find a philosopher from centuries past whose thought better harmonizes with those seven principles.

The UUs' first principle is "the inherent worth and dignity of every person." It sounds like a truism today, and yet the history of philosophy, not to mention religion, is littered with teachings that violate this principle. Spinoza, however, was one of its foremost adherents.

The law of God "is universal or common to all men," he wrote in the *TTP*. To each of us belongs the "natural light of reason," the highest power available to any philosopher.

In his *Political Treatise*, Spinoza criticized authoritarian societies that attempt to impose peace based upon "the sluggishness of its subjects, [who] are led about like sheep, to learn but slavery." Any such society, he said, "may more properly be called a desert than a commonwealth." By contrast, in Spinoza's ideal society, each of us would be allowed to think and speak however he or she pleased, and to express our unique selves freed from the fear of repercussion. In short, Spinoza did not merely proclaim his support of human dignity; he told us what we must do to make everyone's life as rich and as dignified as possible.

The second principle of the UU denomination is "justice, equity, and compassion in human relations." Here again, Spinoza had much to say in support. To him, the worship of God "consists in the practice of justice and love towards one's neighbor." He called that one of the fundamental principles of religion. Spinoza also spoke of justice as the rendering of every person his lawful due, and stated that it must extend equally to rich and poor alike.

We have already cited Spinoza's admiration for the way the ancient Hebrews guarded against permanent poverty. He cited, in particular, the institution of the Jubilee Year, which provided that every 50 years, whatever land poor people had sold because of their poverty was returned to them. Far from resembling today's conservatives, who talk as if private charity should suffice to take care of the needs of the poor, Spinoza wrote that "providing for the poor is a duty, which falls on the State as a whole, and has regard only to the general advantage."

Spinoza was definitely one who respected private property, but he was anything but a greedy person. "Men who are governed by reason," he wrote, "desire for themselves nothing which they do not also desire for the rest of mankind, and, consequently, are just, faithful, and honorable in their conduct." Spinoza was a strong believer in the power of human friendship and was, by all accounts, a gregarious, affable person. In short, this man was not only a great genius; he was also an authentic humanist.

The third principle of Unitarian Universalism is the "acceptance of one another and encouragement to spiritual growth in our congregations." This principle is actually two

different notions, both of which Spinoza affirmed with gusto. Turning first to the idea of acceptance, once again, Spinoza was ahead of his time. One and a half centuries before John Stuart Mill wrote *On Liberty*, Spinoza wrote about the need to respect each individual's choices. In the *TTP*, he said that "the safest way for a state is to lay down the rule that religion is comprised solely in the exercise of charity and justice, and that the rights of rulers in sacred, no less than in secular matters, should merely have to do with actions, but that every man should think what he likes and say what he thinks." In his *Political Treatise*, Spinoza went even further. He turned his attention to laws that seek to regulate vice, and essentially set forth the same doctrine that Mill later made famous in England. "All laws which can be broken without any injury to another are counted but a laughingstock," he said. In other words, we should respect not merely freedom of speech but even freedom of *conduct*, as long as no innocent third party is being harmed.

As for the need to encourage one another to grow spiritually, this was one of the key goals of Spinoza's most famous book, the *Ethics*. Dagobert Runes, in his abridged edition of that book, subtitled it "the road to inner freedom," and that is not an unfair characterization. Spinoza's *Ethics* set forth a coherent set of ideas intended to free us from being in thrall to our passions – or more specifically, it was designed to replace unhealthy passions with emotions that are spiritually uplifting. Unlike the Stoics, Spinoza didn't believe we could subdue our emotions altogether. Then again, he didn't feel like we needed to try. Spinoza thought that we could achieve feelings of contentment by understanding the causes of our hatreds and our fears, and recognizing that we all invariably behave as our own unique natures require us to behave. So why feel guilty when we, or others, fall short of the ideal? Ultimately, Spinoza was encouraging us to follow reason as our guide and to live in harmony with our world, while cutting ourselves slack when we let our passions get the better of us. That attitude forms a major part of his spirituality.

