

Vico, Religious Humanism and the Sephardic Tradition

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IN A RECENT REVIEW OF ISAIAH BERLIN'S book, *Vico and Herder: Two Studies in the History of Ideas*, Arnaldo Momigliano remarked:

More specifically he (Isaiah Berlin) must have found in Vico and Herder a confirmation and support in his own lifelong fight for cultural pluralism and respect for minorities (including his own—should I say our own—the Jewish minority).¹

As I hope to show in the following pages, the case was much the same with some leading Sephardic thinkers in the 19th century who, in their struggle to vindicate their own spiritual tradition, perceived the significance of Vico's contributions as a religious humanist and applied some of his views to meet the challenges of secular rationalism (second section). In the first section there is an examination of the views of Voltaire and Vico concerning man and history and of how these views affected the position of the Jew in contemporary society. The last section contains a few notes on the similarities between the Roman and Hebrew traditions. In this way, one can see how Vico and the Hebrews, when defending their respective traditions against the onslaught of secular rationalism, could appreciate the methods and values that were developed in each other's tradition and could apply them in their interpretation of their own history, literature and institutions.

I

Giambattista Vico was born in 1668 in Naples, where he lived most of his life. His greatest academic achievement was the appointment as Professor of Rhetoric at the University of Naples, a chair of minor importance that he occupied until his death in 1744. Except in his native city, his works enjoyed a very limited circulation and outside of Italy he was practically

1. *The New York Review of Books*, Nov. 11, 1976, p. 33

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unknown until recent times. To illustrate, Windelband, in his *History of Philosophy*, published at the turn of this century, was unaware of Vico's contributions.² In our own days, however, thanks to the masterful works of Benedetto Croce and other leading scholars, like G. Giarrizzo, S. Mazzarino and G. Ricuperati, we are beginning to appreciate the unique genius and momentous contributions of this great thinker. There is no exaggeration in Sir Isaiah Berlin's view that our present perception of the humanities—particularly the sharp contrast between natural science and the humanities—is the effect of Vico's vision:

This formulation, which is by now taken for granted by historians of literature, of ideas, of art, of law, and by historians of science too, and most of all by historians and sociologists of culture influenced by this tradition, is not, and does not need to be, assumed by natural scientists themselves. Yet, before the eighteenth century, there was, so far as I know, no sense of this contrast. Distinctions between the vast realm of philosophy—natural and metaphysical—theology, history, rhetoric, jurisprudence, were not too sharply drawn; there were disputes about method in the Renaissance, but the great cleavage between the provinces of natural science and the humanities was, for the first time, made, or at least revealed, for better or for worse, by Giambattista Vico. Thereby he started a great debate of which the end is not in sight.³

"Vico", in the words of Croce, "is not only a thorough revolutionary, but is quite conscious of being so: he knows himself to be in opposition to all previous theories on the subject."⁴

In order to appreciate the significance of Vico from the perspective of modern Jewry, it is worth considering the predicament of the Jew in the Enlightenment, which offered him the opportunity to participate in the cultural and political life of the State. At the same time, it taught that there are absolute canons of truth determining the ultimate value of all cultures and societies. From the perspective of these canons all religions, and Judaism in particular, were archaic superstitions inherited from a primitive past. The most articulate spokesman of the Enlightenment was Vico's younger contemporary, Voltaire (1694–1778). His derision of Judaism and of Jewish values illustrates the attitude towards religion and traditional institutions that was prevalent at the time: they were the choice target for jokes and irony. (As Arnaldo Momigliano said in a different context, "It was no joke to become a target for Voltaire.") Jews are referred to as a "horde," "a savage and barbaric horde," a "vagabond horde of Arabs," or "an Arabian horde." As for their writings, "the Jews

