The Rise of Religious Liberty I
On Spinoza’s TTP

- A neglected masterpiece? Arguably.
- An important defense of freedom of thought and expression? Definitely!
  - Arguably more significant than the work of others who get more credit (Locke)
- A seminal contribution to biblical scholarship? Definitely!
- Is there a connection between these things?
  - Yes. A properly critical approach to the Bible is essential to the defense of freedom of thought and expression.
As recently as the 16th C, religious liberty was not generally valued in Western Europe and its extensions (those other parts of the world under its cultural dominance).

By the end of the 18th C, religious liberty was widely recognized, in Western Europe and its extensions, as a fundamental right.

What did Spinoza add to the dialogue about liberty? How influential was it?
Up until the 16th C, Christianity was relatively unified and dominant in Western Europe and its extensions. Historically this dominance has not been favorable to religious liberty. MacCulloch: “For most of its existence, Christianity has been the most intolerant of world faiths, doing its best to eliminate all competitors...” Since the 16th C the unity and power of Christianity have gradually declined. This has benefited religious liberty.
A Great Paradox

- Drake: “How did a religion whose central tenet is to suffer, rather than do, harm come to accept the coercive power of the state as its reasonable due?”
- Curley: How could a religion which urges us to love our fellow men, and to do unto them as we would have them do unto us, persecute dissident Christians and other non-believers, repress their speech, and seek to forcibly convert them?
Two Possible Answers

- Human psychology: people generally want others to think and act as they do. (Cf. Spinoza, E III P31C)
- Christian teachings: if we believe in an afterlife, in which Christians will be handsomely rewarded, and non-Christians severely punished, and if we love our fellow humans, we must wish them to have the true faith, and act to bring that about.
  - Quine: “If someone firmly believes that eternal salvation and damnation hinge on embracing his particular religion, he would be callous indeed to sit tolerantly back and watch others go to hell.”
  - Is it necessary to believe this firmly to feel obliged to repress unbelief?
Soon after the Roman Empire became Christian (early 4th C), the emperor became a vigorous enforcer of Christian orthodoxy

Initially Augustine opposed attempts to use political power to achieve religious uniformity

- Partly out of respect for autonomy
- But also because he thought attempts to coerce acceptance of the true religion would only produce pretended Christians, not true believers
Augustine generally opposed the tendency in Christianity to reject the use of force

- Developing an influential early statement of just war theory

Experience persuaded Augustine that coercion could be effective:

- He saw Hippo converted from the Donatist heresy to orthodox Catholicism because of fear of the imperial laws
What Would Christian Love Do?

- “Suppose two persons were living in a house which we knew most certainly was going to collapse, and they refused to believe us when we told them this, and insisted on remaining in it. If we were able to snatch them from there, even against their will... I think that if we did not do so, we would rightly be judged heartless.” (Augustine, Letter 185, par. 33)
Unclear whether Augustine approved all the measures Theodosius had taken in his attempt to suppress paganism

Augustine does explicitly oppose threatening non-believers with death or torture

Seems to prefer the use of stiff fines

Can a consequentialist argument justify these limitations?
Aquinas: Unbelief is a sin, & the greatest of sins (ST II-II, qu. 10, arts. 1, 3)
- ‘Unbelief’ entails more than a mere lack of Christian faith, but an opposition to it, by someone who, having some knowledge of it, refuses to hear it or despises it

Two classes of unbelievers:
- Those who have never accepted the faith (pagans, heathens)
- Those who have once (in some way) accepted it (heretics, apostates, and (perhaps) Jews)
Different Folks, Different Strokes

- Unbelievers who have never received the faith should not be compelled to believe, but may be compelled to prevent their corrupting believers
- Unbelievers who have at some time received the faith may be compelled to fulfill what they have promised
- The sin of heretics and apostates is the gravest; that of Jews next; that of pagans and heathens least
Limitations on Interaction

- It’s praiseworthy to dispute with unbelievers, but only if
  - the disputant intends to confute errors, is qualified to do so, and displays no doubt about the faith, and
  - if the hearers are well-instructed and firm in their faith
- The church forbids the faithful to communicate with heretics and apostates (punishment for the latter)
  - But not with pagans or Jews, provided the believer’s faith is firm (hope of converting the pagans or Jews)
Augustine, Aquinas, and Calvin

- Potential penalties for unbelievers much more severe in Aquinas and Calvin
- The emphasis in both: preserving the faith of the faithful, not on converting unbelievers
  - The possibility of conversion is not excluded, but expected more from communication
- Adverse treatment of unbelievers justified as punishment, not a means of conversion
- Though Calvin’s arguments are more similar to those of Aquinas, it’s Augustine he quotes
A common objection is that coercion is an ineffective means of conversion

- Much more relevant to Augustine than to Aquinas

Another objection is that persecutors assume their beliefs are certain

- This is in fact true of Augustine, Aquinas and Calvin
- But it is unclear that they need to
Suppose the persecutor admits moderate skepticism about his beliefs: they are probable (perhaps highly so), but not certain.

- If he is wrong, he inflicts finite suffering to no good end.
- If he is right, he inflicts finite suffering with the prospect of avoiding infinite suffering.

Given his beliefs about the prospective payoffs, his actions are quite reasonable.