

A NEW DOCUMENT ON DE WITT'S ATTITUDE TOWARDS SPINOZA

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Up till now the secondary literature showed much speculation on the relationship between Holland's grand pensionary Jan de Witt and Spinoza. It was generally accepted, that their relation must have been a positive one, also a personal one. If one looks for the foundation of this hypothesis, it appears to be rather narrow and uncertain. It consists of the following pieces:

1. J.M.Lucas writes in *La vie et l'esprit de Mr. Benoit de Spinoza*:

Il eut l'avantage d'être connu de Monsieur le Pensionnaire de Wit, qui voulut apprendre de lui les Mathématiques, et qui lui faisoit souvent l'honneur de le consulter sur des matières importantes. Mais il avoit si peu d'empressement pour les biens de la Fortune, qu'après la mort de Monsieur de Wit, qui lui donnoit une pension de deux cents Florins, ayant montré le sein de son Mecene aux Héritiers, qui faisoient quelques difficultez de la lui continuer, il le leur mit entre les mains avec autant de tranquillité que s'il eût des fonds d'ailleurs (Freudenthal 1899: 15-16).

There are reasons to doubt the reliability of this information, especially the second half of the fragment. It is hardly believable, that De Witt, who clearly suffers from lust for money and does his utmost to collect as much as possible, would have been willing to support Spinoza financially with such a high amount yearly. Moreover, Spinoza did not need it and certainly preferred to remain independent from such a mighty governor. In his turn De Witt was clever enough to surmise, that an eventual publicity about his subventioning the monstrous atheist, known as "a dangerous instrument of the repub-

lic"(Freudenthal 1899: 119), would without any doubt create political difficulties for him, of which he had already enough. Further: nothing is known about a connection between Spinoza and De Witt's heirs.

On the other hand it is quite possible, that Spinoza had contacts with De Witt in the circle of mathematicians around the Leiden professor of mathematics, Frans van Schooten junior (1615-1660), who published in his Latin edition of Descartes' *Geometria* (1659-1660) not only two papers¹ and a letter of Johannes Hudde (1628-1704), but also a contribution from the pen of Jan de Witt. It is known from the Borch fragment (Klever 1989), that the contemporary eye saw Spinoza and Hudde as companions in mathematics and radical cartesianism. Like Spinoza, Hudde as well as De Witt were for many years involved in a mathematical discussion with Huygens, as appears in the latter's correspondence. All four were interested in the calculation of chance, on which Huygens, De Witt and Spinoza² had each a publication. But it seems to us improbable that a mathematical genius like De Witt³ "wanted to learn from Spinoza mathematics." This smells of hagiography and undermines likewise the information about De Witt consulting Spinoza about important matters. Political advisors could hardly get access to him⁴ and he, in his turn, was not much inclined to ask advice nor to follow it.

2. Sebastian Kortholt writes in the preface of the reprint of his father's (Christian's) work *De Tribus Impostoribus* (1700), that Spinoza was very ambitious, in such a way,

qui vel cum Wittis amicis suis crudeliter dilacerari sublatius optavit,
modo vita brevi gloriae cursus foret sempiternus (Freudenthal 1899:
27).

As I tried to confirm in the appendix of Klever (1991), Leibniz' story about Spinoza's indignation and his designing the words 'Ultimi barbarorum' on a poster, in order to testify to it etc., may well have been historical. Leibniz' confession, dating from the end of 1676 (v. Freudenthal 1899: 201) might well have been the source for the rumour about Spinoza's personal friendship with the De Witts. But according to Occam's dictum 'entia non sunt multiplicanda sine necessitate', the simplest explanation ought to be considered the best.

¹ *De reductione aequationum* and *De maximis and minimis*.

² Spinoza's was his letter (No.38) to Johannes van der Meer. It is now generally accepted, that the *Reeckening van Kanssen* is spurious.

³ Huygens declared in 1659, that De Witt was "a scientist who was very expert in geometry and algebra" (Huygens, *Oeuvres Compltes*, II: 411).

⁴ An example is the failed endeavour of Franciscus Van den Enden during the second English war in 1665 (Klever 1992: 64-72).

Even in the case that Spinoza had a bad relationship with De Witt, he would have been heavily shocked by the uncontrollable cruelty of the people, by which men of great dignity and merit were illegally killed. This does not in the least improve the political situation, as he remarks on occasion of the "fatale exemplum" of the execution of Charles the Second in England. "Novus monarcha summo studio novas leges statuere conabitur" (TTP 18: 226, 22-23).