2. See A. Robert Caponigri, *Time and Idea* (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1968), p. ix.

3. Sir Isaiah Berlin, "The Divorce between the Sciences and the Humanities," *Salmagundi*, 27 (Summer-Fall 1974): 38-39.

4. Benedetto Croce, *Aesthetics* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1962), p. 227.

were nothing but plagiarists." "The Jews . . . treat their history and ancient fables as their peddlers treat their clothes. They turn them and sell them for new as dearly as possible." The high regard for the Jews among the nations "is a strange example of human stupidity." Voltaire's views about the writings of the ancients in general and the Jews in particular may be summarized as follows:

All these documents are curious, but they are documents of the human imagination alone, from which one cannot learn a single truth, scientific or historical. There isn't a small book of science today that isn't more useful than all the books of antiquity.⁵

Accordingly, participation in the Enlightenment implied an abandonment of the very foundations of the Jewish faith.

Vico was the most serious opponent of this culture of rational secularism. Basically, he was a religious humanist who specifically sought to defend the wisdom of the ancients from the attack and derision of contemporary scholarship and to uphold the basic spiritual and ethical institutions of Western society. The final two paragraphs of his *New Science* underline these two points:

. . . providence, through the order of civil institutions discussed in this work, makes itself palpable for us in three feelings: the first, the marvel, the second, the veneration, hitherto felt by all the learned for the matchless wisdom of the ancients, and the third, the ardent desire with which they burned to seek and attain it. These are, in fact, three lights of the divine providence that aroused in them the aforesaid three beautiful and just sentiments; but these sentiments were later perverted by the conceit of scholars and by the conceit of nations—conceits we have sought in this work to discredit. The uncorrupted feelings are that all the learned should admire, venerate, and desire to unite themselves to the infinite wisdom of God.

To sum up, from all that we have set forth in this work, it is to be finally concluded that this Science carries inseparably with it the study of piety, and that he who is not pious cannot be truly wise.⁶

5. See Voltaire, *Philosophical Dictionary*, ed. and tr. by Peter Gay, (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, Inc., 1967), p. 336. For the other references see *Ibid.*, pp. 61, 62, 249, 289, 335. Cf. Arthur Hertzberg, *The French Enlightenment and the Jews* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1968), index, *s.v.* "Voltaire, anti-Semitism." In my view, the attacks against Judaism by people like Voltaire may have been a subterfuge for criticism against Christianity and the Christian Church—a matter that still required extreme caution—rather than any genuine concern with the subject itself. This applies, all the more, to men like Erasmus who lived at a time when even subtle indiscretions could have tragic consequences.

6. *The New Science of Giambattista Vico*, ed. and tr. by T.G. Bergin and M.H. Fisch (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1968), paragraphs 1111-12, p. 426.

The ground of Vico's humanism is the belief in a basic mental language—a kind of metalanguage—common to all mankind that finds expression in a variety of forms:

There must, in the nature of human institutions, be a mental language common to all nations, which uniformly grasps the substance of things feasible in human social life and expresses it with as many diverse modifications as these same things may have diverse aspects.⁷

As we shall presently see, to the Jew in particular Vico offered the intellectual tools to vindicate his own spiritual values and institutions and not to surrender to the dictates of rational secularism. It is important to note, at this juncture, that, unlike Voltaire, Vico never derided the Jew or Judaism. In his *Autobiography*, where he refers to himself in the third person, he writes:

He always takes account of the essential differences between the Hebrews and the gentiles. The former from the beginning arose and stood steadfast on the practices of an Eternal justice.⁸

We shall proceed to examine some of the most significant differences between Vico and Voltaire in their vision of man and history.

