

Philosophical Religions from Plato to Spinoza: Reason, Religion, and Autonomy

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Cambridge University Press, 2012. xxvii + 328 pp.

ISBN # 9780521194570 Hbk.

Hbk. £60.00

Carlos Fraenkel's volume studies in illuminating detail the interpretation of the Abrahamic traditions (Jewish, Christian, and Muslim) as "philosophical religions." On this account, religion in its traditional form consists in the imaginative representation of philosophical truths for the benefit of non-philosophers through laws, parables, and narratives. In this sense it may be described as "philosophy's handmaid." Its function is to lead all members of a religious community, as much as possible, to a virtuous life as understood philosophically, whether or not they can grasp the philosophical grounds for seeing such a life as worthwhile.

Fraenkel traces the concept of a philosophical religion, ultimately, back to Plato's treatment of laws and poetry in the *Republic* and the *Laws*, although insights from Aristotle's *Ethics* (*Eudemian* as well as *Nicomachean*) eventually colour the Platonic model, especially beginning in the Middle Ages. Philosophers of all three religious traditions enthusiastically applied this modified Platonic model to their respective traditions. This holds true for philosophers of Late Antiquity (Philo, Origen and Clement of Alexandria) and the Middle Ages (Maimonides, al-Fârâbî, Averroes), and even extends to Spinoza. They held that, properly (that is, philosophically) understood, religion is a "pedagogical-political program"¹ in the service of philosophy (Fraenkel x). In Plato's ideal city of the *Republic*, and in the less-than-ideal but realizable city of Magnesia in the *Laws*, the goal of such a program is to put in place a political order which enables the members of the religious community (or "citizens," in the Platonic context) to lead a life ruled by reason, both in thought and in deed—what Fraenkel calls "rational autonomy."

This political order is *rational* because citizens learn to live their lives with a view to the human good, which in the philosophical sense means ordering one's life toward the perfection of one's reason—living according to the dictates of reason, to use Spinoza's phrase. This involves, in Aristotelian terms,² cultivating "virtues of character," such as courage, justice, and moderation in order to acquire as much as

¹ The program is *pedagogical* in that it inculcates a preference for good actions among the citizens, thus preparing them for rational self-rule. It is *political* in that it regulates the actions of those who do not attain the ideal of perfect rational self-rule. Thus this distinction maps neatly onto another made by Fraenkel, according to which the religious community is made up of non-philosophers, who especially need political guidance, not-yet philosophers, who especially need pedagogical guidance, and philosophers proper, who need no guidance at all (see Fraenkel 60).

² Plato sees the relation between "virtues of character" and the "divine" virtue of wisdom in a way less straightforwardly summarized, in a space such as this one, than does Aristotle. But neither is fundamentally at odds for the purposes of conceiving of religion as a pedagogical-political program. For Plato's view, see (Fraenkel 54-69).

possible the chief or “divine” virtue of wisdom (the virtue of reason). For by cultivating courage, justice, and moderation, the citizen desires “instrumental” goods such as wealth, pleasure, and honour only insofar as this allows him to spend as much time as possible cultivating the highest good, contemplation (*theôria*) (149-150).

The political order which religion puts in place also guarantees to each citizen a measure of *autonomy*: since the laws and institutions it establishes are meant to guide the members of the religious community toward a life ruled by reason, they will (ideally) live according to the good because they will come to understand the good. But even if they do not come to understand it, it is still better for non-philosophers to live according to the dictates of reason, even someone else’s reason, than to not live according to the dictates of reason at all (x-xii; 18-20; 29-30). Crucial to Fraenkel’s concept of autonomy is a distinction between choosing to live according to the good and being motivated to make such a choice: again ideally, the political order will ensure that citizens choose the good on account of rational deliberation, but because they are brought up to prefer the good they will be subjectively motivated to do so as well. The ideal may not be achievable, however; in less-than-ideal cases, the citizens must be coaxed into living a life ordered by reason toward the perfection of reason by laws, by persuasive exhortations based on parables and narratives, or as a last resort, by coercion (69-78).

How can such a model be applied to *religious* laws and institutions in particular? What sets such an application apart from a “secular” version of a rational political order?³ The answer is again first found in Plato, who identifies God with “Reason (*Noûs*) who rules all things” (*Laws* 631d). If God is Reason, then living according to the dictates of reason means living according to knowledge whose ultimate source is God. Further, since God as Reason “rules all things,” a parallel obtains between the natural order which has God as its First Cause, and the political order which has reason as its aim and first principle. God may be said to be the source of the political order inasmuch as it is established on rational grounds. As Fraenkel says, in the ideal political order, “God’s rule and self-rule coincide” because both are synonymous with the rule of reason (10-11).

