NOTES ET MÉLANGES

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FOUR CLASSES OF CONVERSOS:
A TYPOLOGICAL STUDY

As a consequence of anti-Jewish legislation in Spain, and later on in Portugal, a large number of Jews converted to Christianity. They were known as conversos ("converted"). Ideologically, the converso population may be divided into four classes: those who wanted to be Christians and have nothing to do with Judaism, those who wanted to be Jewish and have nothing to do with Christianity, those who wanted to be both, and those who wanted to be neither. There were strong sociological reasons, compelling these groups to live together and to interact with one another. To begin with, the distinction between "new" and "old" Christian established by the Christians in Spain and Portugal was pure racism. As noted already by Professor Israel Salvator Révah (1917-1973): "in the midts of the Spanish Catholic community it was established a distinction that must be qualified as racist" 1. These racists policies were equally implacable with all individuals of Jewish ancestry, regardless of their personal beliefs and behavior. A short time after the Expulsion, on October 24, 1493, Ferdinand and Isabel, the King and Queen of Spain urged by the new-Christians, were forced to issue an order to the local authorities to restrain the population from persecuting and abusing these new converts. Explicit mention is made that these new-Christians

are very much persecuted, that they are called Jews and turncoats and many other injuries, and consequently neither they nor their servants dare walk or go out from their houses, and that they have sometimes complained about this to you, the above mentioned authorities, and that if you apprehend anyone, [the people] ask you to free him, and moreover that they threaten them [to the new-Christians] that if this would come to pass [that the


offenders would be punished] that they [the new-Christians] would receive
great harm and damage.  

Don Isaac Abarbanel (1437-1508), who understood the Iberian tempera-
ment and the converso better than anyone else, pointed out the fundamen-
tal fact that contrary to the expectation of the conversos, they would never
be permitted to assimilate into the Iberian society. In his commentary to
Ezekiel 20:33, he wrote: “The indigenous people of the land will always
call them ‘Jews’, and they shall be designated ‘Israel’ against their will,
and they would be accused of judaizing secretly, and they will be burnt at
the stake”. Thus, even good Catholic Spaniards with Jewish blood were
forced to escape the Iberian peninsula. Occasionally, some would find
refuge in the more liberal communities of Europe and assimilate into the
general population. More often, they would join the communities established
in France (Bordeaux, Bayonne, Toulouse, Nantes, Rouen, La Bastide,
Peyrehorade... etc.), and in the North of Europe, and try to integrate with
the conversos of different ideologies. The same was true of the religiously
apathetic converso. Since it was not easy to find a Christian society free
from religious intolerance and persecution, he would often settle with
other conversos. In addition, these four groups, although ideologically
divided, were united by family, as well as by business and political ties.
Finally, the ideological boundaries of these groups were not very rigid.
Often, either because of internal developments, or external circumstances,
an individual would pass from one group to another, or revert to a former
position. We shall proceed to examine these four groups.

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First, there were those who wanted to assimilate into the Christian body
and lose all contacts with Judaism and their former correligionists. Don
Isaac Abarbanel describes the reasons moving this converso to want total
assimilation. In his commentary to Ezekiel 20:32, Abarbanel gives a
detailed picture of the mind of this type of converso. The initial, overriding
reason, for defection from Judaism, was to avoid the massacres and
persecutions of Christianity. “Because of the miseries, the condemnations,
and the massacres by the enemies, they left the totality of the Law, and
they thought to become like one of the people of the land”. In this way
they hoped to terminate their specific Jewish duties, and no longer be

bound to the destiny and tribulations of Israel. "Thinking that in this manner, they would be released from the [special] Providence of God, and would be free from the duty to observe His Law, and yet they would not be incurring His anger or the punishment of His maledictions". In conclusion, "They would be like all other nations and families of the world, worshipping their gods... They will be no longer the people of God, His flock and shepherding, and the name 'Israel' will no longer be said of them".