The fourth principle of the UU movement is "a free and responsible search for truth and meaning." I like to think of this as the Principle of Socrates – the idea of following the voice of reason, or truth, wherever and whenever she leads. Is there any question that Spinoza was one of Socrates' greatest disciples?

This is a man who was serving as a poor lens grinder when he was offered a job as philosophy professor at the University of Heidelberg. But he turned it down, fearing that the University's leaders would limit his ability to teach heresy ... or, in other words, truth. Four years later, the poor lens grinder died as a result of the tuberculosis he contracted from the dust particles he had been inhaling at work. Just think about it -- how many people today would opt for a living as a poor lens grinder, rather than as a well heeled professor, simply because limits would be placed on their right to teach heresy? You may have met such a person, but I'm not sure I have.

In his *Political Treatise*, Spinoza essentially invoked the need to create a free and open marketplace of ideas, which is none other than the Principle of Socrates focused not merely on the individual but on the society at large. In Spinoza's words, "men's natural abilities are too dull to see through everything at once; but by consulting, listening and

debating, they grow more acute, and while they are trying all means, they at least discover those which they want, which all approve, but no one would have thought of in the first instance.” In other words, we must create an environment that celebrates intellectuality and isn’t afraid of dissent and experimentation.

Perhaps the greatest enunciation of the fourth UU principle comes from Gotthold Lessing, the playwright whose love of Spinoza led to the great Pantheism Controversy of 1785. Lessing said that “The true value of a man is not determined by his possession, supposed or real, of Truth, but rather by his sincere exertion to get to the Truth. It is not possession of the Truth, but rather the pursuit of Truth by which he extends his powers, and in which his ever-growing perfectibility is to be found. Possession makes one passive, indolent, and proud. If God were to hold all Truth concealed in his right hand, and in his left only the steady and diligent drive for Truth, ... and to offer me the choice, I would with all humility take the left hand.”

I cannot imagine being inspired by Spinoza and *not* agreeing with Lessing wholeheartedly.

The fifth official principle of the UU movement is “the right of conscience and the use of the democratic process within our congregations and in the society at large.” To reiterate what I have said before, Spinoza is famous for being one of the most articulate early proponents of both the freedom of conscience and the value of democratic governance.

“It is almost impossible,” he taught in the *TTP*, “that the majority of a people, especially if it be a large one, should agree in an irrational design.” That a man like Spinoza wouldn’t trust a dictator or even an oligarchy is hardly surprising given his personal history. Remember that this is a man who at age 23 was ejected from his childhood community by its elders. And even outside of that community, though he happened to live in the most modern and enlightened state in all of Europe, he was still regarded as a wicked, godless man by the authorities of church and state alike. Such a man could hardly associate himself with the forces of authoritarianism and repression. How could he avoid casting his lot with the opinions of the majority?

Surely the most horrific moment of Spinoza’s life took place 16 years after the *cherem*, when his most beloved statesman, Johan de Witt, together with de Witt’s brother, was viciously attacked by a mob that included respectable burghers. Just think of those words – “respectable burghers” – and picture something like Rembrandt’s *The Syndics of the Clothmakers’ Guild*. Then imagine how Spinoza must have felt to learn how these and other men turned on his political hero. The mob killed the de Witt brothers, hung their bodies by their feet, stripped them naked, and tore them to pieces. Sadly, Spinoza never had the opportunity to write at length about democracy after that event; he had just started doing so when he died. Still, according to Nadler, there’s no reason to believe the de Witt killings changed Spinoza’s mind about democracy. Both his philosophy and his emotional biases inclined him toward that principle.

