



Liberal Beacon

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As autumn unfolds we are reminded that change—whether in seasons, ideas, or communities—always brings with it both challenge and renewal. This issue gathers reflections that invite us to consider what it means to live as religious liberals, by promoting human dignity through freedom, reason, and tolerance.

We begin with Bruce Bode’s “Core Ideas of Religious Liberalism,” which lays out the enduring principles of a free faith: freedom of conscience, the dignity of every person, and trust in truth’s ongoing unfolding. From there, Andrew James Brown introduces Imaoka Shin’ichirō’s essay on “The Position of a Free-Religious Person,” where we encounter a vision of religion that is both deeply personal and profoundly universal, rooted in democratic practice and shared humanity.

Candace Schmidt then takes us into “The Legacy of Spinoza,” showing how a 17th-century philosopher’s radical honesty still challenges our notions of God, scripture, and freedom.

I wrap things up with my own article, “Free Speech, College Campuses, and Pro-Palestinian Protestors,” exploring this controversial matter and the common thought-fallacies that prevent us from truly hearing each other.

Our issue ends with “Do You Understand?”, a lighter reflection on the ways language both shapes and confuses our attempts to connect.

Together, these writings remind us of who we say we are and aspire to be as religious liberals. We may not be perfect, but so long as we are on the journey ourselves we can show others the way.

—Todd Eklof

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Core Ideas of Religious Liberalism

Bruce A. Bode

Religiously liberal congregations are communities based on covenant rather than creed, on the practice of “right relations” over “right belief.” They are communities whose identity is related more to principles, processes, and values than to specific religious doctrines. The following “Core Ideas of Religious Liberalism” or a free faith, is one statement of the principles, processes, and values of religious liberalism.

1) Freedom of the individual and personal responsibility

Probably the most important principle and value in a free faith or free religion is the freedom of the individual in asking and answering life's most important questions, such as: Who am I? How am I related? What is good? What is the nature and aim of Being?



Religiously liberal congregations are formed to provide a structure, container, or environment in which individuals are granted the largest possible freedom to reflect, think, ponder, consider, question, doubt, probe, explore, search, research, and re-search. Free churches are religious communities that build, guard, and defend the structures that allow for freedom of thought and individual conscience.

Free churches operate on the understanding that truth is best discovered when a person is free to ask and search. Where beliefs are coerced, directly or subtly, the power of religion is lessened. Religion is more real where it is self-chosen and based in personal experience.

In free congregations, authority in regard to belief is ultimately that of individual conscience, not that of a church official, historic creed, or sacred text.

Freedom, however, is not an independent or absolute value; freedom in both individual and

community life is always in relationship to order, structure, and previous destiny.

Though there is no “test of belief” in free churches, the freedom in free churches is not intended to foster the attitude of: “You can believe anything you want here,” or “Anything goes,” or “All ideas are of equal merit.” The purpose of freedom in religion is to deepen, not dilute, one’s faith; it is an invitation to push forward, not draw back. Liberty is intended for discovery and growth, not laxity, laziness, license, or lawlessness.

Freedom is not the end, but the beginning, not the goal, but the means. Freedom is the pre-requisite, the pre-condition, for the discovery of truth. It has to do with freedom *to* more than freedom *from*.

Free religion encourages the open mind and the loving heart. At the same time, the open mind is not an empty mind and the loving heart is not an indiscriminate heart.

Freedom requires courage and personal discipline because one is responsible for one’s ideas, beliefs, and actions.

Free congregations promote a process or spiritual discipline in which one can discover the richest possible content for one’s self and the community.

2) Diversity of belief and the principle of pluralism

A free congregation is a religious community designed to encourage the full flowering of the individual person, a form of relatedness that yields diversity of belief.

Free religion assumes that just as each person has his or her own set of fingerprints, so each person will have his or her own way of thinking, feeling, and expressing him or herself.

A free faith promotes the idea that truth can be seen from many sides, like a jewel with many facets and angles.

Religious liberalism operates on the idea that there is not just one right religion, or one way of seeing things, or one way of expressing things.

A free faith is based on the idea that truth is available for all to seek and find; and that there is no special time, place, people, culture, or religion that has the corner on the truth.

A free faith, based as it is on the principle of respect for the individual, teaches the art of active listening so that the understanding of both speaker and listener may be enlarged.

In a free community where ideas should be questioned and tested, the effort must be made to both speak clearly and listen carefully.

Religious liberalism goes beyond “mere toleration” to promote the ideal of pluralism – unity out of plurality and plurality within unity. Diversity is the “fact,” pluralism is the “ideal.”

A free church does not first of all ask “What is right belief?” but “How do we treat each other?” Its motto is: “Right relations before right belief” and “Deed before creed.”

In religiously liberal congregations, courtesy has a religious dimension; it is needed to protect individuals so that they may express themselves openly and without fear of ridicule or reprisal.

3) The dignity, worth, and value of each individual and the ideal of justice

A free faith promotes the idea that it is in the individual that the universal power of life is expressed.

A free faith holds that all persons have an equal claim to life, liberty, and justice.

Free churches promote democratic process in their congregations so that their communities can govern themselves.

The aim of a free faith may be said to be the liberation and cultivation of the human spirit: first

to liberate, that is, to provide freedom, and, secondly, to cultivate, that is, to provide opportunity for growth and development.

Historically, religious liberalism has been characterized by a concern for this life on this earth, not life after death – the idea of: “One life at a time.”

Religious liberalism promotes the ethical application of religion in this life, seven days a week. Religion and life are one: religion is life, and life is religion.

4) Truth unfolds over time

Religiously liberal congregations generally operate with the idea that truth is not fixed in the past but open and growing into the future, and that life builds in an evolutionary way on the past.

In religiously liberal congregations, revelation is “not sealed.” It is continuous and ongoing, not final and fixed.

A free faith promotes a continuing search for truth and new beliefs. Free congregations are non-creedal, not because they are without beliefs, but because they will not be restrained or limited in their beliefs. They operate with the belief that beliefs can be developed, deepened, re-examined, and adjusted.