At the heart of the pedagogical-political program stands the prophet—now conceived of as a perfect philosopher on the model of Plato’s philosopher-king—who, having attained the highest possible intellectual and moral perfection, establishes the religion on the basis of his knowledge of the good, by using his imagination to design its particulars. In fact, the prophet is both philosopher-king and philosopher-poet (105-108): he discharges the first role by instituting laws for the benefit of non-philosophers, which imaginatively represent philosophical truths to them, and by which they become disposed to perfect their reason. The prophet discharges the second role by persuasively exhorting the citizens to follow the law through parables and narratives (13; 177-178).

³ As Fraenkel shows (28-37; 295-296.), the Enlightenment’s “religion of reason” is, by contrast, based on the notion that every citizen is equally capable of living according to reason on their own, in light of e.g. “common sense,” as Moses Mendelssohn put it.

This conception of the prophet as a perfect philosopher is found in Maimonides, for instance, who claims that Moses had attained the highest possible strata of moral and intellectual perfection, indeed that he overcame his material limitations such that his body ceased to function, leaving his intellect unencumbered (179-180).⁴ As such, Moses designed the *halakhah* in light of his knowledge of God, that is, in light of his reason and knowledge of the good, by translating this knowledge into laws, parables, and narratives by means of his perfected imagination. This suggests a highly peculiar notion of revelation, but one which Fraenkel insists is perfectly consistent with the commitments of the proponents of philosophical religions. The Mosaic Law is revealed and divine because it was designed by a philosopher-prophet in light of his perfect knowledge of the good; but God never actually *spoke* to Moses “as a man to his friend [*’el-re’ehu*]” (Ex. 33:11).

On this last point, Fraenkel’s argument relies (convincingly in my view) on the notion that the proponents of a philosophical religion provide a fictional account of the founders of the Abrahamic religions—Moses, Christ, and Muhammad are depicted *as if* they were perfect philosophers.⁵ In light of this fiction, the task of interpreting the Abrahamic traditions as philosophical religions becomes one of *philosophical reinterpretation*—the goal is to recover the true (allegorical) content of Scripture as identical with certain philosophical truths. This is contrasted with the (failed) project of a *cultural revolution*, which Plato espoused in the *Republic* but abandoned in the *Laws*, namely, of scrapping existing imperfect religious traditions for wholly new and philosophically sound ones (82-85).

By presenting Moses as if he was a perfect philosopher, and engaging in the philosophical reinterpretation of Judaism as a result, Maimonides can argue that the Mosaic Law is divine in the philosophically relevant sense, but also that it cannot be superseded. Fraenkel thinks that the first claim holds for philosophical reasons, but the second claim does not; Maimonides was, on Fraenkel’s view, motivated by apologetic rather than philosophical concerns in claiming that the Law of Moses could not be improved upon (179-180).

Philosophical Religions offers a promising explanation for this discrepancy, which I have always found perplexing. Both al-Fârâbî and Averroes concede that a law is divine if it is ordered in such a way as to promote the good for all citizens as much as possible, and consequently, that should a set of laws which more perfectly approximates the rational order become available, the lawgiver should adopt this new set since it better serves his goal. The upshot is that Islam or Judaism or Christianity constitutes the best set of religious guidelines *so far*, and if a better imaginative representation of the prophet’s knowledge of the good eventually becomes available, we should avail ourselves of it.⁶ So why does Mai-

⁴ See *Guide of the Perplexed* III.51; that Moses overcame material limitations is one feature of Maimonides’ argument that the Mosaic Law cannot be surpassed.

⁵ Or more precisely in the case of Christ, Christian philosophers usually identify him as God’s *logos* with ‘wisdom itself’; the proposal is in that sense even more radical (see Fraenkel 6 and ch. 2).

⁶ See al-Fârâbî, *Book of Religion* §§ 7-8; Averroes, *The Incoherence of the Incoherence* II.4.

monides, who is clearly eager to interpret Judaism as a philosophical religion,⁷ insist that the *halakhah* is the most perfect possible articulation of the pedagogical-political program? On philosophical grounds, Fraenkel argues that this move is not in fact available to him. Instead, Maimonides insists on apologetic grounds that Judaism, despite its anthropomorphic depictions of God and other less-than-philosophical claims, still offers the best possible set of laws and institutions for the Jewish people.

