

Cleveringa, following in Spinoza's footsteps

Cleveringa Lecture delivered on 30 November 2017 at the Dutch Embassy at Santiago de Chile by Prof. Carlos Peña, Rector of the Diego Portales University and Holder for the academic year 2017-2018 of the Latin America and the Caribbean Chair at Leiden University.

At 10 am on November 26th, 1940, Rudolph Cleveringa, at that time Dean of the Faculty of Law at Leiden University, went into a classroom to give a class for a colleague, Professor Meijers. Instead of being taught by Meijers, the students found out that he had been expelled by the Nazis because he was a Jew. Once he had given them this news, Cleveringa praised his friend and enthusiastically and poetically defended the ideals of tolerance the Dutch institution upheld and which, Cleveringa said, the "foreign country that now has a hold over us" had crushed.

Still considered one of the best speakers in the Netherlands, Cleveringa's vibrant speech would have gone no further than the podium had it not been for a colleague who, recognising the importance of what had happened, took and reproduced it, circulating it by hand until it fanned the desire of the students of Leiden to strike. In reprisal, the Nazis closed the university and Cleveringa was imprisoned until 1944.

In order to appreciate the nobility and bravery of Cleveringa's gesture - still remembered nowadays - it is enough to compare it to what occurred six or seven years before in Freiburg. In 1933, Martin Heidegger became Rector of the university there and gave a famous speech in which he voiced his enthusiastic adherence to Nazism. He also forbade Edmund Husserl - until then his teacher and even his friend - from entering the faculty and university library on that same day for the mere fact that he was a Jew. That, Husserl later wrote in a letter, had been the bitterest moment of his life.

In Freiburg, the university Rector, who was already famous for his 1927 publication of *Being and Time*, preferred the use of force and ideology. Without making a fuss and without using militancy, a dean in Leiden, however, was

capable of opposition and of persuading members of the university, also without using militancy, to resist, at least intellectually.

It is not easy to explain Cleveringa's actions, forever honouring the spirit of Leiden University which, on or around November 26th each year, are commemorated in different parts of the world, as we also do here. It is likely that this gesture reflects the university's slogan - the *Bastion of Freedom* - won in the struggle against Spain, at that time a state with a mixture of spiritual authoritarianism and secular arrogance. It is also likely that Cleveringa used his actions to make reference to the tradition of tolerance that so easily spread through the Netherlands from the Seventeenth century onwards and which it seems to me is an apt summary of Spinoza's ideas and career, in whose footsteps Cleveringa followed.

It may seem like a coincidence, but almost two and a half centuries before very close to Leiden in Rijnsburg, Baruch Spinoza had lived for a while, almost next door to the place where on November 26th this speech on dignity and resistance was given. His treaty on ethics and writings on the virtue of tolerance were things Professor Cleveringa paid tribute to through his action.

It seems, then, that there is an invisible thread connecting them and that the same path somehow unites Spinoza, the renegade Jew to whom we owe one of the best defences of freedom and tolerance and Cleveringa, the brave dean who defended Leiden's dignity with his action.

Spinoza's family arrived in Amsterdam via Spain and Portugal, in search of the religious freedom that, inspired by reformed churches, the Netherlands had fought for. Spinoza's upbringing and work, which is the basis for modern culture and the democratic tradition that Cleveringa, as I said earlier, paid tribute to, occurred in the shadow of and in conversation with the intellectual culture of the Netherlands of the time.

Living in a house that is still standing in Rijnsburg, the small town near Leiden and squeezed behind a small desk surrounded by the books he was reading at the time, Spinoza wrote part of what is perhaps his most famous book, *Ethica*.

Although *Ethica* is a so-called book about metaphysics and a book that describes the latest elements of reality, it also houses some of the ideas that would

become the basis for his political thought and is one of the most vigorous defences of democracy and human freedom. It is thrilling to imagine this man, hunched over his desk in his small room in Rijnsburg – a place that, according to his biographers, he would not leave for weeks at a time – writing a book that almost three centuries later is still capable of guiding politics and the direction democratic institutions take.

In *Ethica*, Spinoza imagines a world that is more or less like the one we know today. A whole that is closed in on itself and whose elements are ruled by causality, no exceptions barred. As opposed to what Aristotle, St. Thomas or Suárez declared – names that inspired a large amount of the analysis of the time – Spinoza taught that the world, that whole completely ruled by causality, did not have any finality or aim or what the ancients called a *telos*. Instead, in the sixth and seventh propositions of *Ethica's* third part, he taught that each of the elements that made up the world, including human beings, have an internal impetus, a blind strength or tendency to which Spinoza gave the name *conatus*, which pushes them to persevere during their existence and expand their being. This hypothesis, which to a certain extent was metaphysical, is the starting point for the political reflection that is developed in the fourth part of this magnificent book.