In religious liberalism, faith and doubt, belief and knowledge, religion and reason, ritual and rationality, the sacred and the secular, mysticism and science are not in opposition to each other.

The free church tradition points individuals toward the future with hope based on the idea of the continuous unfolding and developing of life.

Rev. Bruce Bode is a retired Unitarian Universalist minister and advocate of liberal religion's historic values.

The Position of a Free-Religious Person

Imaoka Shin'ichirō (1881-1988)

A short opening note about two key terms used in these translations: *Jiyū Shūkyō* and *Kiitsu Kyōkai* by Andrew James Brown

Jiyū Shūkyō [自由宗教] — Free-Religion

A perfectly acceptable translation of the Japanese term *jiyū shūkyō* [自由宗教] is “free-religion” (note the hyphen), and an individual practitioner of *jiyū shūkyō* — a “free-religionist” or “a free-religious person” — is called in Japanese, a *jiyū shūkyōjin* [自由宗教人]. However, whenever you read the term “free-religion” in these essays, you should always understand it expansively to mean something like, “a dynamic and process-like, creative, inquiring, free and liberative religion/spirituality”. It was a term used by Imaoka Shin'ichiro-sensei to indicate something beyond conventional belief and religion, beyond Theism, Pantheism, Liberalism, Unitarianism, Humanism, Atheism or, indeed, any “-ism”—something that he thought had the power to transform a person into what he called an authentic “cosmic” or “universal” human being. It's important to be aware that the **kyō** [教 teaching/faith] of *jiyū shūkyō* is the same **kyō** [教] of *Kiitsu Kyōkai* (see note below). In other words, free-religion was *Kiitsu Kyōkai*'s distinctive teaching/faith—one that gently bound (*religio*) the community together in their quest to become “cosmic” or “universal” human beings.

Kiitsu Kyōkai [帰一教会 or 帰一教會]—*Returning-to-One Gathering*

Kiitsu Kyōkai was the name of Imaoka-sensei's post-1948 free-religious community in Tokyo. *Kiitsu* [帰一] means “returning-to-one,” and *kyōkai* [教会] means “church” or “congregation.” In general—

though not exclusively¹—in modern Japanese usage, *kyōkai* [教会] refers to a *Christian church*. For these reasons, *Kiitsu Kyōkai* has often been translated as *Unitarian Church*. However, a better translation is, *Returning-to-One Gathering* because this gives us a sense of the active, dynamic and process-like, creative, inquiring, free and liberative religion/spirituality it aspired to teach. This matters because Imaoka-sensei's *Kiitsu Kyōkai* was always more than simply a temple or church, even a Unitarian one, this is because it was also a “school” in which a person could learn about and study free-religion alongside other free-religionists. In the *Kiitsu Kyōkai*, through the practise of *Seiza Meditation* (Quiet Sitting), talks, free and rational inquiry, mutual discovery, learning and conversation, Imaoka-sensei hoped to create a lay-led, cooperative community that would unite (*kiitsu*) all its members in the common cause of creating a more just, equitable, beautiful, and humane society (*kyōkai*) that did not make a hard and fast distinction between the sacred the secular. In his manuscripts, and on their noticeboard outside the hall where they met in the *Seisoku Academy* (where he served as Principal from 1925 to 1973), he attempted to indicate all this by using an older combination of Chinese characters for *kyōkai* (using 教會 rather than 教会), thus writing the name as 帰一教會. He chose to do this because, in Confucian

¹ 教会 [kyōkai] was originally a legal-administrative category introduced in the Meiji period. Under the 1875 Jishū-sei (寺院法規) regulations, when the Shin Buddhist denominations reorganised their institutional structures, they established several classes of local bases: betsuin (別院, major branch temple), tera (寺院, regular temple), kyōkai (教会), and dōjō (道場, mission hall). The kyōkai was a small urban preaching station, often set up in rented premises and typically lacking a cemetery. One example is Kangi Kyōkai (歓喜教会), a Jōdō Shinshū Ōtani-ha preaching hall in Kyoto. While the name can be translated literally as “Church of Joy,” functionally it was a Buddhist mission station rather than a church in the Christian sense. The category of kyōkai has persisted in the Ōtani-ha down to the present day, where official paperwork still records institutions as 寺院 (教会, reflecting the historical distinction between temples and preaching stations).

contexts, which emphasised communal learning and moral/ethical cultivation, 會 (*kai*) was used in terms that referred to gatherings concerned with the mutual exchange of ideas rather than the passing on of fixed doctrines.

It's important to know that *Kiitsu Kyōkai* (but written as 歸一協会) was also the name given to a secular organisation founded in 1913 by the industrialist Shibusawa Eiichi [渋沢栄一], Anesaki Masaharu [姉崎正治], a professor at the *University of Tokyo*, and Naruse Jinzō [成瀬仁蔵], president of *Japan Women's University*. The English translation of this pre-Pacific War *Kiitsu Kyōkai* is always *Association Concordia*. Imaoka-sensei was its secretary, and he continued in this role until the demise of the Association c. 1941/1942. It was not a church, and it did not hold worship services, but within it the underlying unity of all religions was thought about deeply by all those involved, which included, not only religious figures from Shintō, Buddhist, and Christian circles, together with foreign Christian missionaries, but also scholars, thinkers, and senior figures from politics and economics.