This brings us to the issue of contextualism. As Fraenkel puts it, the philosopher-prophet does not descend back into the cave in a “cultural void” (20). The divine law is adapted to the cultural needs and context of the people it is supposed to guide. For example, idolatry was commonplace among Israel as a result of their subjugation in Egypt, and so *Guide* III.32 argues that the *halakhah* is established according to “first” and “second” intentions, such that the second intention of the commandments of sacrifices to a monotheistic God is a negative one, to wean the Jewish people away from idolatry; the first intention, on the other hand, serves to turn the people toward an (admittedly imperfect) apprehension of God. The people could not make the abrupt transition from idol-worship in the Egyptian fashion to full-fledged (philosophical) apprehension of God, and so sacrifices had to be retained. At the same time, the apprehension of God is the ultimate goal of the Law according to Maimonides.⁸ In designing the Law, Moses had to take into account the contingent cultural circumstances of the people who might eventually be led to perfect their reason. This motivates the need for *successive* reinterpretations of the Law after Moses’ time, a task which Maimonides clearly saw himself as fulfilling.

Such examples help us understand the *scope* of religious law outlined in Fraenkel’s book. What is most enlightening about his account is his discussion of how religion as a pedagogical-political program aims at an “average” for moral-political guidance, by which I mean that it is simultaneously addressed to non-philosophers, not-yet philosophers, and philosophers proper. Each of these three groups follows the same laws, but for different reasons. The first follows the law out of fear of punishment and hope for reward; the second, in the manner of children who acquire virtuous habits, the benefits of which they will come to recognize later on; the third, finally, entirely recognize those benefits and enjoy fully the goods of a life ruled by reason.

Fraenkel then invites us to revise the received consensus that Spinoza, on account of his critique of religion in the *Theological-Political Treatise*, made a “clean break” with his ancient and medieval predecessors on the question of the philosophical interpretation of religion, indeed of any non-literal interpretation of religion. Though widely touted as the father of modern historical-textual criticism of the Bible, Fraenkel convincingly argues that Spinoza’s views of the Bible’s (allegorical) content, and of the relation between faith and reason more generally, are better understood as situated on a continuum with the views of Averroes and Maimonides—albeit on an uneven continuum. For instance, while Spinoza abandons and even ridicules the notion of Moses as a perfect philosopher, he nevertheless discerns a

⁷ See e.g. *Guide*, Introduction.

⁸ See e.g. *Mishneh Torah, Laws of the Foundations of the Torah* I.1-4; *Eight Chapters* 5; on the commandment to love God (Deut 6:5) interpreted as apprehension of Him, see e.g. *Laws of Repentance* 10.2-5; *Guide* III.28.

pedagogical-political utility in the teachings of the Law at the time it was promulgated—what is more, Spinoza is even more radical than his medieval counterparts in proposing a “universal” or “catholic” faith (249-258), which with the backing of the state can lead to the maximal enlightenment of the citizens! For this reason, the volume also brings to light an unresolved tension in Spinoza’s thought: how can religion remain politically useful if at the same time Spinoza wants to insist that it can be demonstrated *sola scriptura* that the prophets had no share in wisdom?

On occasion, however, Fraenkel presents certain thinkers as proponents of “philosophical religions” in the sense thus far described, even though it is not clear how well they fit the mold. Here I have in mind Augustine, who in *Against the Academicians* (3.19-20) judged that (neo-)Platonic philosophy did not contain anything that contradicted his Christian Faith, as Fraenkel reminds us (141-142). But it is one thing to note an absence of contradiction, and another to positively argue that one’s religion has a philosophical foundation. Moreover, *Against the Academicians* is an early work of Augustine’s, and we know that he discovered certain “books of the Platonists” from *Confessions* VII; in that (middle) work, he saw the harmony between religion and philosophy as only an intermediate step toward his full conversion to Christianity. In general, for Augustine, living a good life is not so much a question of perfecting one’s *intellect* as it is a matter of getting into the right *moral* relationship with God (in his case, through Christ). As something of a religiously tormented intellectual, Augustine felt an acute need to understand the relation of faith and reason, but that does not entail that he conceived of Christianity as grounded in philosophy. Throughout the *Confessions* (and especially book IX), Augustine admires his mother Monica’s naïve faith, from which she never waivers – unlike her son. That “simple” form of faith was just not available to him as a philosopher, and he explicitly argues that both the philosophical and naïve paths to God can result in salvation. Finally, in a still later work, *The City of God* XX-XII, Augustine argues that ‘reason’ is insufficient for grace, and even that proficiency in philosophy is not the fruit of individual effort, but a gift from God!

I quibble with Fraenkel’s reading of Augustine, but I do not believe that it harms his overall project. His volume is an important and refreshing contribution to our understanding of the (sometimes staid) question of “Athens and Jerusalem.” In the conclusion to *Philosophical Religions*, we are urged to reflect on the *need* for those conceptual frameworks which provided for the philosophical reinterpretation of religious traditions: how can we make sense of those traditions while taking into account commitments, philosophical or otherwise, that are external to them? For the philosophical student of religion, the methods of the thinkers surveyed in Fraenkel’s book offer an intriguing and important alternative to the dismal alternatives of rejection or fideistic literalism.

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