

Clare Carlisle. *Spinoza's Religion: A New Reading of the Ethics*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2021. Pp. 288. Hardcover, \$29.95.

<TEXTNOINDENT>Despite its contemplative, earnest, and, at times, disarmingly conversational tone, *Spinoza's Religion* is a rather provocative book. The epithets thrown at Spinoza throughout the early modern period—referring to the *Theological-Political Treatise* as that most “pestilential book,” “forged in hell” by a godless rebel and atheist—are today badges of pride. Spinoza is celebrated among scholars and in popular culture for his uncompromising iconoclasm. He is admired for his refusal, following his ban from Judaism as a young man, to align with any religious faith. Regarded as a staunch critic of religion, Spinoza is credited with paving the way for secular morality, guided by scientific and rational knowledge. With *Spinoza's Religion*, Carlisle urges us to understand the *Ethics* as a fundamentally religious text, which, at the same time, transforms our ideas of what religion is.

Rather than insisting that her interpretation replace the dominant, secular one, Carlisle proposes that it be allowed to sit alongside it, as an equal. She writes, “We must acknowledge the possibility that the *Ethics* is positively, irresolvably ambiguous, lending itself to two equally plausible, equally coherent interpretations: *either* as a religious philosophy *or* as a secular philosophy” (11). She offers her interpretation as one of several ways to regard the “exquisitely carved crystal” that is Spinoza’s *Ethics*—a complex, reflective surface, where each angle discloses a different aspect, leading to “numerous interconnected chambers and corridors” (35). Carlisle provides an appealing, even beautiful, picture of Spinoza’s *religio*, a term she leaves in the Latin to defamiliarize it, setting it off from our default associations with the word ‘religion.’ Carlisle cites Cicero and Aquinas, who both observe that the word *religio* can be translated as rereading {AQ: of what?} {AQ: did you mean that ‘rereading’ is a translation of *religio*? I think a previous edit may have altered your intended meaning – yes, she means, re-reading as a translation of re-ligio} (164). Carlisle presents the *Ethics* as religious in form and content. As a “sculptural” piece of literature, the text ushers its readers through a spiritual practice of repeated

reading, drawing our attention, again and again, to our being-in-God. In terms of content, the profound and simple message of the *Ethics* is that we exist in-another rather than in-ourselves. In contrast to many interpreters, Carlisle presents the satisfaction and peace we feel through knowing and loving ourselves and others as beings-in-God as a higher achievement than autonomy, or self-legislation (132). The *religio* of the *Ethics* promises a liberating conversion, but one that does not depend upon any doctrinal or ecclesial commitments. ‘*Religio*’ [AQ: Should this be ‘religio’? – yes, fixed} names a virtue, an acquired habit, that follows from a profound affective transformation (*acquiescentia in se ipso*). Carlisle offers a careful scholarly analysis of this elusive phenomenon but tells us that “the thing itself is very simple.” It is a “feeling of being ourselves as a guide to the depth of our self-understanding, the adequacy of our metaphysics and our theology, the truth of our religion” (133).

Carlisle’s invitation to consider the *Ethics* through a religious lens as a nonrivalrous alternative to other approaches underplays her defiance of standard Spinoza interpretation. *Spinoza’s Religion*, in fact, rejects any approach that denies the transcendence and “ontological difference” of divinity. In chapter 3, Carlisle declares that “Deleuze was an insightful reader of Spinoza . . . but on the question of immanence his influence has been pernicious” {AQ: add page number – I put the page below since these are all three from the same page . . . i.e., 63}. In addition, she contends that the “common-sense secularist reading, eloquently articulated by Steven Nadler” likewise misunderstands transcendence in Spinoza’s philosophy {please add page citation}. With *Deus sive Natura*, according to Carlisle, Spinoza does not dissolve God into nature. Pace Deleuze and Nadler, Carlisle’s Spinoza affirms “an ontological difference between creator and creation, between God and the universe” (63). Spinoza is mistakenly regarded as a pantheist, since he does not maintain that “God is everything and everything is God.” On the contrary, he is a *panentheist* who maintains that “whatever is, is in God” (64). The “in” makes all the difference, marking the irreducibility of the distinction between substance, or God, and finite modes, or things. We must appreciate, she insists, “the asymmetry between God and the universe” (67).

I confess I did not *entirely* understand Carlisle's account of what she calls (following Heidegger?) the "ontological difference" between substance and modes, and God and "created" things (Being and beings?). She tells us, "Transcendence and immanence are two sides of the same coin" (62). The power of God and the powers of things are "distinct but not separate, identical but not the same" (66). At the same time, "God is not identical with nature, but the ground of nature" (68). While Carlisle acknowledges that Spinoza rejects a "false" idea of transcendence, according to which God operates outside of reality, exercising some kind of remote power, I am not sure I grasped the "true transcendence" that commentators typically overlook. For Carlisle, we need the concepts of transcendence, ground, and ontological difference to appreciate how all beings depend on God, anchored firmly in "one theological reality" (68). With these arguments, Carlisle disputes most contemporary Spinozism.

Spinoza's Religion draws Spinoza closer to Christian theology than does most scholarship. Carlisle moves between the letter of Spinoza's text and Christian and Biblical phraseology, such as "creator and creation," "eternal life," and "God as love." She interprets, for example, some difficult concepts from the *Ethics* through the lens of Paul's alignment of virtue and life in contrast to sin and death (*Romans* 6:20–23). Spinoza does understand virtue and vice, good and bad, in terms of the forces of life and death. Yet, Carlisle juxtaposes this understanding to Paul's rather dualistic imagery, according to which the soul signifies life and flesh implies death, but without further remark, as if they intend the same thing. Gestures such as these may provoke and puzzle readers.

In summary, *Spinoza's Religion* is a joy to read, with some exquisite descriptions of Spinoza's *Ethics* as a spiritual exercise and transformative project. It is a book that has the power to bring Spinoza deeper into our hearts, making his words a companion in our efforts to live with greater equanimity and delight. *Spinoza's Religion* also poses a compelling challenge to what we think we know about Spinoza.

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