Along the common folk of Gerona and Catalonia — the cradle of Sephardic mysticism and religious fundamentalism — the assimilation was total. The cases of conversos from Gerona and Catalonia tried for judaizing after 1492, were few and exceptional. The ideology of this group was best expressed by Juan de Lucena (c. 1430-after 1500). Responding to a remark where Jews were referred to as his people, he said:

Who would be mine and who would be the alien? There is a single law, a single faith, a single motherland, and a single shepherd for all. *Mine* [italics added] is whoever partake more in this.3

Among this group there were individuals who deeply believed in the supremacy of the Christian faith and in Jesus as the Savior. Occasionally, the desire to show total assimilation into the Body-Christian, lead the converso to harass, persecute, and savage those who adhered to the Jewish faith. There was something Machiavelic and perverse in the Christian practice of using former Jews to persecute other Jews, particularly members of their own families. It further degenerated into simple extortion. Referring to this practice among confesos (= conversos who were reconciled with the Inquisition), Samuel de Usque (16th century), wrote:

I do not want to be remiss in telling you that in addition to the enemies, there were at the time some confesos who delivered their own brothers into this cruel monster's [= Inquisition] power. Poverty was the spur and the reason for most of their evil acts. Many poor confesos went to the houses of their richer brothers to ask for a loan of fifty or a houndred crusados for their needs. If any refused them, they accused him of j udaizing with them.4

This type of converso counted with individuals who continued to adhere to their adopted religion even after fleeing the Iberian peninsula in order to

3. *De Vita Beata in Opisculos Literarios de los siglos XIV á XVI*, ed. Antonio Paz y Melia (Madrid: Sociedad de Bibliófilos Españoles, 1892), p. 182. There is an an explanatory gloss on "his people" that reads: "It means to say: since you are one of those who converted [to Christianity], they may say that you approve of what I said, because I am also a convert, and, therefore, Lucena replied: Who would be mine? etc.

escape the ravages of the racist persecutions (pureza de sangre “racial purity”) instituted against them by their new correglisionists. Men of the stature of Elias Montalto (d. 1616) and Immanuel Aboab (ca. 1555-1628), tried unsuccessfully to persuade some conversos who had taken refuge in the South of France to return to Judaism.

There were some, that collaborated with the ecclesiastical authorities in bringing to trial and punishing their relatives and friends who, upon leaving Spain and Portugal, had ‘relapsed’ into Judaism. This class of converso includes some of the most distinguished thinkers of the time, such as Juan Luis Vives (1491-1540), whose father was burnt alive by the Inquisition in 1524, the bones of his mother unburied and burned, and all of the property confiscated, and Luis de León (1527-1591), whose great-grandmother was burnt at the stake, and he himself spent four years in the Inquisition dungeon in Valladolid (27 March 1527-7 December 1576) — and yet their faith in Christianity was unshaken. As may be gathered from a remark that Juan de Lucena put in the mouth of Alonso de Cartagena (1385-1456), they believed that those policies were some sort of aberration, unrepresentative of ‘true’ Christianity and Christian society. Responding to the gratuitous, racist slur, commonly made by the old-Christians at the converso (“Go, go! That’s a marrano [‘piglet’]; he is lower than dust!”), Cartagena remarked: “They are contradicting the evangelical truth, saying that the true light cannot illuminate those who come to it.”

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8. See M. de la Pinta Llorente y José Maria Palacio, Procesos inquisitoriales contra la familia judía de Juan Luis Vives (Madrid: 1964); for some valuable documentation on the Jewish practices of his family, see Manuel J. Arditi, La Inquisición Al País Valencià (Valencia: F. Sanchis i Cardona, 1970), pp. 17-45.