Shōwa 26 [1951] in “Creation”, Issue 12

Since religion is an individual experience, it is, as Shinran Shōnin² stated in absolute terms, extremely personal: “Amida’s salvation is for me alone”. However, the more deeply one pursues

² Shinran Shōnin — Shinran (1173–1263), honoured with the title Shōnin (“venerable master”), was the Japanese Buddhist monk who founded the Jōdo Shinshū, True Pure Land School of Buddhism. A disciple of Hōnen, he was exiled for his adherence to recitation of the nembutsu (“Namu Amida Butsu”) but eventually came to emphasise not self-powered practice but absolute reliance on Amida Buddha’s vow, or “Other-Power”. In his major work, the *Kyōgyōshinshō*, he presented a theology in which salvation is assured through shinjin (entrusting faith) granted by Amida Buddha. Married and living as a lay teacher, Shinran redefined Buddhist vocation and shaped a movement that became one of Japan’s largest Buddhist traditions.

the personal aspect, the more religion simultaneously becomes a social matter. It is not a matter of being saved first and then telling others: “Come to the place I’ve reached”. Rather, the attitude of Hōzō Bosatsu [Bodhisattva Dharmākara]³—who said: “Until all sentient beings are saved, I too cannot be saved. I am saved together with all others”—is just as correct as that of Shinran Shōnin. Though these two perspectives may seem contradictory at first glance, they are in fact two sides of the same religious life. With the aim of freely expressing this religious life, the position of the free-religious person is one that is, on one hand, deeply individualistic, and on the other hand, profoundly universal. However, if someone were to object, saying: “Isn’t this the stance of all true religious people, not just free-religionists?” I would wholeheartedly agree. The position of the free-religious person is nothing other than the position of a true religious person. The position of a true religious person, bound by nothing, is precisely the position of a free-religious person. Thus, my answer is: “free-religion” is, in fact, nothing other than religion itself.”

If we apply the above principles to the position of the free-religious person in a more concrete manner, then first and foremost, the church/*kyōkai* of the free-religious person must be a democratic one that equally respects both the individual and the collective. That is to say, the church/*kyōkai* must not belong to the clergy, such as Buddhist priests or Christian ministers, but rather, it must belong to the entire congregation—the laity. In

³ Hōzō Bosatsu [Bodhisattva Dharmākara] is central to Pure Land Buddhism. According to the *Larger Sukhāvativyūha Sūtra*, he was once a king who, moved by compassion, renounced his throne to become a monk and vowed before the Buddha Lokeśvararāja to establish a realm of unsurpassed bliss. Through forty-eight vows, he promised that all beings who call upon his name with faith would be reborn in this Pure Land, where enlightenment is assured. On fulfilling these vows through countless kalpas of practice, he became Amida (Amitābha) Buddha, the Buddha of Infinite Light and Life, whose boundless compassion remains the focus of Pure Land devotion.

other words, the sovereignty of the church/*kyōkai* must always remain in the shared hands of all members, and the clergy are simply executive functionaries. I believe that the same principle applies to the position of a religious founder. For example, Shinran Shōnin once said: “Shinran has not a single disciple. Everyone is my fellow traveler and friend.” I believe that this attitude is correct. If one does not establish one’s own disciples or followers, and if comrades form genuine friendships, becoming of one heart and body, then the founder and the clergy can simply step into the background. It is even possible to imagine a situation where the church/*kyōkai* continues to function without the presence of a religious founder or clergy. Those religious founders and clergy who exert an influence and provide guidance beyond their visible, public activities are truly great religious figures. Consequently, within the church/*kyōkai*, the mutual refinement among the members of the congregation is even more important than the sermons and the activities of the clergy. At the very least, there should be no hierarchical distinction between the value of the clergy’s contributions and that of the congregation.

It is often said that a defining characteristic of the church/*kyōkai* of the free-religious person is that it does not have prescribed articles. However, no matter how much a free-religious person values freedom, it is impossible for them to have no intellectual expression whatsoever regarding their own faith. Rather, it is both natural and an expression of freedom that each person has their own articles of faith. Thus, almost paradoxically, a free-religious person could be said to adhere to articles of faith even more than those in established religions. However, such articles of faith are personal and individual, and they are never a standard statement. Furthermore, it goes without saying that they are not something that can be imposed by an external religious authority. In other words, a free-religious person absolutely cannot agree with the idea of believing in a creed—such as the Apostles’ Creed, the Nicene Creed, or the Athanasian Creed—as if they were unchangeable, eternal truths that cannot have a single word added or removed. When it is said that a free-religious person does not have articles of faith, it is meant in this sense, and it certainly does not mean that they

reject all articles of faith. Articles of faith differ from person to person and evolve with time. They do not represent the whole truth but simply express a part of it. However, even though they are only a partial expressions of truth, since they are an expression of truth, a free-religious person will feel a sympathetic resonance with other people’s sincerely held articles of faith. Nevertheless, since a church/*kyōkai* is an organised entity, it is naturally necessary to have some kind of charter that clarifies the basis of the congregation’s unity. However, this is not really a creed but rather a statement of shared purpose or a set of practical guiding principles.

The same can be said regarding ceremonies. A free-religious person does not hold ceremonies in the sense that one must receive baptism to be saved, or that one must recite sutras to attain Buddhahood. However, religious conviction does not exist entirely naked, in and of itself; it necessarily takes some concrete form. Thus, just as there is no heart/mind apart from material things, and just as there is no life apart from the body, so too, there is no religion without ceremonies. However, since objects and forms are infinitely varied and never uniform, religious ceremonies are also infinitely diverse and appear to have nothing in common. In fact, differences in ceremonies have sometimes even caused schisms among religious denominations. Therefore, when free-religious people gather in one place to hold a worship service, the question naturally arises: “What kind of ceremonies should be adopted?” At first glance, this seems like an extremely difficult problem. However, from the fundamental standpoint of free-religious people, it can be resolved with the greatest ease.

The religion of the free-religious person is a universal religion, a faith that should be applicable to all people under heaven. Therefore, it should be impossible for a particular group of people to find it inaccessible because of ceremonial differences. If such a situation were to arise, then that free-religion would no longer be a universal religion. If it truly possesses universal life, should it not naturally hold enough power of attraction to move even those accustomed to different ceremonies, allowing them to transcend ceremonial differences and feel a sense of shared spiritual resonance? Is it not precisely the ability to transcend differences in

ceremonies and differences in doctrine, in the place where mutual sympathy and resonance occur, that we find the sacred poignancy and true aim of the “communion of saints”—or the “gathering of the sacred multitude”—which represents the ideal and profound meaning of a *Church/Kyōkai of Free-Religionists*? Thus, the ceremonies used in the worship services of the free-religious person’s church/kyōkai need not be fixed or specific. The most essential thing is not the question of ceremonies but rather the pulsation/vital movement of the universal Great Life,⁴ powerful enough to move and inspire even those accustomed to different ceremonies. However, if someone were to insist that in order to make this universal Great Life pulsate, it must be done through a particular ceremony—that no alternative ceremony can suffice—then I would begin to doubt whether their religion is truly universal.

