

God of Spinoza

by [Petr Chylek](#) (June 2026)



Spinoza, Excommunicated (Samuel Hirszenberg, 1907)

When Albert Einstein was asked, "Do you believe in God?", he did not answer yes or no; instead, he [said](#), "I believe in Spinoza's God who reveals Himself in the orderly harmony of what exists, not in a God who concerns Himself with the fates and actions of human beings."

Baruch Spinoza (1632-1677) was born in Amsterdam. His ancestors had moved there from Portugal to escape discrimination against Jews. Despite growing up in a respected Jewish family and receiving a rigorous Jewish education, he

developed doubts about Jewish and Christian beliefs in his early teens. In 1656, at age 23, he was excommunicated by his Portuguese-Jewish community in Amsterdam. At the time, he had not published anything, so his excommunication had to be based on his vocal disagreement with the teaching of the congregation's Rabbis and on his discussions with fellow members of the congregation.

The Jewish community in Amsterdam enjoyed limited freedom to worship according to their religion. It was granted to them on the assumption that they would not cause any difficulty. One heretic could mean a problem for the whole congregation. Therefore, congregation leaders tried to make a deal with Spinoza. They offered him a comfortable annual stipend if he would just be quiet and stop asking questions. He declined.

Baruch was not personally present at his excommunication, which, in Jewish law, is termed *Charem*. The written Charem was read aloud in the congregation and contained the harsh text: "Cursed be he by day and cursed be he by night; cursed be he when he lies down and cursed be he when he rises up. Cursed be he when he goes out and cursed be he when he comes in..." All Jews were forbidden to maintain any contact with Spinoza, and he lost the support of his Jewish community. Because he was equally critical of Christian beliefs, he did not join the Christian community either and remained largely isolated until the end of his life. He earned a modest income by making lenses and constructing optical instruments.

It is unclear exactly what Spinoza was accused of. The excommunication cited his evil opinions and acts, abominable heresies, and monstrous deeds, without specifying what they were. Spinoza never tried to defend himself, so the evil acts and heresies remained unknown. Only a few years later, after his beliefs were more clearly articulated in his writings, could we guess what 'evil opinions' and 'abominable heresies' were.

Baruch Spinoza was the first to openly question the religious beliefs of his generation. Although earlier thinkers had doubted Moses as the author of the Torah (Abraham ibn Ezra, 1092–1167) or miracles (Moses Maimonides, 1135-1204), Spinoza was the first to attack the foundations of the Jewish and Christian religions. Most philosophers hold Spinoza in high esteem as a founder of the Enlightenment. However, among theologians, his work is more controversial.

Spinoza read the Torah many times. He could not help but notice numerous discrepancies, which led him to conclude that the Torah was not written by God or by his interpreter, Moses. According to Spinoza, it was written by many different authors at different times and compiled by an editor who sought to combine the individual pieces into a seamless narrative.

Today, many people would arrive at the same question and conclusion as Spinoza did. However, in his time, even in Amsterdam, one of the most tolerant cities, his ideas could lead to the loss of freedom and, eventually, life. People were expected to simply believe what priests or rabbis told them and not to ask questions. The Christian Bible was treated as a sort of Constitution of the world, given by God. It was a source of all secular powers and politics.

Spinoza had much to learn from the recent history around him, and he had many reasons to be cautious about expressing his thoughts. His distant relative, Uriel Da Costa, was a member of the same Jewish congregation in Amsterdam. Because of his heretical views on God's existence and actions, and his attitude toward scripture, he was excommunicated from the congregation. After he "repented," he became eligible for readmission. The elders decided that a degrading ceremony was to be held. Da Costa was required to prostrate himself before the entrance to the synagogue, and congregants had to step over him. Within a year, he committed suicide.

Spinoza's friend Adrian Koerbagh published a treatise in 1668

that provoked the anger of Amsterdam's Christian establishment. Koerbagh argued that Jesus was not divine and denied the existence of miracles. He published the work under his real name and in Dutch so that all could read it. Dutch authorities accused Koerbagh of blasphemy, arrested him, convicted him, and he died in prison.

Additionally, in 1672, French troops invaded the Dutch Provinces. Johan de Witt, the chief statesman and leader of the provinces, was forced to resign. He and his brother were brutally killed by a mob in Amsterdam. Spinoza was deeply affected by these events.

Amid these events, Spinoza sought to express his thoughts without incurring immediate backlash. He employed a strategy used by other philosophers in a similar predicament: publishing a book in an uncommon language. Among the well-known cases, Maimonides published his *The Guide for the Perplexed* in Arabic, written in the Hebrew alphabet, so only those who knew Arabic and Hebrew could read it. Meister Eckhart published most of his philosophical works in Latin, so ordinary Germans could not read them. Some authors have used different names for readers in Arabic-speaking countries and in their own countries.

Spinoza chose to publish his first work, *A Theologico-Political Treatise*[\[1\]](#), anonymously. No author was named, and a nonexistent German publisher was cited. The work was published in Latin, making it inaccessible to most Dutch citizens, and a prohibition on translating it into Dutch was announced. The book was banned in Amsterdam and in most European cities. However, it was studied enthusiastically in clandestine copies by philosophers and eager learners throughout Europe.

Spinoza did not say that God does not exist. He only said that the God of the Torah and the God of the Christian Bible are products of human imagination. Spinoza's God is the one who created nature. God is nature, governed by known and yet

unknown scientific laws. He is not a God who performs miracles. Spinoza's God neither observes your actions, rewards good actions, nor punishes bad ones, nor does He listen to prayers.

Some time ago, in one of the Torah study groups, when we came to questions about prayer, one lady declared: "The prayers work. They change the one who is praying." Spinoza does not say we should not pray. When we do, we should understand what is going on.

No one can force another person to think in a certain way. Spinoza believed that each person should be free to think whatever they wish and to speak their thoughts. Only actions should be regulated by the governing authority. The last chapter of *A Theologico-Political Treatise* is titled: "That in a free state every man may think what he likes, and say what he thinks." This is a basic human right to say what you think, as long as you don't advocate violence. In the Torah, God expressed the same idea by rejecting uniformity: "If you make an altar of stones for Me, you must not build it with cut stones" (Exodus 20:24-25).

Although Baruch Spinoza never became a Christian, he held Jesus Christ in high regard. He considered Christ spiritually superior to Moses. While God spoke to Moses 'face to face' (Exodus 33:11), God spoke to Christ 'mind to mind' (*TPT* Chapter 1), meaning that God communicated knowledge directly to Christ without words or images. It was like downloading from the mind of God into the mind of Jesus Christ. According to Spinoza, the essence of Christ's teaching was justice and charity.

At least two attempts to reverse Spinoza's excommunication occurred in the 21st century, and both were unsuccessful.[\[2\]](#) To revoke the excommunication, the action must be supported by the congregation that issued it. In both cases, the Amsterdam Jewish congregation vetoed the procedure, citing Spinoza's

preposterous ideas, which were tearing apart the very fundamentals of the Jewish religion.

Although Spinoza's ideas were not appreciated in his time, he is now considered one of the great philosophers. Many of the Jewish progressive congregations incorporated his ideas. His ideas about free thought and free speech are the backbone of many democratic governments. From a 17th-century heretic, for some, he became a hero of our times.

[1] B. Spinoza, *A Theologico-Political Treatise and A Political Treatise*, Dover Publications, Mineola, New York, 2004

[2] Baruch Spinoza—Wikipedia, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Baruch_Spinoza.

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