Voltaire conceives of man as an intrinsic part of nature. Therefore, man is to be understood, exclusively, in the light of nature. There are canons, eternal and immutable, that are operative in all spheres of human activities. They are recognizable by human reason and are valid in all times and societies. Vico, on the other hand, conceives of man in historical terms, not in terms of nature. He rejects the notion of eternal and immutable truths, of absolute canons of thought and feeling. According to him, the canons operating in the realm of history are relative and dynamic. There is a constant shift in the patterns and categories of human thought and feeling. Even the most fundamental concepts of the human mind, like freedom and justice, are subject to ongoing change. It is well to emphasize that this change is not a progress from the imperfect to the perfect, since this notion entails an absolute criterion of value. As mentioned, Vico understands man in terms of history. But history is not merely a compilation of data. It is the perception of the specific set of values and conventions of a group or a society at a definite time, the awareness of their categories of feeling and thoughts, what questions they

7. *Ibid.*, paragraph 161, p. 67. It is worth noting that among Spanish-speaking Sephardim there is an expression *ley mental*, "mental law," meaning "Oral Law." Actually, it refers to the basic assumptions that are made at the subspeech level and that underlie the interpretation of a written text.

8. *The Autobiography of Giambattista Vico*, ed. and tr. by M.H. Fisch and T.G. Bergin (Ithaca, New York: Great Seal Books, 1963), pp. 171-172. Cf. *The New Science of Giambattista Vico*, paragraphs 125, 166, 167, 298, 334, 350, 365, 373, 481, etc.

asked, what they demanded of themselves, and what they expected from others. Vico conceives of poetry, myth, and religion as stages in the historical development of man. Accordingly, what for Voltaire may have been forms of unreason and human decadence, for Vico are monuments of the human past, encounters with the sublime, expressions of fear, love, hope and doubt.⁹

II

Already in the 18th century, the ideology of the Enlightenment began to affect some prominent Jewish scholars, but its full impact was not felt until the 19th century with the establishment of a new approach to Jewish studies, commonly known as *Jüdische Wissenschaft*. It reflected the German ideal of *Kultur*¹⁰ and also projected the German philosophy of history in which sacred and profane histories are totally separated, with no probing into the connections between the religious and political development of mankind.¹¹ Sephardic scholars were unsympathetic towards the ideology and methods of investigation of *Jüdische Wissenschaft*, which was dominating Europe while, at the same time, they were searching for a valid alternative to it. This point was neatly made by Rabbi Henry S. Morais, who remarked, on examining the contributions of Joseph Salvador (1796–1873) in the field of ancient Jewish history, that “In the sphere of philosophical criticism, he differs from the German school, whose theories, transplanted into France, are greatly in vogue.”¹²

Whereas for reasons of geography and ideology, prominent Jewish thinkers in Central and Eastern Europe identified with the Enlightenment, Sephardim found a genuine alternative to rational secularism in the religious humanism of Vico. Accordingly, rather than conceiving of the Jewish past as static and uniform—as the strict traditionalists did—or dismissing it as a mass of irrelevant nonsense—as did the secular rationalists—Sephardic humanists applied Viconian concepts to the interpretation of classical Hebrew texts and history.

Sephardim knew of Vico while he was still an obscure professor of rhetoric at the University of Naples. In November, 1731, he had sent a copy of his *New Science* to Joseph Attias, who, in his reply, mentioned that he had given the work to his friends to read.¹³ Attias was also instrumental in making *New Science* known outside of Italy—in Amsterdam and, possi-

9. See Caponigri, *Op. cit.*, pp. 55–70, for a brilliant analysis of this aspect of Vico, and Berlin, *Op. cit.*, pp. 28–39.

10. See my “Introducing the Materials of Sephardic Culture to Contemporary Jewish Studies,” *American Jewish Historical Quarterly*, LXIII (1974): 339.

11. Cf. Arnaldo Momigliano, *Studies in Historiography* (New York and Evanston: Harper & Row, 1966), p. 53.

12. Henry Samuel Morais, *Eminent Israelites of the Nineteenth Century* (Philadelphia: Edward Stern and Co., 1880), p. 323.