Spinoza thought that men moved by this *conatus* could easily be overcome by passion and, in this state of nature, come into conflict with one another in a very similar way to what had occurred twenty years ago, as Hobbes had imagined. Passion, he explained, is something we suffer, something we cannot control. Only if we manage to understand the cause of our actions, if we learn to dominate our affections using reason or dominate the fear we feel or the impulses that spur us into action can we stop suffering and become the agents of what we are. For Spinoza, freedom, in a metaphysical sense, is the rational understanding of need.

In the lecture he gave in Leiden on *Civil Courage and Moral Imagination*, Michael Ignatieff tells that when Cleveringa read his famous speech, he did not do so expressing a simple passion for or mere rebellion against an act that he felt was unjust. In fact, Ignatieff says that after showing how the expulsion of his colleague hurt the principles of the Dutch constitution, he urged his students not to do anything stupid and instead, understanding they felt a sense of injustice, urged them to accept the *force majeure*. There is no doubt that it was

brave of Cleveringa to give his speech and rationally protest against the act that violated rules of freedom and tolerance, but he was also free to carry out an act that was typical of Spinoza. As Spinoza had taught, freedom consists of being capable of understanding what is needed, of looking this need in the face and using reason to avoid surrendering to it.

In autumn 1765, Spinoza wrote to Oldenburg - Secretary of the Royal Academy in London, with whom he had been in touch after the former's visit to Rijnsburg in 1761- and told him that he was writing a *Treaty* that contained his interpretation of the Scriptures. This is one of the first times he mentioned the famous *Theological Political Treatise* in his correspondence - one of the most noteworthy defences of modern thought and expression, with the same values Cleveringa defended in his famous speech.

To understand the scope of the *Treaty*, the circumstances that enveloped it in scandal (to the extent that it was forbidden and called "a book made in hell") and the importance that it had in the creation of modern politics, two things should definitely be mentioned, if only superficially. The first concerns the theological-political problem or, if you prefer, the use of religion to assert authority that criss-crosses the Sixteenth and Seventeenth centuries and in which several intellectuals from Leiden play a key role. It is enough, of course, to remember Arminius, a Professor of Theology at Leiden, whose work inspired contemporary Methodism. Arminius was opposed to Calvinist orthodoxy, like Hugo Grotius and very early on began to demand some kind of religious freedom. There is also, of course, Pieter de la Court, a textile manufacturer from the city of Leiden and author of *The Interest of Holland* (1662), who stood up for the Republic and for the separation of Church and State. The theological-political question that Spinoza himself deals with is thus ever present in the history of the city to which Leiden University belongs.

The other issue is more philosophical in nature and is related to what literature calls *Dutch Cartesianism*.

Dutch Cartesianism has its roots in a debate that emerged specifically at Utrecht University about the possibility of natural theology - that is to say, the possibility of proving, with a single reason and without any revelations, religious truths. What was called Dutch Cartesianism defended the separation between philosophy and theology into two clearly differentiated spheres, with the first

not interfering with the truths of the second. Dutch Cartesians taught that philosophical knowledge was one thing; what emerged from the common experience and the convergence of the knowledge of theologians, politicians and lawyers was something different.

Spinoza referred to these two subjects in his letter to Oldenburg. His *Treaty*, he told Oldenburg, was motivated by the aims of getting people to stop having “prejudices against theologians” so that they could “dedicate their time and energy to cultivating philosophy” and by the desire to consolidate freedom for people to philosophise and say what they think; freedoms, he concludes, that fanatical preachers aspire to repress. It is hard to explain more clearly than Spinoza does in this letter his opposition to Dutch Cartesianism and the use of religion to assert political power.

The *Political Theological Treatise* is made up of two parts, the first theological and the second political. In the first, he defends the freedom to interpret the Scriptures and, in the second, the State’s freedom of expression. The topic dealt with in the *Treaty* is therefore freedom in all areas of human existence.

It is worth revising its contents, at least schematically.