Second, there were those who wanted to remain Jewish at all cost. The official reason given for the Expulsion was to prevent this type of *converso* from coming in contact with his former correligiousists. For this *converso*, Christianity was perfidy and rank idolatry. Elias Montalto, one of the most illustrious men of his time¹¹, expressed the deep abhorrence that this type of *converso* felt for anything Christian. In the letters that he wrote to his relative Dr. Pedro Rodrigues, who escaped from Portugal to France, but refused to embrace Judaism, Montalto let us know the innermost sentiment of the believing *converso* on this subject. Christianity is “idolatry”¹², “abominable idolatry”¹³, “blind idolatry”¹⁴, “abominable blindness and torpid idolatry”¹⁵ a “nefarious abomination”¹⁶. It “had tyrannically persecuted and still persecutes the people of Israel”¹⁷. Through “the kings of France, Castile, and Portugal, England and other monarquies, it had forced on the Jews their false gods, and their idols of wood and stone”¹⁸. The doctrine of the Holy Trinity is an “irrational chimera”¹⁹. Its teachings are “doctrines of the depraved, who with false translations and expositions of the Holy Scripture, pretend to eclipse the light of Israel”²⁰. It is a “fraudulent and perverse conspiracy”²¹. Imposing its doctrines “with tyrannical violence, with superficial arguments and sophistry, with false histories, with misleading pretext of religion and with all the means that human impiety could fabricate”²². The Jewish people worships a God who is the “Creator, not a creature: alive, not dead; boundless, and not corporeal; highermost, and not understrapped to human miseries and filth”²³. “To whom shall we give credit?” — asked Montalto, “to the

¹². «Quatre Lettres d’Élie de Montalte», 148.
¹⁸. *Ibid.*, 151. Interestingly, among Portuguese Jews the expression “wood and stone” was a code-term for the crucifix and other Christian objects of worship; upon entering a church, this *converso* would say “I enter this house / I worship neither the wood nor the stone / but only the God who governs all” (*Nesta casa entro / não adoro nem o pau nem a pedra / Só a Deus que em tudo governa*), see “Les Marranes”, 53 note 2.
¹⁹. «Quatre Lettres d’Élie de Montalte», 155.
²⁰. *Ibid.*, 150. The term “depraved” is repeatedly used, see 156, 159, 161.
²¹. *Ibid*.
Creator of the world who repeated so many times that the law of Sinai is forever, or to the gentiles who fabricated contrary decrees, the imitators and heirs of their ancestors' idolatry, who contradict the exalted God, and say that the law is not forever?"

At the same time, this *converso* felt a part and parcel of the Jewish Diaspora, hoping for the future redemption of the people and the land of Israel, and his own eventual reintegration into the Jewish society. This was particularly true in Andalucía — the cradle of Sephardic Jewry — Portugal, and to some extent Castile — especially as a result of the influx of *conversos* coming from Andalusia and Portugal. Many, eventually managed to join their Jewish brethren outside Spain and Portugal. Others fell victims of the Inquisition. Some, although loosing all contacts with Jews and Judaism, never identified with the Body-Christian, and somehow, managed to retain strong feelings for the people and religion of their forbearers. For this type of *converso*, Christianity was merely a means to escape Christian violence. His feelings were best expressed by the great Spanish poet João (Mosshe) Pinto Delgado (d. 1653):

Y de los Reyes
el Rey solo teme
y solo adora que fue,
sera y es agora:
un Dios, un pueblo, una Ley.

(An English rendition: "And among the Kings / [he] only fears / and only worships, / the King who was, / shall be, and who now is: / a single God, a single people, a single Law").

Generally, as the famous Portuguese writer João de Barro (1496-1570) observed, the Judaism of the *converso* was *potential*, which upon entering the Jewish community became *actual*. However, in order to maintain a modicum of Jewish religion, this class of *converso* risked life and property. Occasionally, he raised to heroic dimensions, exhibiting a magnitude of boldness and Fortitude rarely matched in the history of religious martyrdom. As an illustration of courage and daring, consider the synagogue established in Madrid in 1707 by 20 *converso* families. Seven years later they selected a rabbi whose appointment had been previously approved by the rabbinic authorities in Leghorn. It was discovered in 1720. Conse-

25. "*Autobiographie d’un Marrane*", 100.
26. Cited in "*Les Marranes*", 55. On the religious beliefs of this type of *converso*, see *ibid.*, 50-55.
quently, between 1721 and 1727 more than 824 people were arrested for judaizing, of whom 75 were burnt at the stake.27

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Third, there were those who wanted to be both, Jewish and Christian. These were individuals who had attained a high level of education and sophistication. On the one hand, they had accepted Jesus as their Savior and Christianity as the true religion. On the other hand, they had retained some traits and characteristics, regarded by the Christian society as “Jewish”. Specifically, these individuals were marked by a profound sense of mission and excellence, and the desire to contribute to the Christian society to which they now belonged. And indeed, contribute they did: in the fields of theology, philosophy, jurisprudence, government, science, technology, and commerce. Almost overnight, the converso was able to penetrate the infrastructure of Spanish and Portuguese spiritual, political, and economic life. In Portuguese, the expression homens de negócios (“men of business”) came to mean “Jewish”.