The sixth principal of the UU movement is “the goal of world community with peace, liberty and justice for all.” We have already seen that Spinoza wrote that whatever we desire for ourselves, we should also desire for the rest of mankind. We have also seen that Spinoza is associated not with narrow parochialism but with a universalistic outlook that has caused him to be viewed by some as the first true citizen of the world. What we haven’t yet spoken about is Spinoza’s role as a man of peace.

Spinoza wrote in the *Political Treatise* that “peace is not mere absence of war, but is a virtue that springs from force of character.” The importance in which he placed this virtue may be derived from two Spinozist principles – his affirmation of cosmic unity and his emphasis on universal brotherhood. When we intuitively treat other people as extensions of ourselves, and when we recognize our ties to the whole of nature, we will necessarily eschew violence as a general matter – for to do violence to others would truly represent violence to ourselves. In the *Ethics*, Spinoza goes further to say that peace isn’t something you create simply by avoiding something. You have to work for it. “Men,” he said, “can provide for their wants much more easily by mutual help ... [O]nly by uniting their forces can they escape from the dangers that on every side beset them.”

That leads me to the seventh and final UU principle: “respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part.” I will have considerably more to say about Spinoza’s acceptance of this principle when we turn our attention to his conception of God. Suffice it to say for now that there is probably no thinker in the Western world more associated with this principle than Spinoza.

So, let me ask the question again. Was Spinoza a UU? Playing devil’s advocate, I could certainly accuse myself of rigging the deck with the above analysis. Fairness requires me to mention that Spinoza did sometimes express pre-modern ideas, most notably his comments about men being better suited than women to run a government. But is it really necessary to remind you that Spinoza was a 17th century man who possessed some 17th century views? Is that really such an indictment of Spinoza as a sage?

So yes, I acknowledge that some of Spinoza’s beliefs would be politically incorrect if they were espoused today. But I have no qualms in saying that, based strictly on the consideration of the seven official UU principles, you’d have to say that his philosophy was UU through and through. In fact, however, when you look beyond the seven principles toward the underlying spirit of Unitarian Universalism, you’ll find yet another parallel between UU and Spinoza.

Some of you may recall that when I did my presentation on Goethe, I recited his poem *Prometheus*, which thoroughly mocked the belief in a God that lovingly intervenes in this world. Goethe refers to that God as the “sleeper above” who has never truly relieved the burdened man’s anguish or assuaged the frightened man’s tears, and has simply caused people to hate this life and flee into thoughts about the hereafter. That poem harmonizes with Spinoza’s philosophy, and especially the Appendix to Part I of the *Ethics*, in which he points out the absurdity of the traditional conception of God. But Spinoza would never have published anything like *Prometheus* because of its mocking tone. He was too

afraid of the powers-that-be to challenge them with ridicule. After all, this was a man who affixed a seal on all his correspondence with the word “caute,” meaning caution. He wanted to speak the truth, but not in a way that would cause him to meet the same fate as the deWitts.

Similarly, the UUs are cautious as well – for my taste, too cautious. Modern UUs, at least those in America, need not fear an angry mob. They have the luxury of speaking their thoughts directly, and rhetorically, if the effect would be more powerful. And yet, for some reason, they cannot seem to join as a group and state emphatically anything controversial that they oppose. Just look at the seven principles – all are phrased in affirming, loving terms. Not one is provocative. Not one could have been written by Nietzsche, another of Spinoza’s and Goethe’s greatest disciples.

Perhaps the caution I’ve noticed in the UUs stems from their tremendous tolerance of ideological diversity ... and diversity generally. Perhaps it is so important for UUs to treat other people’s views with respect that the denomination would never think of attacking, let alone mocking, traditional religious doctrines – at least not *officially*. After spending a week at SUUSI getting to know scores of active UUs, however, I have to say that few ideas more unify this group than their rejection of a God who intervenes with the laws of nature. You wouldn’t know this from the seven principles, but when you talk to UUs one by one, I’m convinced you’d accept that statement as true. The UUs’ disdain for the belief in a supernatural, providential God actually goes hand in hand with their progressive politics. Because UUs are so uncomfortable counting on a God or Messiah rescuing us from environmental degradation and other dangers, they are especially insistent on the need for social action to solve the problems that plague our world.

