

Religion & Philosophy

SPINOZA, LIBERALISM, AND THE QUESTION OF JEWISH IDENTITY.

By Steven B. Smith. Yale University Press. 304 pp. \$30 cloth

This compelling book rescues Baruch (Benedict) Spinoza's *Theologico-Political Treatise* (1663) from undeserved obscurity. The only one of the Dutch philosopher's works to be published during his lifetime (1632–77), the *Treatise* reflects the influence of the new philosophy and method of Descartes, as well as Spinoza's meditation on his experience as a descendant of Jewish refugees from the Spanish Inquisition who found himself excommunicated from the Jewish community of Amsterdam for his unconventional beliefs. As painstakingly reconstructed by Smith, a political scientist at Yale University, the *Treatise* is shown to contain both a far-reaching critique of traditional Judaism and a powerful argument for a democratic republic in which toleration and liberty of thought exist for all.

Smith claims that Spinoza's *Treatise* defined a critical challenge to modern liberalism: reconciling the Enlightenment's universalist aspirations with the reality of human difference. It was Spinoza, Smith argues, who set the terms for the later debate (involving such seminal figures as Moses Mendelssohn, Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, Kant, and Hegel) about the conditions under which Jews should be granted full rights of citizenship. That debate shaped classic liberalism's account of how a modern state grounded in recognition of the natural freedom and equality of human beings should deal with minorities.

In addition to being a religiously based vindication of individual liberty, the *Treatise* is a politically inspired challenge to religion. Spinoza sought to emancipate his fellow Jews from what he regarded as the back-breaking burden of religious tradition. To this end, he scrutinized the Hebrew Scriptures as a human book, offered withering criticism of miracles and the idea of particular providence, and reinterpreted the Mosaic law as a merely political and long-superseded body of legislation. His goal was to lay the foundations for a secular state that would be home to autonomous individuals who bowed to no authority save that of reason.

Today, this Enlightenment political project

raises concerns about the rise of rank individualism, the deterioration of the family, the appearance of the naked public square, and the breakdown of civil society. The autonomous individual in whose name Spinoza wrote now seems adrift rather than self-directed, enervated rather than emancipated. This problem, in Smith's view, is inseparable from Spinoza's legacy. Smith does not presume to resolve the dilemmas of contemporary liberalism or pass final judgment on what the Enlightenment has wrought. But he does offer a searching exposition of what was overthrown and what was built, what sacrificed and what gained, by the theological-political revolution Spinoza championed.

—Peter Berkowitz

CONSERVATISM:

An Anthology of Social and Political Thought from David Hume to the Present.

Edited by Jerry Z. Muller. Princeton University Press. 442 pp. \$59.50 cloth, \$19.95 paper

After two decades of intellectual ascendancy and political victory, American conservatism is beginning to look frazzled. Friend and foe alike could benefit from reflection on its origins and guiding purposes. Recalling its debt to and divergence from European forms of conservatism, this rich anthology, edited by Muller, a professor of history at the Catholic University of America, throws "historical and cross-cultural light" on conservative thinkers from Edmund Burke (1729–97) and Joseph de Maistre (1753–1821) through such contemporaries and near-contemporaries as Michael Oakeshott (1901–90), Irving Kristol, and Edward Banfield.

This is "an anthology with an argument." While admitting that conservatives have at different times and places defended different, indeed contradictory, things, Muller maintains that there is a recurring habit of mind—"shared assumptions, predispositions, arguments, metaphors, and substantive commitments"—common to conservatives (almost) everywhere. Yet he distinguishes between "conservatism" and "orthodoxy." The former assumes that long-lived institutions have endured for good reason, and that veneration, custom, and habit are essential to human well-