My conclusion is that also the Kortholt fragment is rather weak, especially if one looks also to the immediate, very tendentious context, which does not need further commentary.

3. Colerus provides us with an intimation, which is too general for drawing conclusions from it. In his *Levensbeschrijving van B. de Spinoza* (Amsterdam 1705: 26) he writes:

Hier heeft hy, na men my beregt heeft, 3 à 4 jaren doorgebracht, terwyl hy sig hier in 's-Gravenhage veele vrienden, zo onder militaire als andere personen van stant en aanzien maakte, die garen met hem omgingen en redeneerden.

'Military and other respected persons of the high class': that is not of necessity an indication, that De Witt, who in those years behaved like an absolute monarch, belonged to that circle of intellectual friends. There are enough other candidates, among which Van Beuningen and Beverningh, and a lot of 'esprits forts'.

The title of 'Articul X', 'Werd met veele Grooten bekend', may have played a misleading role in the historiography. 'The Great men', intended in this chapter, are all from the post-Wittian period, just like the "veel aanzienlyke luiden" who attended Spinoza's funeral and paid him the last honour.

4. Finally we read in the Stolle-Hallmann Journal, that Spinoza, after moving from Voorburg to The Hague,

mit grossen Herren bekannt worden [ist] (Freudenthal 1899: 222).

It is also said in this biographical source, that

Man habe alsdenn seine Werke gleich aus seinen Msstis zusammengesucht und unter dem Titel Opera posthuma im Haag ediret. Sie würden damit vielleicht nicht ohne Gefahr gewesen seyn, wenn ihnen nicht der Rektor im Haag (so Spinosae guter Freund gewest) an der Hand gestanden und sie selbige ohne Benennung eines Druckortes publiziert hätte (224).

For chronological reasons it is impossible, that the 'Rector im Haag' can be identified as the grandpensionary. Concerning the remark on Spinoza's acquaintancy with 'great people' in The Hague, I refer to my comments in paragraph 3.

The travellers are finally told by Bayle:

Und ob er wohl von Ministris zuweilen zu sie invitiret und in rebus ad statum pertinentibus consuliret worden (als worin er sehr scharfsichtig gewest), so habe er doch davon kein Geld gezogen (230).

This phrase is clearly expressed as an unconfirmed hypothesis. The well informed explorer Bayle must have read it in the clandestine manuscript *La vie et l'esprit*. Like me he expresses his doubts concerning De Witt's financial support.

5. The most interesting item is perhaps the communication in a pamphlet against Jan de Witt, named *Sleutel ontsluitende de Boecke kas van de Witte Bibliotheek, met zijn Appendix. Waer in de duystere namen der Boecken klaerlijck werden vertoont en bekent gemaect*. Door J.B. Bibliothecarius. 's Gravenhage, By Nil Volentibus Arduum. 1672. Voor Intelligentibus.

This fake catalogue mentions on p. 15, n. 33:

Tractatus Theologico-Politicus etc. Door den afvalligen Jood Spinoza uyt de Hel voortgebracht, waer in op een ongehoorde Atheïsten manier bewesen werdt, dat Godts woort door de Philosophie moet uytgeleyt en verstaen werden, het welck met kennis van Mr. Jan publijck gedrukt is (Freudenthal 1899: 194, Van der Linde 1918).

What to think about this curious message? Is it more than a malicious guess? Freudenthal considers it as an expression of the phantasy of the exasperated people. I think he is right.⁵

Surveying the range of these remarks, one cannot but agree with Guido van Suchtelen's conclusion⁶: "Un contact personnel entre Johan de Witt et Spinoza n'est pas prouvé."

But this does not exclude a benevolent view of the one upon the other; how about that? Did they like each other and respect each other's work?

⁵ Mind, nonetheless, the striking interpretation of the TTP as a work, which is fully in line with Meyer's *Philosophia Sacrae Scripturae Interpres* (1666).

⁶ In his annotation to the French Meinsma (1983): 343.

The TTP as a critique of the Dutch aristocratic system

De Witt (v. Rowen 1978) was part and parcel of the aristocratic political system, a system which was through and through corrupt. The 'regenten' looked only after their own well-being; they considered the state as their own state. In fact they suppressed and exploited the people. Spinoza's master, Franciscus Van den Enden, had launched a sharp accusation at their address in his *Kort Verhael van Nieuw Nederlandt* (1662) and *Vrye Politijke Stellingen* (1665). These works, with their sharp analysis of the aristocratic diseases, were a call-up for a revolution and the installation of a true democracy, in which political power would be exercised by the citizens themselves and the citizens only. It was no wonder that the political activist Van den Enden came into conflict with the Amsterdam magistrate and finally refuted to Paris (v. Klever 1992: 50-64).