The first part explains that when the Scriptures are examined using reason, behind the imaginative images that have been concocted throughout the centuries, there are a handful of very simple truths, the main one of which is so-called pious living. Spinoza explains that if this mandate is complied with - or, to describe it in modern terms, if one lives their life treating others with respect and consideration - then one has complete freedom to comment on any other religious matter. The political part of the *Treaty*, on the other hand, begins by examining the origins and foundation of the State. If *Ethica* explained that human beings are driven by a *conatus* that could easily turn into passion, this now explained that this is where the basis of the State is to be found: a contract or agreement between men that is based on reason, with the aim of subduing passions and rationally controlling them. It is difficult to better establish the foundation of the State, which, as Spinoza explains, is based on reason and how this is exercised:

5. (...) the best State, it says, is that in which men lead a peaceful life. I understand human life as that which is defined not only by

the circulation of blood and other functions common to all animals but rather, and above all, by reason, true virtue and the life of the soul.

6. It should be indicated, however, that when I say that the State is constitutionally aimed towards this end, I refer to that founded by a multitude that is free and not that acquired by winning a war against this multitude (...)

Spinoza says that the state to which he refers is one founded by a multitude that is free. It is worth pausing for a moment to study this expression - *a free multitude* – since it shows the Republican roots of his train of thought and the meaning he assigned political freedom.

In the age of Spinoza, an old concept of freedom from the Digest - an important compilation by Justinian - gained a lot of importance. In this text, it is suggested that a man can be under his own authority, in which case he is free or under foreign authority, in which case he is a slave. Thus, slavery is defined as “a disposition of the rights of people, through which one is submitted to the dominion of another against their will” (D. 1, 5, 4, 1). According to this concept of freedom, it is not coercion itself that threatens freedom, but domination. From the Digest’s point of view (and the Republican tradition that took its inspiration from it), a man can be a slave without ever having been exposed to coercion coming from a third party. For this reason, Cicero explained that “freedom does not consist of having a fair master but of having no master at all”. Spinoza thought that being free was, then, being *sui juris*, being submitted only to something attainable when reason ruled and when one was a member of “a multitude” that was also free.

And it was the exercising of reason and freedom in the midst of this multitude that demanded tolerance as a political virtue, the disposition to accept that everyone should be able to express themselves in the public sphere, not as if this were a bad thing that had to be accepted with resignation, but rather as something that should be encouraged.

In his *Political Theological Treatise*, Spinoza gives three arguments in favour of tolerance that are still completely relevant and worth remembering, because

they are the foundation on which both the university Cleveringa defended and democracy are based.

In the first place, Spinoza affirms that beliefs cannot be promoted through state coercion. A belief that is held because of fear or the threat of coercion is not a genuine belief. Thus, he concludes that, faced with thoughts and convictions, the State force is powerless. If it is exercised to prevent thought, then this gains the appearance of reason but is not reason itself.

Secondly - and as opposed to Hobbes, whose Leviathan can still be seen on the bookcase in his small room in Rijnsburg - Spinoza thought that the social pact did not transfer everything to the State or the sovereign and that the natural right to reason and one's own rules were rights that could not be transferred to the sovereign - in other words, the State.

Thirdly, Spinoza explained that the attempt to force people to believe or think certain things using the threat of coercion, beyond obtaining the bare appearance of adhesion, threatens the stability of the State and this stability is what the sovereign should aim for so that citizens can pursue prosperity through their own means.

Of all the reasons that Spinoza puts forward in favour of the virtue of tolerance (a comprehensive tolerance that, as opposed to the idea Locke promotes, leaves nothing out), the most important one and the one that is most confused with the university ideal that Cleveringa defended, is undoubtedly the first. The university's existence is based on the conviction that rational thought is the fruit of autonomy and that forcing someone to think or believe something or excluding them from the university community for what they think or believe is, as Spinoza taught, not only an ethical error but also a logical impossibility.

When relating Cleveringa's speech, Michael Ignatieff says that Cleveringa ended by explaining to the students that the class would continue to be taught by him or by one of his colleagues and that they should all believe in future freedom and Meijers' return one day. When Cleveringa finished talking, the students spontaneously started singing the national anthem, the *Wilhelmus*, no doubt inspired by the hope Cleveringa had asked them never to abandon. The phrase he used, perhaps involuntarily, was a quote from Spinoza. In the *Tractatus Politicus*, the book he was writing when he died, Spinoza said that

a free multitude was guided more by hope than by fear, while the subjugated are guided more by fear than by hope.

Spinoza's words about the unbreakable link between freedom and hope stand out and were, it seems to me, the lesson on which Cleveringa based his actions and speech at 10 am on November 26th, 1940.