Finally, clarifying the differences and similarities between a *Church/Kyōkai of Free-Religionists* and a *Religious Association*⁵ will also help explain the characteristics of free-religion. From my perspective, both groups share the principle of advocating for friendly relations among various religions. However, whereas the *Religious Association* is a collaboration concerned with the secondary aspects of different religions, a *Church/Kyōkai of Free-Religionists* seeks unity [*kiitsu*] in the essence of religions. Consequently, while it is difficult for the *Religious Association* to conduct worship, a *Church/Kyōkai of Free-Religionists* can—or rather, *must*—conduct worship. This is the key point of difference between the two. Whereas the *Religious Association* functions simply as a coordinating body, a *Church/Kyōkai of Free-Religionists* is a firmly autonomous and independent church/kyōkai. If that is the case, then what is the relationship between established churches and a *Church/Kyōkai of Free-Religionists*?

⁴ 普遍の大生命の躍動

⁵ Imaoka Shin’ichirō is likely drawing on the differences that existed between the pre-Pacific War *Kiitsu Kyōkai* [帰一協会], the *Association Concordia*, and his own post-Pacific War *Kiitsu Kyōkai* [帰一教会 or 帰一教會]. See “Short Note” at the beginning of this volume.

Does one have to leave one’s established church/kyōkai in order to become a member of a *Church/Kyōkai of Free-Religionists*? Or is it possible to belong to both churches/kyōkai at the same time? In other words, is a *Church/Kyōkai of Free-Religionists* a denomination, or does it move beyond denominational boundaries? To this question, I would like to answer both “yes” and “no.” If an established church/kyōkai is not exclusive, and through the denomination as a “symbolic” form it embraces a universal religious life, then that church/kyōkai is, in itself, already a *Church/Kyōkai of Free-Religionists*. In such a case, one is free to belong to either church/kyōkai—or, if one has the capacity, to belong to both at the same time. However, in most cases, established churches/kyōkai exist as denominations in an exclusive sense. Thus, there is a great need at this moment to found a new *Church/Kyōkai of Free-Religionists* that goes beyond established churches/kyōkai. Moreover, it is both natural and necessary that, once the connection with established churches/kyōkai is severed, one should dedicate oneself entirely to the cultivation of a *Church/Kyōkai of Free-Religionists*. Therefore, no matter how supra-denominational its intent may be, once the *Church/Kyōkai of Free-Religionists* is formed, it will, in a strict sense, cease to be supra-denominational and will become a new denomination. However, rather than regressing into an exclusive and self-assertive denomination, it will become a denomination that constantly evolves in accordance with the times, striving above all for the expansion of the universal religious life. In other words, it will become a supra-denominational denomination.

The above argument is by no means our original idea. At the end of the 18th-century, Gotthold Ephraim Lessing had already depicted, with great fidelity, the position of a free-religionist in his dramatic poem *Nathan the Wise*. Therefore, I would like to conclude this piece by quoting a scene from that dramatic poem.

It takes place during the time of the Crusades. Nathan, a Jew, had seen his seven sons slaughtered by the Christian Crusaders. However, by a strange twist of fate, a stable boy appeared, bringing with him an infant—his master’s Christian child—and

pleaded for Nathan's mercy. The child's mother had already died, and his father had joined the Crusades, leaving no one to care for the infant. Nathan, overjoyed, accepted the child, as if one of his lost sons had returned. He then raised the child in a truly Jewish manner. However, eighteen years later, this act was discovered. The Christian abbot, outraged that a Jew had raised a Christian child and turned him away from the Christian faith, declared that Nathan must be burned at the stake. The abbot then ordered his monastic brother to track down Nathan's whereabouts. However, as fate would have it, the monk tasked with this mission had once been the very stable boy who had brought the infant to Nathan.

He immediately sought out Nathan and spoke these words: "More than anything else, this child needed love—more than Christianity. Even the love of a wild beast would have sufficed. He could have become a Christian at any time. Had it not been for your compassion, this child would have died. You, a Jew, are the true Christian. I have never known a finer Christian."

To this, Nathan replied:

"We are both blessed. What you see in me as Christianity, I, in turn, see in you as Judaism."

The quintessence of religion is something far greater and more precious than Christianity, Judaism, Islam, Buddhism, Shintō, doctrines, ceremonies, or denominations. It is a universal life—which we may, provisionally, call love.⁶ Thus, the free-religious person dedicates themselves solely to the free unfolding of this universal life—nothing more, nothing less.



⁶ 愛

Introducing our 2025 NAUA Summit Keynote Speaker, Rev. Szabó Előd

Todd Eklof



We are delighted and honored to have Rev. Szabó Előd as our scheduled keynote speaker at this year's NAUA Summit. Rev. Szabó is minister in Székelykeresztúr (Cristuru Secuiesc), one of the largest congregations of the Hungarian and Transylvanian Unitarian Church. "I am a born Unitarian, and I could also say I am a born Unitarian minister," he explains. "Many of my ancestors, beginning with the 19th century, served the church as ministers. My grandfather, Kovács Lajos, was the Unitarian bishop; the leader of our church for more than two decades, beginning in the 1970s. My father is also a retired minister. Religion and church matters were always a hot topic at the dinner table and family events beginning in my early childhood."

Előd grew up in Kolozsvár, where he went to high school and studied at the Theological School. He began serving as a minister in 2005 and spent two years in Székelyudvarhely (Odorheiu Secuiesc), then another fifteen years in the Unitarian Church of Ürmös (Ormenis). He became minister in

Székelykeresztúr in 2023, where he lives with his wife Kata, a nursery schoolteacher, and their two sons, Magor and Regő.

Előd and his family spent a year in the US doing post graduate work as the 2019-2020 Balazs Scholar at Starr King School for the Ministry in Berkeley, CA. During this time, he says, “My family and I encountered a country that is very different from ours. We met new people, new schools, visited museums and churches, and we found something to learn every day.” His emersion among Western Unitarians, and his lifetime among Eastern Unitarians, has provided Előd with a unique understanding of their similarities and differences. As NAUA seeks to reconnect Unitarianism to its historic roots and values, we are grateful for the opportunity to learn from Előd’s wisdom and his unique perspective.