13. *The Autobiography of Giambattista Vico*, p. 174.

bly, also, in France. Thus, Vico was extensively quoted by Rabbi Eliahu Benamozegh (1822–1900) of Leghorn, Italy, who, by applying Viconian concepts to Biblical texts and Rabbinic exegesis, was able to show the intimate relationship between the interpretation of the text and the conventions and values making up the historical context of the rabbis.¹⁵ Rabbi Yisrael Moshe Hazzan (1807–1863) of Izmir, Turkey, applied the Viconian concept of the rustic origin of language¹⁶ to the Biblical lexicon. In this way he came to a better understanding of the semantic environment underlying Rabbinic exegesis.¹⁷ These two rabbis—who were highly influential in the Sephardic world—also applied Viconian methodology to a further exploration of the juridical exegesis and rhetoric of the Talmud. The complexity of the subject prevents us from illustrating this method of analysis, and it may, therefore, be more appropriate to quote from one of the most distinguished Jewish scholars of the last century for his impressions on this matter. When the book, *Naḥalah le-Yisrael*, by Hazzan, dealing with the laws of inheritance, reached Rabbi S.J. Rapoport (1790–1867), he made the following comment, which was incorporated into the work:

Without indulging in any form of flattery, I must say that never yet has a work of this quality come to me. He shows marvels because of his correct method of interpreting the texts and the way in which they were formulated, not only in the vast field of Talmudics, but also in the field of the exegesis of the verses connected with the subject of inheritance. This was done with the most pure and subtle intellect. They, i.e., the verses which he explained, will suffice to show to every reader, even if he were to be a gentile scholar, what the correct and appropriate law is, without need for recourse to the authority of tradition. However, he also was able to uplift the Jewish tradition as if it were a flag for us—the House of Jacob—on the basis of an extraordinary erudition, deep understanding, and the propositions of theories that are logically correct and quite plausible. This he was able to accomplish on the basis of the Talmud and all of the commentaries that came after it, whether in the Codes of Law or the books of Responsa. . . . He has thoroughly exhausted the subject without leaving any doubts at all on the matter. I am shocked and dismayed that, up to now, the good name of this great man, outstanding among ten thousand, has not been heard throughout the globe.¹⁸

14. See his commentary to the Pentateuch, *Em La-Misra*, 5 vols. (Leghorn: 1862-1863), vol. 1: 3b, 44b, 48b, 51b, 79b, 87b, 109a, 158a; vol. 2: 52b; vol. 3: 10a, 70b; vol. 4: 38b; vol. 5: 21a, 36a, 66b, 70a, 120a-b, 142b, 153b, 178b. On his life and works, see Sabato Morais, *Italian Hebrew Literature* (New York: The Jewish Theological Seminary of America, 1926), p. 213. For some interesting glimpses into Benamozegh, see Henry Morais, *Op. cit.*, pp. 23–27.

15. For some illustrations of this method, see my "Sephardim in the XIXth Century: New Directions and Old Values," *Proceedings of the American Academy for Jewish Research*, XLIV (1977): 29–52.

16. *The New Science of Giambattista Vico*, paragraph 240, p. 78.

17. See his *She'erit Ha-Naḥalah* (Alexandria: 1862), pp. 26 (#95), 28 (#112), 79; for the application of this principle to the Biblical lexicon, see *Ibid.*, pp. 29-30, 32-33, 35 ff, 76 ff. etc.

18. *Naḥalah le-Yisrael* (Alexandria: 1862), p. 69.

In order to gain a better insight into the attitude of Sephardim towards Vico's religious humanism, it should be noted that there were some scholars who, independently of him, were developing methods of interpretation reflecting some of his same concerns.

