

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of miracles and the idea of particular providence, and reinterpreted the Mosaic law as a merely political and long-superseded body of legislation.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-

being. The latter maintains that institutions should ultimately be justified by abstract truth or a transcendent or unchanging moral order, whether revealed or rational. This distinction makes clear why Muller believes that conservatism is not a critique of the Enlightenment (such as orthodoxy often mounts) but rather a part of it, and why he concludes that David Hume (1711-76) was more or less the first conservative.

Muller's definition of conservatism leaves little room for Eric Voegelin and Leo Strauss, not to mention Aristotle, Aquinas, and the American Founders, all of whom held, in various ways, that society's law and customs have, or ought to have, some important dependence on natural justice. But for that very reason, Muller's book is a bracing commentary on the present-day condition of American conservatism, and a welcome invitation to rethink what conservatives ought to be conserving.

—Charles R. Kesler

**THE SENSE OF REALITY:
*Studies in Ideas and Their History.***

By Isaiah Berlin. Edited by Henry Hardy.
Farrar, Straus & Giroux. 304 pp. \$25

"Ideas do, at times, develop lives and powers of their own and, like Frankenstein's monster, act in ways wholly unforeseen by their begetters." So writes Berlin, a fellow at All Souls College, Oxford, and, at 87, one of the world's pre-eminent intellectuals. In this new collection of occasional essays, most of them written during the 1950s and '60s, Berlin ponders the jagged paths sometimes cut by humane and rational ideas.

In "Kant as an Unfamiliar Source of Nationalism," Berlin discovers "a traceable line of influence" from Kant's conception of human freedom to the rise of violent nationalism. The German philosopher J. G. Fichte (1762–1814) gave the first twist to Kant's teaching that mature people choose to live by certain values because they know them to be rational and to apply to everyone. From this, Fichte reasoned that fully developed people create their own values based on what they perceive to be true. The second twist, also Fichte's but absorbing the influence of J. G. Herder (1744–1803), was to say that, because individuals are shaped by their milieus, they cannot truly act except as part of a group, a nation, and finally a state. Thus did the German romantic thinkers transform Kant's appeal to reason into an assertion of collective

will, not anticipating how this idea could drive nationalist revolts and, eventually, genocidal slaughter.

Berlin's explanation of how morally beneficial ideas become perverted leads him to conclude that human life is composed of unaccountable infinitesimals, a dark mass of factors that cannot be analyzed, only felt and lived. Absent an all-encompassing truth about reality, and given the vulnerability to fanaticism demonstrated in this century, he urges a conscious acceptance of plural versions of the truth. He admires reformers such as the Indian poet Rabindranath Tagore (1861-1941), who believed that the only hope for India was to combine English political freedoms with a nationalism rooted in Indian civilization.

Berlin excels at this kind of intellectual portraiture, but he is more than a portraitist. While adding to our store of knowledge about the history of ideas, he has also refocused our thinking. Nationalism, he has shown, is a legitimate expression of the human need for recognition and a degree of material security that, if ignored, explodes into terrible crimes. To accommodate that need, contemporary liberalism must include both protection of people's liberties and a place for them to live satisfying lives as members of communities. Vintage though they are, these essays could hardly be more timely.

—Susan Ginsburg

**A MEASURE OF MY DAYS:
*The Journal of a Country Doctor.***

By David Loxterkamp. University Press of New England. 336 pp. \$24.95

Literature it may not be, but this book is something equally valid: the honest self-portrait of a small-town family doctor trying to do as much good in the world as he can. Earnest, kindhearted, subject to depression and guilt, and above all pious, Loxterkamp seeks and finds in the daily tending of the sick a path to holiness. If there is an overarching point of view, it is that of a devout Roman Catholic whose every act is lent significance by the immediate presence of God.

The language is mercifully simple, devoid of pomp and authorial vanity. It has the scrubbed, plain texture of the monastic cell at the Trappisarium of Gethsemane, where Loxterkamp retreats in emulation of his idol, Thomas Merton. Of course, in keeping this journal, Loxterkamp has chosen to put himself on view, taking the risk that every diarist