On a personal note, I first met Rev. Előd several years ago when he served as the interim minister in Felsőrákos, which is the partner church of my Spokane congregation. Since then, we have met several times over Zoom and I have come to consider him my colleague and friend. As for the content of his address, he wishes to talk about “the challenges that we, as religious communities face, in the political, social and historical environment in which we live, and also look at the possibilities and challenges we need to address in our effort to strengthen the bonds between Unitarians in Transylvania and in the west.”

The 2025 NAUA Summit’s Keynote address will happen October 3 from 4:00 to 5:00 PM PST, followed with a Q&A period with Rev. Előd from 5:00 to 6:00 PM. To see the full schedule or to register, please use the following link:

https://events.zoom.us/j/AnxJNjsqlahrG8VEDlmdWAT5MoLVHyalYC4v0IbFf8NQc463QNcu~AnNV7tBkankZuUSfhpuCSvLIYUKY3hbeeEskfsg2P0ZKBwM8VGG_IxDs6Q

The Lasting Legacy of Baruch Spinoza

Candace Schmidt

Benedictus de Spinoza lived in the 17th century Dutch Republic, a European country that had thrown off the domination of Spanish Catholicism in 1579. In part because of the desire of leaders of the Republic to continue the prosperity brought in by international trade, relative tolerance was extended to the myriads of groups, sects, and religions that participated in its bustling economy. In contrast, much of the rest of Europe remained under the sway of the Spanish Inquisition, which sought to quash any opposition to the Catholic Church. In the countries where Calvinism had taken hold, there was a rigid intolerance to dissenters expressing opposing views to the teachings of that particular religion. The relative tolerance in the Dutch Republic meant that citizens were free to make up their own minds about religious teachings and philosophical issues; however, it was decreed that no citizens had the right to teach others about their views or to publish books espousing dissenting viewpoints from the still-influential Reformed (Calvinist) Church.

Spinoza, often known by the name of Baruch rather than Benedictus, was born and educated in a strict Jewish community in Amsterdam. His forebears came from Spain and Portugal, where in the late 15th and early 16th centuries Jews were forced to convert to Catholicism or face expulsion. In fact, the Spanish Inquisition’s primary purpose was to enforce doctrinal purity by persecuting those Jews who outwardly practiced the Catholic faith while covertly remaining true to their Jewish faith traditions; they were known as Crypto Jews, or conversos. Over the course of a century many of these Crypto Jews, including the Spinoza family, made their way to the Dutch Republic, where they were free to openly practice their faith and develop thriving communities. The Spinoza family attained a high level of prosperity in the city through its thriving international trade business. Benedictus, while receiving a thorough education in the Torah,

was expected to eventually take over the family business to ensure the family's wealth and prosperity continued.

While Spinoza as a teenager was esteemed in the local synagogue as a brilliant scholar, his rabbis and teachers became seriously concerned over his increasing skepticism toward Jewish traditions and teachings. Over time this culminated in Spinoza's expulsion from the Jewish community in Amsterdam, whereby all of the synagogue's members, including Spinoza's immediate family, were forbidden to speak to him. Benedictus then gravitated to various small groups of "freethinkers" in Amsterdam who were primarily Christians of various persuasions, and who challenged the Reformed Church's beliefs in the Trinity, the divinity of Jesus, miracles, and other "superstitions" that he believed were meant to enforce obedience in church members to the religious authorities.

While Spinoza mostly lived a quiet life spent in furthering his education in Latin, science, and philosophy, eventually leading to treatises on ethics, theology, and later politics, he maintained an extensive correspondence with other freethinkers and philosophers in the Dutch Republic and in the rest of Europe. Spinoza wrote in the *Theological Political Treatise*, published anonymously in 1670, that Christianity and Judaism are basically nothing more than "organized superstition." For Spinoza, peoples' natural response to the precariousness of living was to believe in superstition. In contrast, Spinoza's God is stripped of any anthropomorphic qualities that humans throughout the centuries have assigned to God based on human attributes; but is instead conceptualized as Nature and natural laws. He scoffed at organized religions' tendency to describe God in human terms, saying that if believing entities were triangles, then their God would have triangular characteristics, and if these entities were circles, then God would be described as circular!



Religious authorities were shocked and angered by Spinoza's categorical rejection of scripture. But as historian Jonathan Israel noted, "no other element of Spinoza's philosophy provoked as much consternation and outrage in his own time as his sweeping denial of miracles and the supernatural." While most progressives and scientific thinkers in the 17th century described nature as being governed by physical laws and natural causes, few went as far as Spinoza in denying even the possibility that miracles had ever occurred in the history of man. He viewed the idea of a miracle as an event whose

natural cause could not be explained by comparing it to any other similar occurrence. He claimed that miracles are not just improbable, but completely impossible. "Miracles and ignorance are the same." At the same time, Spinoza did not shy away from talking about God but thought the power of God was synonymous with the power of nature, since God was nothing but nature and nature's physical and immutable laws. He often spoke of providence, by which he meant the universal cause and effect of nature.

He did not think of himself as an atheist and was typically deeply offended if someone described him as such. To Spinoza, being an atheist meant having no moral compass or guiding moral principles.