At the spiritual level some of these conversos regarded themselves, precisely because of their Jewish ancestry, as the true Christians, hierarchically superior to their corregionalists of gentile ancestry.28 This was true of Solomon of Burgos, known after his conversion as Pablo de Santa Maria (c. 1350-1435). He was the founder of the most powerful converso family (his daughter was the grandmother of Ferdinand, the King of Spain who expelled the Jews in 1492).29 Isaac Orobio de Castro (1620-1687) describes


28. In the same manner as it became fashionable among Spanish writers to regard the very notion of “Inquisition”, “intolerance”, etc., as the result of “Jewish influence”, see, for example, Antonio Domínguez Ortiz, Los Judeoconversos en España y América, (Madrid: Ediciones ISTMO, 1971), p. 31, it also became fashionable among Spanish writers (even when sympathetic to Jews) to ascribe Spanish racism to Jewish influence, see, for example, Américo Castro, De la edad conflictiva, (Madrid: Taurus, 1961), pp. 86-87, 119-120, 155-161, etc. It is a totally spurious notion without any basis either in doctrine or in history. The rabbinic dictum, “A bastard scholar precedes over an ignorant High Priest” (Mishna, Horayot III.8) is as eloquent a statement on this matter, as that of the saintly R. Meir (2th century), himself the son of proselytes, who equated a gentle studying Tora with a High Priest (Berakhot 57a). Since Shema’ya and Abtalion (1th century BCE) — two of the most illustrious figures in the chain of rabbinic tradition — and throughout the ages, Jews never shy at sitting at the feet of proselytes to study Tora. The notion of hierarchical superiority, entertained by apostates such as Pablo de Santa Maria, come, precisely, from the Christian environment and Church doctrine, that always upheld the pagan notion of nobility, and thereby, of racial superiority.

29. Epistola invectiva, in I.S. Révah, Spinoza et Juan de Prado (Paris: Mouton & Co,
him as a “poor Haham [‘rabbī’] that”, upon baptism, “passed from misery into almost royal opulence”30. In the dedication of his *Aditiones ad postillum Magistri Lyra* (1429) to his son Alonso, he reminds him of his Jewish ancestry, and that his family stems from the house of Levi. Exhorting him, thereby, to continue in this priestly tradition, and apply himself to the study of the Scriptures. There is no careful, systematic analysis of the theological works produced by *conversos*. However, there is little doubt, that there was a definite *converso* view of Christian theology. (Otherwise how could it be explained that so many *converso* theologians were branded as heretics). It is not difficult to imagine that this *converso*, by virtue of his ancestry and knowledge of Jewish tradition, regarded himself as the one best qualified to teach the true meaning of Christianity to his gentile correligionists. As with Isaac de La Peyrere (1594/6-1676), this *converso* may have perceived his role as a determining factor — of eschatological dimensions — in the development of Christianity and the future of humanity: he would effect a complete reconciliation of Jews and Christians, and bring about the second coming of Jesus and the millennia31.

This class of *converso* never understood the true meaning of either Christianity or Christian society. Somehow, he was unable to distinguish between (theological) rhetoric, and the brutal facts of Spanish and Portuguese history. More precisely, enchanted by his own rhetoric, he could now turn his back on the hideous facts surrounding him — thus committing the fatal mistake of allowing rhetoric to condition and suppress reality. In fact, all the *conversos’* activities, whether in the sphere of the spiritual or the material were loathed by their new correligionists. The contempt of the Christian population for anything associated with the *converso* was so great, that they preferred to languish in material and cultural decadence, rather than to indulge in any activity that could be remotely associated with anything “Jewish”. Referring to the cultural and scientific lethargy characterizing Spain after the 16th century, Américo Castro (1885-1972) writes:

The reason was quite simple. Almost the totality of the scientific and philosophical thought, and the most refined technology had been the work

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of Spanish-Jews, of the Spanish-Hebrew cast, first integrated by Jews of religion, and since 1492 as new Christians.\textsuperscript{32}