De Witt certainly knew about his dangerous ideas and his clash with the Amsterdam magistrate. His wife was a member of a mighty Amsterdam regenten family; apart from that he had many private economic interests in this town. Its pensionary, Pieter de Groot, was a personal friend of his. Spinoza's relation to Van den Enden cannot have been a secret for him.

The publication of the *Tractatus theologico-politicus* in the year 1670, when Holland was in a deep economic crisis and under the hot pressure of its envious neighbours, must have opened his eyes for the growing danger of a revolution. One cannot imagine that he, a clever intellectual, did not recognize the democratic tendency of the work. Democracy, defined as the "coetus universus hominum, qui collegialiter summum ius ad omnia quae potest habet", is characterized as the "imperium maxime naturale". It is also closest to the "libertatem, quam natura unicuique concedit. Nam in eo nemo ius suum naturale ita in alterum transfert, ut nulla sibi in posterum consultatio sit, sed in maiorem totius societatis partem, cuius ille unam facit; atque hac ratione omnes manent, ut antea in statu naturali, aequales" (TTP16: 193; 195). These sounds were more than an echo of Van den Enden's rebelling voice. The TTP, therefore, was not only a plea for 'libertas philosophandi', as indicated by its sub-title; it was also a cry for a change of the system towards liberty and equality for all citizens. The work was full of criticism. The military, to mention only one example, ought to be constituted "by all the citizens" and not by mercenaries. "Nam certum est, principes sola militia, cui stipendia solvunt, populum opprimere posse; deinde eos nihil magis timere quam libertatem militum concivium..." (TTP 17: 213, 1-3). This was the Dutch situation.

The TTP which immediately caused so much turmoil and a gale of indignation on account of its 'atheism', must have been a shock for De Witt for another reason too: because it was an attack on the dirty aristocratic structure of the society for which he, more than other 'regents', was uttermost responsible. The TTP was clearly the work of a criticist and a political opponent like Van den Enden. Rather often appeared in the text the word 'collegialiter' or 'collective',⁷ by which a claim was laid on another type of government than the actual one, in which the power was in the hand of a few, to their own behalf. A 'paucitas regentium', as Spinoza would call it later in TP 10/14, leads necessarily to the ruin of a state. The state, therefore, has to be reformed to a system, in which "omnes ex communi decreto [agunt]" (TTP 20: 245, 24-25). No, De Witt could not become enthusiastic about this work which undermined the position of his caste. He must have disapproved it.

Disapproval of the TTP by De Witt

Well, this conclusion is now explicitly confirmed in a reliable document which Giuseppina Totaro discovered in the University Library of Leiden. Against the above sketched background this finding is an important event which may contribute to a renewed lecture of the TTP and a revised assessment of Spinoza's standpoint in politics.

Totaro's field of research was: the first reception of Spinoza's thought in the Florence of Cosimo III (v. Totaro, forthcoming). In this context the many contacts between Magliabechi and Jacobus Gronovius (1645-1716) were carefully explored. The document which regards us is an unpublished notebook or diary wick Gronovius kept when travelling to Spain and Italy in 1672 and 1673.⁸

The author

Jacob Gronovius was the son of a Leiden professor, according to his biographer⁹ the very famous Johannes Fredericus Gronovius (1611-1671), "one of the most learned men of his time in classical philology". The son, Jacob, enjoyed a

⁷ 5 times in a prominent setting: twice in the fifth, twice in the sixteenth and once in the 20th chapter. Cf. G. Totaro & M. Veneziani (1993).

⁸ Dousa Kamer of the University Library Leiden, signature: LTK 859.

⁹ Bierma, *Nieuw Nederlands Bibliografisch Woordenboek* I: 989-992.

first class education in classical languages and law at the academies of Deventer and Leiden. In 1670 he travelled to England where he visited Oxford and Cambridge and made acquaintance with Casaubonus, Stanley, Pocock and Pearson. In 1671 he went to Paris to meet people like Chapelain, Valois and Thévenot. He conversed with the great men of politics, which resulted in his participating in a Dutch embassy, under the leadership of Adriaan Paets, to Spain in 1672. From there he went to Italy, to the court of the Grand Duke of Tuscany, where he also cooperated with Magliabechi, the librarian of the Laurentiana. In 1679 he was appointed professor of history and greek language in the Leiden Academy. Like his father he became a great and well known classical scholar.¹⁰

The diary

The name of the diary is: *Dagverhael eener reis naar Spanje en naar Italie in 1672,'73* ('Record of a journey to Spain and Italy in 1672.'73'). It consists of two handwritten 'cahiers' of the oblong format of 20 x 6 cm (8vo). The first one concerns the period between the 1st of June till 27 July 1672 and describes the journey from the departure unto Madrid. It has 37 pages of text. The text is, however, not continuous nor complete, since many pages are torn out and others have missing parts. The handwriting is well readable.