With regard to the accuracy of scripture, Spinoza's contemporaries believed the people who wrote various parts of the Bible were "merely the privileged recipients of an eternal content," according to historian Steven Nadler. To Spinoza, rather, the Bible is simply a work of human literature that strove to make sense of circumstances experienced by ancient Israelites. He did not consider scripture as necessarily a source of truth but thought it quite useful in promoting the obedience of the masses required by religious leaders. "In order to escape from this scene of confusion, to free our minds from the prejudices of theologians and to avoid the hasty acceptance of

human fabrications as divine teachings,” it was necessary to see exactly what Scripture was and was not, in order to free men “from religious and political bondage.” By promoting this view, he hoped to undermine clerical influence in the politics of the Dutch Republic. His aim was to usher in a tolerant democratic society of people whose actions were guided by “true (moral) religion.” Spinoza’s true religion was an ethical call to action, in which universal justice and goodwill toward mankind was central. It also included a sense of wonder and awe at the beauty, unity, and complexity of the world. Albert Einstein was open about the influence of Spinoza’s philosophy on his own thinking, stating, “We followers of Spinoza see our God in the wonderful order and lawfulness of all that exists ...as it reveals itself in man and animal.” Describing his view of true religion, Einstein agreed with Spinoza that it has very little to do with what most people considered religion, but is free of all superstition and intolerance and would center the writings of philosophers and scientific research as guiding lights in society.

Society’s religions, according to Spinoza, had nothing at all in common with the aims of philosophy and science, but served a different purpose, that is, to keep the populace “in servitude” to its religious leaders. Impressive ceremonies, fabricated theological teachings, and threatened consequences of disbelief were all used by religious authorities to keep intact the power they held over their churches. Religion “promotes obedience and good conduct” while philosophy and science were “knowledge-seeking disciplines” that sought to further understand the workings of the natural world and of ourselves. He believed that Christianity, in and of itself, was a positive force in people’s lives as long as it adhered to the principles of “love, joy, peace, moderation and good will to all men.” However, Spinoza was very direct in saying that organized Christianity had devolved from Christ’s original universal teachings to the current-day situation of different sects battling each other for supremacy and oppressing its believers by punishing dissent.

Throughout his life, Spinoza remained acutely aware of the dangerousness of publishing his philosophical views and the risks of potential imprisonment for his dissenting views, even in the

Dutch Republic, which was by far the most tolerant of the countries in Europe. This was so because of laws prohibiting the publishing of anti-Reformist (Calvinist) views and because church clerics were persistent in their criticism that the Dutch Republic was too lenient and permissive toward dissenting beliefs and thus advocated for the increase in punitive action toward those with opposing ideas. His *Theological Political Treatise*, published anonymously in 1670, outraged the secular and religious authorities, even though Spinoza was careful to express with some equivocation, in order to avoid unwanted consequences, some of his most incendiary anti-Biblical beliefs. Spinoza was eventually identified as the author of the *Treatise*. District synods in the Republic called for a formal ban on the *Treatise* and other dissenting writings, but certain provincial leaders were hesitant, perhaps viewing such repressive actions as more dangerous to the peace of the Republic than “immoral” books. After this piecemeal approach to banning the *Treatise*, in 1674 it was officially banned in the entire Dutch Republic. The backlash was so intense that Spinoza decided not to publish a previously written book, “*Ethics*,” for fear of its inciting further repercussions.

The historian Jonathan Israel noted, “Spinoza’s death represents a unique landmark in intellectual history. Paradoxically, it was his physical death in the Hague, on 21 February 1677, that opened the door ... to his initial massive European reception and recognition as one of the leading, or rather most challenging, thinkers of the age.” The ten months after his death were pivotal, as his friends and colleagues covertly collected, copied, edited, and prepared for publication a significant portion of his previously unpublished writings, bundled together in what was titled “*Opera Posthuma*.” By the end of 1677 the “*Opera Posthuma*” was published, in both Latin and Dutch, with an ensuing clandestine effort to disseminate the materials throughout the Republic and Europe. This led the Dutch Reformed Church authorities in a desperate search for the offending manuscripts in order to destroy them and to discover the author of the heretical books.

Almost immediately, most of the leading intellectuals and church leaders in Europe were reading the manuscripts and contending with the

implications of Spinoza's philosophy, despite their being banned in his home country, France, Italy, the German states, the Spanish world, and by the Vatican. Even though much was said publicly about these "blasphemous" writings, much care was taken to hide from the public the name of Benedictus de Spinoza, once they discovered his authorship, to prevent attention being drawn to the author. With the threat of harsh punishment, any actions to print, sell, and distribute the Opera Posthuma were prohibited. Nevertheless, copies were disseminated by an underground cadre of freethinkers, using a variety of strategies, including putting false covers on the manuscript so that bookstores could continue to sell it.

In subsequent years, the Opera Posthuma was widely distributed throughout Europe. Israel writes, "Spinozism's emergence as a world-shaping force in 1677 was thus the work of Spinoza *and* his circle, not any one individual." The work was finally translated into English in 1689. Spinoza challenged not only ecclesiastical teaching and authority, but also the existing social order, with his attacks on monarchies and other forms of authoritarian governance. He promoted the idea of democracy being the best form of government because it allowed the most freedoms to citizens to "freely philosophize" without fear of punishment. Israel writes further, "... some of the greatest minds of post-1700 modern humanity including Lessing, Herder, Goethe, Shelley, George Eliot, Heine, Nietzsche, Freud, and Einstein considered Spinoza's philosophy the most inspiring guide in their personal lives." An observer and critic of the early Enlightenment era, Jean le Clerc, wrote that from around 1725 aspects of Spinoza's philosophy advocated a broad scope of now widely-accepted modern principles diffused slowly, with difficulty, but nonetheless steadily, and contributed to laying the groundwork for present-day liberal democratic societies.

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Free Speech, College Campuses, and Pro-Palestinian Protestors

Todd F. Eklof

The Gaza Health Ministry estimates more than 60,000 Palestinians, mostly women and children, have been killed by the Israeli military during the past two years, along with over 100,000 more who have been wounded, during its efforts to destroy the militant Islamic Resistance Movement, Hamas. To be clear, Israel's actions are in response to Hamas's horrific October 7, 2023, attacks resulting in the cold-blooded murder and torture of more than 1,250 innocent Jewish people, and the taking of more than 250 Jewish hostages. But its response has literally been overkill. Both the International Criminal Court and the United Nations have charged Israel with war crimes and crimes against humanity for this reason. It has reportedly bombed hospitals, killed aid workers and journalists, and routinely blocked food and medical supplies from reaching sick, injured, desperate, and starving Palestinian civilians.

