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**PRESS & TELEVISION**

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Television spokesmen have countered with contrary evidence and have questioned the methodology of the North Carolina study. Nevertheless, Welles contends, the "primacy" of television news can no longer be considered a "sacrosanct truth."

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**RELIGION & PHILOSOPHY**

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*Why Spinoza?*

"Why Spinoza Was Excommunicated" by Yirmiahu Yovel, in *Commentary* (Nov. 1977), 165 E. 56th St., New York, N.Y. 10022.

In 1656, Amsterdam's Jewish Council of Elders excommunicated a 24-year-old member of their community. His offense: He had proclaimed his view that the Bible was full of contradictions; that the laws of the Torah were arbitrary; that nature and God were one; and that knowledge of nature was therefore knowledge of God. Undaunted, the youth, Benedict Spinoza (1637-77), went on to formulate one of the most important metaphysical systems in the history of philosophy.

Yovel, a philosopher at Jerusalem's Hebrew University, believes that to understand the "phenomenon of Spinoza" one must understand his social and cultural environment. Living in the shadow of the Catholic Inquisition, Amsterdam's Jews were struggling to reintegrate the refugee Marranos into Judaism. (The Marranos were Spanish Jews who had "converted" to Christianity to avoid persecution but continued to practice Judaism in secret.) Dutch rabbis and elders were responsible for ensuring religious cohesion while maintaining the Jewish community as a shelter for the continuing stream of refugees from Spain. They demanded total obedience. At a less critical time, Yovel speculates,

*Philosopher Benedict Spinoza was excommunicated by Amsterdam's Jewish Council of Elders for doubting the Bible's veracity.*



From *Etika* by Benedict Spinoza, St. Petersburg, 1886.

## RELIGION &amp; PHILOSOPHY

Spinoza's challenge might have been viewed more sympathetically.

In breaking with both Judaism and Christianity, Spinoza chose the path taken by many Jews of later generations. "Perhaps we can see in him," writes Yovel, "the first 'secular Jew' at a time when this category did not exist." There is no longer one norm of Jewish existence, he adds, no single compulsory model: Judaism today is determined by the way Jews live it.

### *Transcending Secularism*

"Religion and the American Future" by Peter L. Berger, in *New Oxford Review* (Nov. 1977), 6013 Lawton Ave., Oakland, Calif. 94618.

The current "orgiastic self-denigration" of American life by the cultural oracles of the upper-middle class has a parallel in the American religious community's "crisis of credibility," suggests Berger, a sociologist at Rutgers University. This crisis, he says, which has hit "mainline" Protestantism and Roman Catholicism, is marked by a weakening of traditional symbols and an accelerating secularization.

According to Berger, organized religion's present troubles have their roots in the Enlightenment, when religious leaders paid misguided obeisance to the "cultured despisers of religion." In its modern form, the Christian churches, seemingly embarrassed by their tenacious belief in transcendent values, have stressed the secular aspects of their creeds: social uplift, the search for "true community," and so on.

One result is that while many Americans have not lost their faith, their belief in spiritual values is typed as "backward" or "reactionary" by the religious avant-garde. Ironically, the more these religious trend-setters—priests, ministers, and theologians—bend over backwards to accommodate secular opinion-makers, the more they are held in contempt. Berger cites "ominous threats" in Congress to the tax-exempt status of religious organizations that take strong stands on political issues.

An awesome collection of human hopes rides on the survival of American democracy, Berger concludes. But the re-spiritualization of American religion is an even greater imperative, "for it points beyond America and indeed beyond history."

### *Thoughtless Evil*

"Thinking" by Hannah Arendt, in *The New Yorker* (Nov. 21, 28, and Dec. 5, 1977), 25 W. 43rd St., New York, N.Y. 10036.

The 1961 war crimes trial in Jerusalem of former Nazi officer Adolf Eichmann left one witness with an uneasy sense of the "banality of evil." Reflecting on the implications of that phrase, the late political philosopher Hannah Arendt concludes that Eichmann's crimes indeed lacked "base motives." Neither pride, nor envy, nor any of the other sins to which responsibility for evil has been traditionally assigned