I mention this as prologue because it sets up an incredible opportunity for Spinoza’s philosophy to make a difference in the UU community today. That community is currently undergoing a membership crisis. In a nation of 300 million people, no more than a quarter of a million, or less than 1/10th of 1%, are affiliated with a UU church. Whereas many other religions are gaining in membership, due to the overall increase in the American population, the UUs are stagnating. And their ministers will tell you in private that a major reason for this demographic crisis is the movement’s failure to come to grips with the topic of God.

For the most part, I’ve found, the community’s older members want to scrap the idea of God altogether. They associate the God concept with the Biblical deity who may harshly judge us one day and bestow mercy on us the next. That God just doesn’t sit well with the UU sensibility. By contrast, younger UUs are more open to the concept of divinity. They long for the type of spiritual sustenance that you can’t find by staying late at the office, or by arguing about politics at a union hall.

From what I can tell, UU ministers sense the value of appealing to the younger crowd and offering them divinity without the supernatural miracles. In short, they want UU to embrace God, just not *the* God that is reflected in the literal words of Scripture.

Do we know of any alternative to the traditional deity? You guessed it – the God of Einstein, Goethe, and yes, Spinoza. When I talk about Spinoza at UU churches, I talk a lot about his God. And in doing so, I invoke the Metaphor of the Sky from my novel, *The Creed Room*.

For those of you who haven't read the book, Sam Kramer, a character who loves Spinoza, is asked to explain how Spinoza has influenced him. And he responds by reminding his friend about the night sky. Not the polluted D.C. sky. I'm talking the Wyoming sky -- the one with lots and lots of stars. It's awe inspiring and seems limitless. But astronomers can't afford to simply wonder and gaze. If they want to get paid, they'd better analyze. So they focus on bits and pieces of the sky. Constellations, say, like Orion.

To the Spinozist, Kramer says, all the traditional western conceptions of God are like planets and stars in the same constellation. God the Father, call him Alpha Ori. Adonai, Beta Ori. Allah, Gamma Ori. They're all great, and unique too, but they're also fairly similar to one another. Relative to this big beautiful sky we could be contemplating, they're just specks of light in a very limited part of space. When Spinozists think about God, though, we want to reflect on the entire sky, not just fall in love with one tiny constellation.

Think of it this way, Kramer continues. Theologians love to paint a conceptual picture of God. God is a *He*. He is all-loving, all-wise and all-powerful. He acts in accordance with a human-like will. He is separate from the world, which He alone created. He is incorporeal.

This picture is known throughout the western world. Lots of people buy into it. Others call it crap, and say they don't believe in God at all. To a Spinozist, this whole debate is ridiculously narrow. It relates only to one little constellation in the sky, and we have a right to see God in any part of the sky we want to.

We don't let other people define God for us, Kramer concludes, we define God for ourselves. And we start with the principle of the sky – its awesomeness, its limitlessness, its grandeur. That's where we'll find *our* God.

For me, that metaphor is the best way of illustrating why Spinoza's God is so inspiring to so many of us. And I also happen to think that this notion is very consistent with the open-minded and open-hearted spirit of UU. But when Kramer is finished comparing Spinoza's God to a star outside of Orion, his friend tells him that she doesn't just want to hear about how Spinoza has freed us to look at God differently. She wants to know more about Spinoza's God itself – she wants a telescope to visualize that star, or if need be, the entire sky.

Not surprisingly, when I present Spinoza's philosophy to the UUs, I always bring my telescope. Allow me here to explain at some length how I attempt to capsule Spinoza's view of God in my presentation.

