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Baruch Spinoza

Lead: One of the most creative thinkers of the seventeenth century was an Amsterdam lens maker, Baruch Spinoza born on November 24, 1632.

Intro.: *A Moment in Time* with Dan Roberts.

Content: Spinoza's father and grandfather were Portuguese. The regime of the Spanish Inquisition forced them to convert to Christianity even though privately they retained their Jewish faith. The Union of Utrecht in 1579 decreed that in

Holland there would be religious freedom and the Spinoza clan migrated to Amsterdam, becoming there prosperous merchants and respected members of the Jewish community.

Spinoza was trained by rabbis, quite possibly at the Amsterdam school for Jewish boys founded in 1638. There he would have come under the influence of Manasseh ben Israel and other leading members of the community. He learned Latin and was familiar with most major European languages, but early on developed a streak of independent thinking that would characterize his life to its end.

The 1600s were years in which all sorts of radical experiments in thought and politics were breaking out in Europe. In this less restrictive atmosphere young Baruch began to develop some unorthodox notions. In conversations with other students, he expressed his doubts that angels existed or that the soul was immortal. Scandalized, the Jewish fathers of Amsterdam, fearful that such views might bring down the wrath of City authorities on their community, begged him to recant and then excommunicated Spinoza when he refused.

Over the years he supported himself as an expert lens maker, grinding the glass for spectacles,

telescopes and microscopes. This independent income allowed him the freedom to think and write. His ideas were influenced by but reacted against the work of the French mathematician Rene Descartes whom many consider the father of modern philosophy. Spinoza's views of God were particularly offensive to both Jewish and Christian thinkers during and after his lifetime. He believed God was the cause and substance of the universe. This is pantheism, the notion that God is everything. Since God is everything and God is good, then evil does not exist. Miracles don't happen. This would detract from the order of the universe.

Scientist, philosopher, teacher, Spinoza died in 1677 of tuberculosis complicated by years of inhaling glass dust. His work inspired authors such Johann von Goethe who ironically saw in his unorthodox ideas a religious outlook even though it was shorn of doctrine and dogma and unacceptable to religious authorities.

At the University of Richmond, this is Dan Roberts.

Resources

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