The reason that Spaniards did not partake in the scientific and cultural movements taking place in the rest of Europe, was not the policy of a particular monarch or the fear of reformation, but, rather, to avoid being perceived as "Jewish":

The cultural retrogression of the Spaniards since the middle of the 16th century, was not the effect of some counter reform [movement], or the anti-scientific phobia of Philip II, but simply the terror of being taken for a Jew.\textsuperscript{33}

This point will become clearer upon considering that the old-Christian population had no tradition of work and productivity. Therefore, to be either productive or creative was tantamount to being "Jewish". The old-Christians:

regarded intellectual activities, as proper to Jews alone, as nefarious — not as something to be imitated or to be bettered in quality. This and this alone was the reason for the cultural backwardness of the Spaniards, visible until our days in so many aspects.\textsuperscript{34}

As Américo Castro had shown, the old-Christians "lacked the tradition and habit of work, of being socially productive; otherwise, how could [it be explained that] all intellectual and technical activity was labeled as Jewish?".\textsuperscript{35}

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Fourth, there was the skeptic converso who wanted to be neither Jewish nor Christian. Anti-semitic literature in Spain, (as well as modern Jewish scholars) portray this converso as a hypocrite without any positive faith. M. Menéndez Pelayo (1856-1912) describes this type of converso as "people without God or law: bad Jews before, and worst Christians after [conversion]".\textsuperscript{36} A close reading of a passage of Abarbanel on this subject, however, will reveal that this was the effect, not the cause, of conversion: they did not convert to Christianity because they were faithless and immoral, but, rather, they became immoral and faithless upon converting

\textsuperscript{32} De la edad conflictiva, p. 54.

\textsuperscript{33} Ibid., p. 118, cf. p. 84.

\textsuperscript{34} Idem, La Realidad Histórica de España, p. xxiv.

\textsuperscript{35} De la edad conflictiva, p. 91.

\textsuperscript{36} Historia de los Heterodoxos Españoles vol. 1, p. 637.
to Christianity. In fact, this *converso* best illustrates how Christianity could displace Jewish religious practice and morality, without effecting any commitment to Christian religion and morality. Thus, Christianity created an individual that Spanish anti-Semitic literature called *Alboraique* — Mohammed’s mythical mount, made up of disparate elements — who could no longer fully identify with any religion. This *converso*, like the first one, wanted to assimilate into Christian society and lose his Jewish identity. However, unlike the *converso* who broke with Judaism on ideological grounds, this one broke with Judaism for purely pragmatic reasons: fear from Christian retribution. In his commentary to Ezekiel 5:6, Abarbanel discusses the attitude of this *converso*:

They don’t observe the laws, rituals, and commandments of God for fear of the gentiles. Lest they should say, that since they are now part of them and their society, if they observe the laws of Israel they would be killed as sectarians and heretics.

This *converso* however, refused to accept Christianity as a true religion: “And they don’t observe the religion of the gentiles, because they don’t believe in their religion”. More significantly, since he now had to abstain from practicing Judaism for fear of Christian retaliation, he refused to conform to practical morality. It is on this point that Abarbanel considers their attitude reprehensible:

At one time you were the chosen elite from among all the nations, but now, by making yourselves as the masses you have become a more corrupt nation than all the people around you. “In the rituals which I have commanded” (Ez. 5:7) your fathers, you have not observed. These are the commandments for which we have no reason. However, you also have failed to observe even the laws which are in accordance with the dictates of reason [i.e. morality]. This is so because you have abandoned religion, but, on the other hand, “as the [rational] laws of the nations around you, you have not observed” (ibid.). This means, that although they have made themselves as if they were just like all the rest of the people of the world, they have failed to observe the laws of these people. Accordingly, they are like heretics and sectarians, since they don’t believe in either of the two religions, in the Law of God or in the laws of the nations.