There were some like Benedetto Frizzi Cohen (1756–1844), who wrote *Petaḥ 'Enayim*, 7 vols. (Leghorn: I. Costa e C: 1878–1880) on the aggadic portions of the Talmud,—a very popular book among Sephardim that somehow has escaped the attention of modern scholars—who may have had direct knowledge of Vico's *New Science* and, therefore, applied some of his methods to the interpretation of Rabbinic text. But there were others who could not possibly have had any knowledge of Vico and yet exhibited some of the same methodology underlying his vision of the humanities. By way of illustration, we shall examine how a Sephardic rabbi who had no contact with Western thought and culture applied one of the Viconian principles to the interpretation of Rabbinic exegesis.

Vico had made clear the gross anachronism created by those who tried to interpret the words and ideas of one historical period according to the categories of thought and modes of perception current in their own times. This principle was the major concern of Rabbi Rephael Verdugo (1747–1821) of Meknes, Morocco. In the second volume of his work, *Me Menuhot*, he discusses guidelines that might help in arriving at a better understanding of Rabbinic exegesis. In his Introduction, he remarks that “a believer in the Torah is not duty-bound to accept lies in order to justify the literal truth of the words of the Rabbis.” Thus, he criticizes those who interpolate the text of the Rabbis with their own specific values and modes of thinking in order to “explain” a difficult passage. Referring to a clever explanation of one such passage, he observes:

And the Rabbis from their (divine) abode of Truth, will surely give testimony and declare that they never intended to say what was put into their words. . . . The correct method that one should pursue is that our Rabbis of revered memory were men and not gods. And although their wisdom was enormous, nonetheless they did not cease to be men, men who sometimes express themselves clearly, at other times cryptically, according to the occasion, [i.e., conventionalism], and the time.¹⁹

This approach to the Rabbinic text is the basic principle of Verdugo's magnum opus, *Sharbit Ha-Zahab*, a commentary on the entire Talmud.

III

The main intellectual interests of Vico were jurisprudence, rhetoric, history and philology, all of which were intimately connected with the Roman tradition around which Vico developed his major ideas. A few notes on similarities between Hebrew and Roman traditions will help us

19. The Introduction is not paginated.

appreciate his idea of religious humanism from a Hebrew perspective.

Of all the peoples in antiquity, only two, the Hebrews and the Romans, developed a system of jurisprudence.²⁰ In my view, it was their passion for law that singled them out as the only peoples of their day who severely criticized and—in the case of the Hebrews—attempted to resist effectively the Hellenistic way of life.²¹ Greek philosophers saw the highest criterion of truth and ethics in nature, but, to the Romans and the Hebrews, law was the supreme authority. Hence, neither the Romans nor the Hebrews were interested in nature, and both were equally indifferent to science. To them, rhetoric—and not logic—was the highest form of expression. The Romans and the Hebrews also cultivated their respective national histories (in contradistinction to the universal history of the Greeks). Philology and history are the links between rhetoric and jurisprudence. Thus, the four major intellectual concerns of Vico.

To my mind it is unlikely that these similarities had escaped Vico's attention. The profound respect and veneration that characterizes his treatment of the Hebrews and their tradition, and his conception of the Hebrew People as the paradigm of eternal justice, indicate that he closely identified both intellectually and emotionally with the Hebrews.

As we shall see, there may have been other intellectual bonds between Vico and the Hebrews. For this, we must touch upon the history of religious humanism, particularly in Europe before Erasmus.

Let us begin by pointing out that a large number of the most distinguished humanists of Spain in the 15th and 16th centuries were former Jews who had converted.²² Moreover, the great religious humanists, in particular, were former Jews who, either themselves or their parents, had converted, such as Juan de Lucena (born c. 1430, died after 1500), Juan Luis Vives (1491–1540), Juan de Valdes (died 1541?), Fray Luis de León (1527–1591) and, probably, Benito Arias Montano (1527–1598).

The most distinguished Jewish convert, and one who may be considered the founder of religious humanism in Europe, was Alonso de Cartagena (1385–1456), who was in close contact with Poggio, Brunni, Aeneas Sylvius (Pius II) and Pizzolpasso. About fifty letters of his correspondence with Decembrio are extant. Cartagena represents the first "civic" humanism in Spain. But, unlike his contemporaries, who placed a greater

20. The Persians also seem to have developed a system of jurisprudence. However, very little of it has reached us to allow for an intelligent judgment as to its content and character.