To begin, I point out that Spinoza offers God without the mythologies of organized religion – in other words, without the anthropomorphisms. Spinoza is somewhat aptly referred to as a pantheist: one who equates God with the world. If nature exists as a unified whole, then there must be a God, at least in one of the ways that Spinoza uses the term. Repeatedly, in the *Ethics*, he invoked the famous phrase “God or nature,” suggesting to some that his God *is* nature – nothing more, and nothing less.

That’s obviously how Richard Dawkins understands Spinoza. Dawkins began his bestselling screed *The God Delusion* by saying that while he’s about to ridicule the existence of God for 300 pages, he’s not challenging the God of Spinoza. Why? Because, Dawkins says, it is merely “sexed up atheism.”

To me, though, the common “pantheistic” view of Spinoza is a little simplistic. If you read his *Ethics* carefully, you’ll see that Spinoza doesn’t merely equate God with nature, if by nature we mean the sum total of all the animals, vegetables, minerals and particles in the world. He goes on to define God in a more transcendent sense. For Spinoza, the point of departure in all of philosophy is “the knowledge of the union existing between the mind and the whole of nature.” And with respect to God in particular, he starts with the key principle of radical unity – that there exists complete unity of substance, transcending all the multiplicity that we see, touch or hear. Spinoza is also unwilling to impose limits on the power and scope of this unified substance. To Spinoza, simple *Being*, whether organic or inorganic, is divine. God is limitless and unbounded in *every* respect; God is, in all senses of the word, ultimate.

Thus, whereas children of Abraham traditionally think of God as the pinnacle of goodness, Spinozists see God as the pinnacle of *Being*. Nothing exists outside of God – there’s no separate “creation” or world. God creates, God expresses, from within. And God is behind everything. Accordingly, we don’t just find a little bit of goodness, or Godliness in our world. We find our world, our whole world, including Hitler, *in God*.

Spinozists conceive of God through dualisms, just not the traditional ones like mind versus body, or good versus evil. Traditionally, God is associated strictly with the incorporeal, the spiritual. And the assumption is made that spirit or soul is metaphysically separate from the corporeal world. In fact, to claim that God has a body is generally viewed as the epitome of primitive religion. Well, if that’s the case, we Spinozists are primitive. Spinoza taught that the mind and the body are in fact unified. To use his words, “the order and connection of ideas is the same as the order and connection of things,” meaning bodies. That’s another way of saying that everything that exists can be comprehended in two ways – as mind and as body – but it’s really one and the same thing. Antonio Damasio, a prominent scientist, has credited Spinoza with anticipating modern neurobiological research with his teachings on the mind-body relationship.

Similarly, just as Spinoza railed against the dualism of Descartes, he also criticized the traditional theological teachings about good and evil. Traditional churchgoers regularly

hear about God's beneficence and love, as if He represents the source of all that we deem good, but not necessarily what we deem evil. To Spinoza, though, everything – both the good and the so-called evil – is in God. “As for the terms good and bad,” he wrote, “they indicate no positive quality in things regarded in themselves. . . . One and the same thing can be at the same time good, bad, and indifferent. For instance, music is good for him that is melancholy, bad for him that mourns; [and] for him that is deaf, it is neither good nor bad.” In other words, we call something good or evil simply based on whether we desire it or wish to avoid it, but in both cases, we are talking about divine beings.

It should be obvious by now that to Spinoza, God is less identified by the opposition between two poles than by their unity. This is the purpose of his dualisms – to identify, in opposites, the threads that tie them together. And no dualism is more essential to grasping his philosophy of God than the distinction between *simple Being* or *Substance*, on the one hand, and *beings*, on the other.

To Spinoza, we locate God based on combining two ways of looking at the world – one as self-caused *Being* and the other as the product of a causal chain of *beings*. Since there is nothing outside of God, God is truly regarded in both of these respects – first, as the eternal, infinite, self-caused and universal substance; and second, as natural beings in so far as they are the product of other natural beings in a great interrelated organism. We humans are thus part of God – our thoughts are God's thoughts. But we are each merely one of an infinite number of beings that comprise God. To use the organism metaphor, we are but individual cells in a greater whole.