For those of us who value reason, it is especially important to remain sound thinkers when considering matters like this that are so intensely polarizing and emotional. One of the best ways to do this is to become familiar with some of the most common informal fallacies that mislead us into believing our thinking is sound when it isn't.

When asked about the charges of war crimes, for example, Israel and its supporters often respond that "Israel has a right to defend itself." Of course it does! And we could only expect that its response to the brutal October 7 attacks would result in additional bloodshed and death, enveloping many innocent civilians. But this reply is a *strawman argument* that subtly diverts the discussion to a different question than is being asked. The question is not, "Does Israel have a right to defend itself?" The question is, "Does Israel have the right to commit war crimes and crimes against humanity by indiscriminately killing, injuring, and denying



humanitarian aid to civilians? The appropriate response to the first question is *yes*, of course Israel has a right to defend itself. But the answer to the real question is *absolutely not*; it doesn't have a right to kill, injure, or starve those innocents who are in its way.

Accusing those who remain focused on the real question of antisemitism, furthermore, is an *ad hominem* fallacy because it diverts attention away from the real question by demonizing whoever is asking it or pointing out Israel's inhumane actions. After the ICC issued a warrant for Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's arrest last year, he said the decision "cast shame on the court," that the court is a "rogue prosecutor," and that it was an "anti-Semitic decision,"⁷ none of which addresses the lives and welfare of the Palestinian civilians he is accused of disregarding.

Ad hominem accusations of "antisemitism" are frequently lodged against anyone criticizing Israel's

treatment of Palestinians, including against US college students protesting such behavior, and, in some cases, against the colleges themselves for not preventing them from demonstrating. The point of *ad hominem* attacks, however, is always "to kill the messenger" in order to avoid dealing with the message, or, in this case, the real question being asked. *Does Israel have the right to commit war crimes and crimes against humanity by indiscriminately killing, injuring, and denying humanitarian aid to Palestinian civilians?*

Another error at play is the *fallacy of composition* which occurs when one wrongly assumes that a characteristic that's true of an individual part must also be true of the whole. Just because a tire is made of rubber, for example, does not mean an entire automobile is made of rubber. This fallacy is the root of all human prejudice and racism. Those responsible for the October 7 attack against Israel were Palestinians acting on behalf of Hamas. But this doesn't mean that all Palestinians are members of Hamas or were responsible for these attacks. Assuming otherwise makes no more sense than claiming all Americans play for the NFL because some Americans do. Yet Israel seems to be holding

⁷ <https://new.embassies.gov.il/nepal/en/news/prime-minister-benjamin-netanyahu-22112024>

all Palestinians responsible for what happened on October 7 by not discriminating between innocent civilians and the militants it wants to eradicate.

Defending the Palestinian people as a whole does not justify the horrific violence some Palestinians have engaged in against Israel. Nor does it justify the brutal actions of those individuals involved in the heinous and indiscriminate crimes against individual Jews living anywhere. To be pro-Palestinian does not mean one must be against Israel. This is a *false dichotomy*. If one is fundamentally for humanity and for life, then one is for the humane treatment and welfare of all people and for the peaceful resolution of conflict.

This, by and large, was the purpose of the more than 120 protests that occurred on college campuses in the US during 2024, in response to the relentless atrocities committed against scores of innocent Palestinians standing between Israel and Hamas. Such demonstrations almost always include some individuals who speak more passionately and angrily than others and may say things not all participants agree with. But this is the nature of free expression: the right to say things others disagree with. The overall goal of the student protestors, however, was for their universities to divest from companies supporting Israel, along with a few other demands specific to certain campuses.

Legal questions emerged when student protesters began setting up encampments on their campuses, over 117 of them, along with some occupying buildings and denying other students and faculty members reasonable access to classrooms and other facilities. University administrators took various approaches to resolve these situations, resulting in approximately 18 percent of schools partially agreeing to their demands, and to just over half of them forcibly removing the encampments.⁸ These forced removals also resulted in the arrests, suspensions, expulsions, and withholding of the degrees of some student protestors.

⁸<https://www.bestcolleges.com/research/student-protests-pro-palestinian-encampments/>

In many cases, Jewish students merely claiming they felt unsafe has been the basis for charges of antisemitism against the protestors. But claiming to *feel* unsafe in response to hearing things one disagrees with has become rampant on today's campuses, as has requiring professors to give "trigger warnings" before saying anything that might disturb the sensitivities of a particular student, which makes it difficult to take these *appeals to emotion* seriously. The few incidents of violence that have been documented appear to be the result of aggressive confrontations on both sides. An incident at UCLA in April of 2024, for example, occurred when a pro-Israel group allegedly attacked protestors, which has resulted in a lawsuit against the University for not adequately protecting pro-Palestinian demonstrators.

That same month, The New York Times published an article with the headline, "Some Jewish Students Are Targeted as Protests Continue at Columbia."⁹ This sounds serious, but the byline beneath it is much softer: "After reports of harassment by demonstrators, some Jewish students said they felt unsafe. Others said they felt safe, while condemning antisemitism." The offenses the article goes on to cite as examples of targeting Jewish students only describe speech, not actions. "Some pro-Palestinian demonstrations on and around campus veered into harassment," it says. And "protesters targeted some Jewish students with antisemitic vitriol," and "verbal attacks left a number of the 5,000 Jewish students at Columbia fearful for their safety." But it doesn't tell us how many of these students actually felt this way.

Questioning the so-called "lived experience" of those who say they felt threatened but may not have actually been threatened, is precisely what can get a person "cancelled" these days, which I recognize I am in danger of now. But these terms, "felt unsafe," "fearful," "veered into harassment," "antisemitic vitriol," all given without citing anything that was said to anyone, let alone done to anyone, makes such claims spurious. In fact, the

⁹<https://www.nytimes.com/2024/04/21/nyregion/columbia-protests-antisemitism.html>

article itself goes on to admit that “some Jewish students who are supporting the pro-Palestinian demonstrations on campus said they felt solidarity, not a sense of danger, even as they denounced the acts of antisemitism.” (Again, the article doesn’t mention what “acts” it is referring to.) At the very least, this discrepancy indicates the *Times* article is reporting on subjective experiences, not on objective truths, which should make us skeptical of such claims.