21. See Arnaldo Momigliano, "The Fault of the Greeks," *Daedalus*, 104 (Spring 1975): 12–15; and Elias Bickerman, *From Ezra to the Last of the Maccabees* (New York: Schocken Books, 1972), pp. 101–105, 178–179.

22. The following names: Diego de Valera, Alonso de Palencia, Alfonso de Alcalá, Diego de San Pedro, Luis de Lucena, Hernando del Pulgar, Pablo Coronel, Alfonso de Zamora, Juan de Vergara, Diego de Lainez, Gaspar de Grajal, Alonso Gudiel, Pedro de Lima, Andres de Lugana, Bartolome Torres Naharro, Luis de la Cadena, Francisco Sanchez de las Brozas, Sebastian Fox Morcillo, Cristobal de Mesa and Casiodoro de Reina, are just a few of the long list of distinguished humanists of Jewish background who flourished in Spain in these two centuries.

emphasis on the secular aspect of civic life, Cartagena—like Vico—always underlined the religious framework within which ethics, politics, and laws, by necessity, exist. It is worth noting, in this connection, that, like Vico, Cartagena's main intellectual concerns were four: jurisprudence, rhetoric, history and philology. Cartagena's religious humanism had a lasting influence on the development of humanism in Europe.²³

The most significant aspect of the religious humanism of Jewish converts of the type of Alonso de Cartagena was their recourse to the Hebrew heritage of Christianity. This may be best appreciated when we realize that the deepest intellectual and spiritual struggle that perennially surfaces within Christianity is the conflict between the pagan and Hebraic traditions that it adopted. From the Renaissance to the Enlightenment, Christian thinkers attempted to resolve this conflict adequately. Whereas many proposed to do so from within pagan tradition and values, humanists like Cartagena conceived of the Hebraic tradition in Christianity as the only framework capable of adequately coping with the conflict.

We are now in a position better to understand Vico's main objectives. As it was brilliantly stated by Peter Gay, the goal of the Enlightenment was "to assimilate the two pasts they had inherited—Christian and Pagan—to pit them against one another and thus to secure their independence."²⁴ However, whereas the *philosophe* emphasized the Pagan element of Western tradition, Vico, like Cartagena, saw in the Hebraic tradition the paradigm of eternal justice.

The best representatives of religious humanism among the Hebrews outside of the Iberian Peninsula were Yehuda Abarbanel (c. 1460-post 1522), known in Italy as Leon Hebreo, and Moshe Almosnino (c. 1515-c. 1580) in the Ottoman Empire. Another humanist of the same tradition, Menasseh ben Israel (1605-1657) of Amsterdam, deserves special mention. He was very close to Grotius and seems to have exercised considerable influence on him, and he, in turn, greatly influenced Vico. This triangle really needs to be adequately examined in order to understand the genesis of many of the fundamental ideas of Vico and their affinity with Sephardic thinking.

In conclusion, religious humanism among Sephardim in the 19th century was grounded on a long tradition that began in the Iberian Peninsula before 1492. It came to the foreground again, in modern times, in order to meet the challenges of the materialistic ideology of the Enlightenment that dominated Europe. This will help us understand why Sephardic thinkers in the 19th century were ready to perceive the significance of Vico's vision, to accept his methodology, and to apply it to their literature and specific historical process.

23. I take this opportunity to thank Dr. Ottavio de Camillo for the valuable insights and data on Cartagena that he shared with me. See his book on Cartagena, *El Humanismo Castellano* (Valencia: Horizon, 1976), for an excellent treatment of this topic.

24. Peter Gay, *The Enlightenment: An Interpretation* (New York: Vintage Books, 1963), p. xi.