Stated differently, Spinoza has become identified with the phrase “determination is negation,” which he wrote in one of his many letters that survive to this day. That phrase means that in order to determine the uniqueness of a rock, a tree, or a person, you need to locate that thing in a larger universe -- its particular place, its particular time, and its unique powers. But in order to do that, you need to ascertain its limits – where it is not, when it is not, and what it is not. In other words, you must negate it and bound it, in order to grasp its form. Spinoza's God, by contrast, is the one concept of which I am aware that is not, in that sense, determinable. It is the synthesis of all dichotomies -- the pure *absence* of negation; absolute, limitless affirmation.

Spinoza talks about looking at the world *sub species aeternitatis* – under the form of eternity. And from that standpoint, there is clearly a realm of unity that transcends our world of birth and death. This is why Spinozists know their philosophy not as pantheism, which simply says that the world is equal to God, but rather as *panentheism*, which says that the world is *in* God. Spinoza's God might not be supernatural, but he remains transcendent. In fact, to quote Spinoza: “To those who ask why God did not so create all men, that they should be governed only by reason, I give no answer but this: because matter was not lacking to him for the creation of every degree of perfection from highest to lowest; or, more strictly, because the laws of his nature are so vast, as to suffice for the production of everything conceivable by an infinite intelligence.”

That is Spinoza's philosophy in a nutshell. Don't expect God to conform to some human-like ideal. We have a very definite form, a very limited form. But God is an unlimited, unified, infinite, and eternal whole. The parts of God – including each of us -- act in the way we do based on our own creative natures, which are subsumed within the divine nature. We are no freer to change who we are than a stone is free to stop falling when dropped from a tall building. It is precisely views like that one that make scientists and philosophers love Spinoza, but have caused so many theologians to dismiss him.

With science and philosophy, Spinoza believed, we can come to understand many truths about this divine eternal whole. And one of these truths is that just as physical space and time is infinite, so too is the domain of thought. If an idea can be conceived, it must somehow come to life, in one dimension or another. We have no reason to know that to be true, but to speculate anything else would not be respectful to the greatness of the infinite God.

In presenting my ideas to UUs, I contend that if their denomination is looking for authentic conceptions of God that hold up in light of modern science and Biblical scholarship, Spinoza's is definitely one of them. Surely there are others. But if for no other reason than that Spinoza's God was conceived by a man who was, if not the Moses or Abraham of the UU movement, at least its Jacob or Joseph, UUs need to study this God and see for themselves why Spinoza has inspired so many of humankind's greatest luminaries, such as Locke, Jefferson, Goethe, Schelling, Hegel, Heine, Nietzsche, Freud, and Einstein.

Any spiritual community that hopes to retain their teenagers and young adults must be able to point to great historical figures who illustrate what it means to exemplify the community's values. As a Jew, I can't overestimate how much of our survival has depended on the attention bestowed on our legends from centuries past. They have become incredible sources of pride for all Jews. For some reason, though, UUs haven't felt the need to devote that kind of attention to figures like Spinoza whom they can honestly claim as one of their own. Why not seize on his example and use it as a teaching tool? Bertrand Russell called him the most noble and lovable of the great western philosophers – surely, UU teenagers can understand what made him so. And his political and theological teachings are comprehended easily enough – in fact, as we've seen, UUs can go through each of the seven principles and point to one Spinozist teaching after another to illustrate them. As for Spinoza's views on God, all UUs really need to teach is one form or another of the Metaphor of the Sky. Just give the teenagers a telescope – or for that matter a microscope – and challenge them to search for God anywhere they care to look.