Yet the Trump Administration has sought to punish Harvard and Columbia Universities, among others, for not having quickly stopped their students from speaking out on this issue—passionate, angry, and even inappropriate as some of their protected speech may have been. The President has threatened billions in funding for Harvard, calling the prestigious university “very antisemitic.”¹⁰ Prior to a recent financial settlement the BBC reported, “The Trump administration is looking to strip Columbia University of its accreditation over claims it violated the civil rights of its Jewish students,” and that his “Education Secretary Linda McMahon said in a letter that the New York City college ‘acted with deliberate indifference towards the harassment of Jewish students in a manner that violated federal anti-discrimination laws.’”¹¹ These should make interesting court case given that these universities are being accused of *not* doing something; in this case, of not controlling the free speech of others.

When it comes to freedom of speech, US courts and laws are far more liberal than any other democracy in the world. Exceptions to such speech include harassment, terroristic threatening, inciting a riot, hate speech, slander, and libel, some of which are extremely hard to prove, and must be accompanied by proof of real damages. If accusations of antisemitism should fall under the categories of harassment, terroristic threatening, or a hate crime, the courts will require evidence of real harm, not

just hurt feelings or feeling threatened. To be clear, there is nothing criminal about making negative or unwanted comments about others.

The freedom of speech movement was born on our college campuses, and the right of their professors, faculty, and students to exercise such freedom has been repeatedly upheld by the courts. As far back as 1957, for example, the Supreme Court ruled in favor of a college professor who had been jailed for refusing to answer questions about some of his lectures.¹² Chief Justice Earl Warren explained, “The essentiality of freedom in the community of American universities is almost self-evident. No one should underestimate the vital role in a democracy that is played by those who guide and train our youth. To impose any strait jacket upon the intellectual leaders in our colleges and universities would imperil the future of our Nation.”

In 1967, New York State enacted a law that effectively prohibited state employees from being members of the Communist Party. The State University of New York successfully sued over the matter because it required employees to sign an oath stating they were not Communists, once again firmly guaranteeing the principle of academic freedom. In 1972, the Supreme Court again ruled against Central Connecticut State College for refusing to recognize an on-campus chapter of the Students for a Democratic Society, a leftwing student activist organization, calling such behavior unconstitutional and determining that the First Amendment applies to all public institutions.¹³

Before Israel was established in 1948, Palestine was home to Arabs, Jews, and Christians, all with ancient ties to the region. Though Jewish scriptures tell stories of escaped slaves led to a promised land, some historians suggest the early Hebrews were likely a loose confederation of oppressed peoples who settled the surrounding hill country, gradually uniting their stories and forming a shared identity. Eventually, they were briefly unified under a leader named David, whose reign became the foundation for their messianic hopes of restoration. Yet

¹⁰ <https://www.today.com/video/harvard-responds-after-trump-threatens-to-pull-3b-in-federal-funds-240358981692a>

¹¹ <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/cy0j2n0p89go>

¹² *Sweezy v. New Hampshire*

¹³ *Healy v. James*

throughout history, Jews rarely controlled the land exclusively, and lived under successive empires—Assyrian, Babylonian, Persian, Greek, and Roman.

In 135 CE, after crushing a Jewish revolt, Rome renamed the region "Palestine" to sever Jewish ties to it. Some Jews remained and likely assimilated with the evolving Palestinian population, while most were scattered across the world. Remarkably, despite centuries of exile and persecution—including the Holocaust—Jewish identity has endured.

After World War II, Israel was founded in this already inhabited region as a Jewish homeland, but only after displacing over a million Palestinians from their homes and cities, whose ancestors had lived there for centuries. The resulting conflict has persisted, fueled by hostility from surrounding nations and enduring resentment against Jews around the world. The situation has worsened dramatically since the vile Hamas attack of October 7. But to be clear, while Israel's oppressive behavior is partly responsible for causing such hostilities, the inhumanity of the actual perpetrators of this attack cannot be justified by saying "they were just defending themselves," no more than this excuse can justify Israel's actions now. The October 7 attackers were intentionally sadistic toward the innocent Jewish civilians who became the tragic victims of their diabolical cruelties on that day. My concern for the lives and wellbeing of Palestinian people does not mean I regard these brutes with any less outrage than I hold for Benjamin Netanyahu and those carrying out what many consider war crimes and crimes against humanity on his behalf.

Today, freedom of speech is under assault, including in the US and other so-called free countries. There are potentially serious consequences to speaking about almost anything these days, but especially about the most important things, like what is and has been happening to Palestinians for more than half a century. Using our freedom of speech, our right to say what we believe is so about this or other important matters, too often takes great courage, especially nowadays. Yet those devoted to the principles our democracies are

supposed to be founded upon must find the courage to say and, more importantly, do what we must to foster human rights and human welfare everywhere.

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Do You Understand?

Todd Eklof

We don't say things "stand" because people stand, we say people stand because things stand. There are so many ways to stand.

Do you understand?

I put my book down on my nightstand, right next to my lampstand. Sometimes I grandstand, misunderstand, take a stand, stand together, stand with, and stand beside.

Can you withstand hearing what you can't stand?

Do you understand?

We don't say things "see" because people see, we say people see because things see. There are so many ways to see.

Do you see?

Dogs see in grayscale, bats see sound, bees see colors that I can't, and a blind man sees his friends, his favorite movies, and what's happening in the world just as good as most.

I see in my mind's eye, I see what you're saying, I see the truth, sometimes I see the future.

Do you see?

Mixing up pronouns may not be amusing but it's so God
damn confusing!

Whoever thought that he, she, and they could be so
abusing?

I won't throw a fit if you should say "it," cause it's the
Queen's proper English. It's neutral. There's nothing
wrong with it. It's alright. It's nice. It's good.

But now "they" can mean one, too. Say what you want,
but they means many and sometimes one, too.

Don't come undone, have fun. People don't mean the
things they say, people say the things they mean.

They're not mean things; they just mean things.

You may put ideas into my head but please don't put
words into my mouth.

Just try to see what I'm saying.

Just try to understand.

Do you understand?