The fragment

Omnes athei digni sunt carcere, ut Spinoza. Contra, tam fervide propugno, perquirendos quotquot modo credunt poenam et praemia superesse post hanc vitam. Want hoc vinculum moet niet gescheurd worden. Als Spinoza gehoord had, dat syn Exc. syn boek misprese had, sont hy iemand an syn Exc. om met hem daer van te spreken, doch kreeg tot antwoord, dat syn Exc. sulck een man niet begeerde over syn dorpel te sien.

¹⁰ Bierma, *Nieuw Nederlands Bibliografisch Woordenboek* I: 985-988.

A few experts in seventeenth century handwriting¹¹ were consulted in order to arrive at the reading presented here. The greatest difficulty was the word on the third line, which is rendered with 'perquirendos'. Readings like 'parcendos' or 'ferendos', have to be rejected on account of the characters which are clearly written. One is more or less seduced to accept them on account of the opposition to the first sentence, which is made with 'contra'.

Translation

All atheists deserve the jail, like Spinoza. On the other hand, I am a fervent protagonist, to examine and persecute also those people, who only believe to be elevated above punishment and recompense after this life. This shackle may not be broken. When Spinoza was told that his Excellency had disapproved his book, he sent somebody to his Excellency in order to speak with him on the subject. But he was answered that his Excellency did not want to see him pass his threshold.

Contents

The fragments contains the following affirmations:

1. Atheists have to be clapped under lock and key, clearly on account of them being dangerous for the state.
2. A slightly less severe treatment must be given to those people who are not atheists but nonetheless do reject the final judgment after death. The reason is likewise a political one, since the dogma of the final account is supposed to have a deterrent effect, because it is called a 'vinculum'.¹²
3. De Witt disapproves ('misprese'!) Spinoza's book. This book must be his TTP for reasons of time.
4. De Witt does not want to explain to Spinoza the reasons of his disapproval on the latter's request.

¹¹ Among them the conservator of the manuscript department in Leiden and staffmembers of the Pierre Bayle Institute in Nijmegen.

¹² This word is also used by Spinoza describing in the TTP the 'religionis vinculum' applied by Mozes.

Context

In order to find out whether these are simply personal remarks of the author, Jacob Gronovius, or a reliable report of words from the grandpensionary, Jan de Witt, we have to look for the context.

Well, in the pages shortly before and after the quoted fragment, there is much said about Jan de Witt, namely about his activities as well as his opinions. A whole page, for instance, is dedicated to his order of the day, with a precise indication of the time spent in the meetings of the States General and the States of Holland, his dealing with ambassadors, his reading and writing of letters, his care for the finances (since there is no 'thresorier' for Holland) etc., "so that when things go as usually, he has only 7 hours for eating and sleeping." The author seems to be informed about his way of life by means of a direct acquaintance. It does not become clear whether he lived for a while in his quarters or whether they travelled for a while together. Both is not impossible, since the embassy to Spain, of which Gronovius was a part, had to receive explicit instructions from the Grandpensionary.

It is absolutely certain that Gronovius had *personal contacts* with De Witt, at least for a few days. Shortly after the quoted fragment he reports, how 'his excellency' derides the total attachment of some members of the reformed church to the preachers to the disadvantage of the law. "This took more than an hour." Further on Gronovius writes again, that "his excellency rebuked in general all the reformed, since they never think at them selves and their belief, but are totally dependent on the preachers, and full of prejudices.... They did not answer to this." On another occasion Gronovius himself is addressed by De Witt. "In the afternoon his excellency asked me,¹³ whether one ought to say Belgius, Belgia or Belgica." Gronovius, a classical scholar, explains his preference for 'Belgius', but De Witt was not convinced by it,¹⁴ "because Grotius and other authors always said Belgica, and that he once had hear demonstrate apodictically, that one ought to say Belgica."

It appears from the quoted passages and some other pages, that Gronovius had direct contacts with De Witt and reported many of his sayings during the time that he conversed with him.

¹³ "vroeg my syn exc."

¹⁴ "doch syn Exc. seyde..."