Before I conclude with a poem, I'd like to point out one final thought that seemed to touch a number of people at SUUSI. What I'm about to say applies especially to UUs, but you shouldn't have to read between the lines very far to realize that it applies to everyone who has up until now rejected the idea of prayer and the value of the word God.

In my second novel, which should be coming out either this year or the beginning of next year under the name *Moses the Heretic*, I evoke the thought of UUs being ideally suited to mediating between the warring parties in the Middle East. Quite simply, UUs are temperamentally and intellectually poised to play the role of neutral facilitators for peace. But that can only happen, I believe, if UUs demonstrate an empathic connection with the ultimate concern of religious Jews and Muslims. And that means joining them when they pray to the one, ultimate God.

I've heard atheists say that they can build bridges with religious people simply by affirming principles such as the devotion to universal brotherhood and the respect for diversity. While that might be true, I wonder how strong those bridges will be. In terms of making a connection with moderate but passionate people of faith, there is no substitute for joining together in prayer.

That activity -- communal prayer -- forms much of the lifeblood of both Judaism and Islam. When religious Semites come together in our holiest of times, we are inevitably chanting out loud or praying silently in groups, preferably large groups, and always first and foremost about God. From the outside, our rituals must seem ridiculously redundant, but in truth, the idea of God serves almost like a mantra. It allows us to focus our whole being on how much we love to be alive, how thankful we are for this life, and how we wish to honor above all else the source of life. There are few activities if any that are more intense, more fulfilling, or more beautiful than passionate, communal prayer. To join together in that manner is to build a bridge that is difficult to shake.

Remember that you don't need to embrace another's exact conception of God in order to join with them in prayer and accordingly be invited into their hearts and ultimately into a dialogue. But you just might need to show religious Jews and Muslims the respect of embracing the word God -- and to take the time to invest that word with some unique, transcendent meaning that is worthy of comparisons to Adonai or Allah. Ultimately, the decision as to whether to embrace divinity does not center on your views of metaphysics or science, but rather on your politics. As a political matter, do we want to declare war on religion? Or do we want to think of ourselves as men and women of God, albeit free-thinking ones who seek to help religion evolve in a more rational, universalistic direction? I think you know where I stand on that choice. By repeatedly using the name God in the most laudatory terms, Spinoza showed where he stood as well.

Finally, I want to conclude with a reading from Goethe. As a Spinozist, he didn't merely rail against the B.S. in religion, he also extolled spirituality when it's in harmony with the voice of reason. To Goethe, as for me and so many other Spinozists, religion at its best is a celebration of the unity in life. It's about the decision to invest the world with holiness -- so that we don't merely remove the shackles of superstition, we become enchanted with the simple *Being* that remains when those shackles are removed. I find this same spirit at the heart of Unitarian Universalism.

In this poem, Goethe reveals not merely his Spinozism but also his love for one of the world's great Abrahamic religions, which also happens to be the most reviled religion in 21st century America. The poem is called *A Thousand Forms*.

Take on a thousand forms, hide as you will, O Most-Beloved, at once I know 'tis
you
Conceal yourself in magic veils, and still, Presence-in-All, at once I know 'tis you

The cypress thrusting artless up and young, Beauty-in-Every-Limb, I know 'tis
you
The channeled crystal wave life flows along, All-Gentling-Tender One, I know
'tis you

You in the fountain plume's unfolding tip, All-Playful-One, what joy to know 'tis
you
Where cloud assumes a shape and changes it, one-Manifold-in-All, I know 'tis
you

I know, when flowers veil the meadow ground, O Starry-Twinkle-Hued, in beauty
you
When thousand-armed the ivy gropes around, Environer-of-All, I know 'tis you

When on a mountain sparks of dawn appear, at once, Great Gladdener, I welcome
you
Then with the sky above rotund and clear, then, Opener-of-the-Heart, do I breathe
you

What with bodily sense and soul I know, Teacher-of-All, I know alone through
you
All hundred names on Allah I bestow, with each will echo then a name for you