From the preceding it is obvious that, initially, this *converso* was not immoral, that his indifference to morality came as a result of Christianity: since he could not accept Christian religion, he would not accept any type of morality. Why? Abarbanel did not offer any explanation. The reason, however, is quite obvious. Unlike Christian scholastics, for traditional

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Judaism morality is binding only because of revelation. It is a part of the Tora, a divine commandment — not the result of some sort of ‘natural law’. Moreover, the whole notion of morality as some sort of contractual obligation, owed by the individual to society, was absurd in the case of the *converso*. He was murdered, robbed, oppressed, and abused by it; it had deposed him of his most intimate values and sentiments. That society had forfeited any claims for morality. More precisely, the recognition of morality, within that context, is itself immoral. There was another, more overwhelming reason, behind the *converso*’s rejection of morality: it pertained to his very existence and his unyielding belief in the supremacy of Judaism. It has been noted that the denial of immortality and reward after life was rampant among *conversos*. Since this notion was found among peoples of the most elemental education, it cannot be attributed to some sort of “philosophical school” operating underground in Spain and Portugal. Furthermore, as the great Spanish philosopher Miguel de Unamuno (1864-1936) had pointed out, the feeling of immortality pertains to “our very essence” and “is the affective basis of all knowledge and the personal inward starting point of all human philosophy, wrought by man and for men”. As such, it is a fundamental condition of human beingness:

What the sorrowful Jew of Amsterdam [= Spinoza] called the essence of thing, the effort that it makes to persist indefinitely in its own being, self-love, the longing for immortality, is it not perhaps the primal and fundamental condition of all reflective of human knowledge? And is it not therefore the true base, the real starting-point, of all philosophy, although the philosophers perverted by intellectualism, may not recognize it.

It is sheer nonsense to assume that anyone, except a special type of intellectual, would forfeit this fundamental pathos on account of some philosophical notion.

The denial of immortality was existential. It subliminally expressed the *converso*’s faith in Judaism and his total rejection of Christianity. As mentioned before, this *converso* did not abandon Judaism because of ideology, but on fear and fear alone. What is the status of such an individual within the context of normative Judaism? Jewish law is quite clear on this matter. As Maimonides (1135-1204) wrote, although Judaism exempts apostasy under duress from heavenly (*karet*) and judicial retribution, it is still regarded as a grave offense; the transgressor had “inculpated

his soul" (*mithayyeb benafsho*). The apostate may be regarded as "under duress", only on condition that he would seek freedom and flee on the first opportunity. "But if he could save his soul, and escape from the hand of the wicked king, and he fails to do so", concludes Maimonides, "he is regarded as one who idolatrizes with premeditation; he will be excluded from the world to come, and shall come down to the lowest layer of hell".41 Unlike other *conversos* who professed to be hoping to join their Jewish brethren outside the Iberian peninsula, this *converso* regarded his situation as final: he had decided to remain in Spain and Portugal. Accordingly, he could no longer be regarded as "under duress", but as one who has apostized with premeditation. Such an individual has thus forfeited his portion in the world to come and is excluded from salvation. This type of *converso* had fully accepted the ultimate consequences of his decision: he knew that he had lost immortality. It would have been easier to yield to the human desire for immortality and espouse some doctrine that could justify his situation — philosophy and religion count with a vast array of creeds for all times and occasions. This, however, would involve the manipulation and distortion of values that he regarded sacred and inviolable. It is a testimony to his integrity and character that he did not engage in any theological or philosophical babbler. His denial of immortality and afterlife made his position unmistakably clear. Psychologically, his denial of immortality and afterlife, made his disconnection with Judaism possible. Existentially, it was a recognition that by nominally accepting Christians he had lost immortality. Since this judgement was a consequence of Jewish values, by accepting this verdict he was obliquely ascertaining his unyielding faith in the supremacy of Judaism: he submitted to the final judgement of the Law.

The indifference of this *converso* to morality and his pursuing of pleasure and materialism are direct consequences of the decision he had made: since Christianity prevented him from practicing Judaism and he had lost his spiritual world, there was no point in also wasting this.

This *converso* was an anti-hero: despised by all other *conversos*, ruthlessly attacked by religious authorities, and unkindly treated by both Christian and Jewish modern historians. And yet — regardless of the merits of his choice — he alone had the courage to refuse to play by the conventionalisms of an oppressive society, and to recognize that within the spiritual vacuum of Christian Spain and Portugal, religion and ethics were inoperative: hence, he negated both immortality and morality.