

DAVID NIETO AND THE ORTHODOXY OF SPINOZISM.

The following letter, the eighteenth of the published Responfa of the Hhacham Zevi [Rabbi Zevi Afchkenazi, 1658—1718] explains itself. In the translation the introductory paragraph has been condensed and a few notes added in square brackets.

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A QUESTION FROM THE WARDENS OF THE HOLY COMMUNITY SHAARE SHAMAYIM IN THE GREAT CITY OF LONDON IN ENGLAND:

Rabbi David Nieto, president of the Rabbinical court and guide and teacher of our community, gave a sermon in the synagogue in which he said: 'I am reported to have stated in the Rabbinical college that *God and Nature, and Nature and God, are one and the same*. It is true that I made this statement and I now repeat and confirm it; and I give as my authority the words of the Psalmist in the 147th Psalm: *He who covereth the heaven with clouds; he who prepareth rain for the earth; he who maketh grass to grow upon the mountains*. You must know, however, as the first principle of our faith, that the word Nature [טבע] is a modern expression, no more than four or five hundred years old, and is not found in the words of the Talmudical sages, who said that it is God who *causeth the wind to blow*; and God who *causeth the rain to fall*; and God who *causeth the dew to come forth*. From these passages it is clear that everything attributed by modern thinkers to Nature is due to the action of God; so that in fact there is no such thing as Nature, what they call Nature being nothing other than the providence of God [השגחה]. And so, as I said, God and Nature and Nature and God, are one and the same.'

This opinion is correct, pious and holy. Those who do not hold it are heretics and unbelievers.'

This sermon having given rise to a charge of heterodoxy, Rabbi David gave the following defence:

'It is a known fact that clouds, rain and plants are particular natural things [טבעים פרטיים = natura naturata]; and also that *He who covereth* is not the same as the covering. If what I had

wished to show was that particular natural things were God, I could never have quoted in confirmation the words of the Psalmist or our Sages. The Psalmist says that *God covereth the heaven with clouds*, not that *God is a cloud*; and our Sages, that *God causeth the wind to blow*, not that *God is the wind*. It is clear therefore that my meaning was that the cause which *covereth the heaven and maketh the winds to blow* is not Nature but God. Because there are men who call these phenomena natural and attribute them to Nature [as distinct from God], I used these quotations to show that what they assign to Nature we are bound to assign to God; it follows that I was not speaking of particular natural things at all.'

'Seeing, therefore, as we have shown, that our references to Nature were to Nature in general [טבע כולל = *natura naturans*] and not to particular natural things, when we made the statement that *there is no such thing as Nature*, it was this Nature, i. e. Nature as comprehending all existing things, to which we referred; for Nature in this sense is in very fact nothing other than God who comprehendeth all and maketh all. And so I said that *Providence, which is the same thing as the Nature of modern thinkers, is God*, that is to say, that the providence of God and God are one and the same; in order to draw attention to the necessity of keeping distinct the work of God and the work of the particular natural thing. Men say nowadays that it is Nature which *causeth the rain to fall and bringeth down the dew*, but the Psalmist and our Sages teach that it is God who doeth all this. In opposition to this false opinion that it is Nature which is the maker of all, I said that Nature and God are one; and so emphasised the truth that it is God, not Nature, who maketh and provideth for all.'

'I repeat that this doctrine is religious and correct; because it teaches that God supports and cares for his world, and does not, like the opinion which we have been examining, give His glory to another by attributing these actions to a general Nature apart from Him.'

Such is the case. We ask you to decide with whom is the right.

ANSWER.

I approve the opinion of the great and distinguished scholar Rabbi David Nieto, seeing that it is the very opinion of Rabbi Jehudah Halleivi [11th — 12th cent.] in his Cuzari [the classical apologia for Judaism as a religion of feeling] (Part. I, caps. 75—76), and of the commentator thereon Rabbi Jehudah Moscato [16th cent.] who after much discussion comes to the following conclusion: 'God may in truth be called Nature, as in our text, because he stamps [מַטְבֵּעַ] with his seal the shapes [מַטְבְּעוֹת] of created things; and this is the meaning of the Rabbinical dictum [Abodah Zara 3b] that *God sitteth and feedeth all from the horned wild-ox to the smallest lice*'. Your learned Rabbi is to be congratulated in that he has rejected the mischievous theories of the naturalistic philosophers although, as we have heard, deeply versed in them, and has followed the opinions of our holy men that all things depend directly on the providence of God.

I have listened to the complaints of his opponents but do not understand them.

If they take exception to his statement that apart from God there is no Nature comprehending all existing things, and make this objection on the ground that it is a derogation from the glory of God, the King of Kings, that He should act without intermediary; they must learn that it is those who seek for the mediation of Nature in the general world-order [הַהֲנַחָה הַבּוֹלֶלֶת] who are likely to fall into perplexity, whereas those who believe in the direct action of God's providence in all things go securely whithersoever they turn.

If, secondly, they think that the words of the sermon referred not to Nature in general but to particular natural things, — the heat of fire, for example, or the wetness of water, — and from this misunderstanding force the interpretation that in their natural action fire and water are themselves the Godhead [הָאֱלוּקוֹת], (an opinion which would not be held by the most foolish and brutish of unbelievers, much less by a sage and learned man among the people of God who believe in God and in His holy Law), — on this count

the words of the sermon are perfectly clear, without need of the defence, seeing that they are centered upon the fundamental doctrine of the general world-order; as he says: *it is God who causeth the winds to blow and bringeth down the rain and dews; from which passages it is clear that everything attributed by modern thinkers to Nature is due to the action of God.* On this point only wilful misconstruction can raise a doubt.

Their third possible ground of objection is that 'it is not right to give the name Nature to what is the work of God, such ascription being a derogation from His glory.' If this is their complaint, then they should make it not against Rabbi David, as they have done, gathering together against him and crying out with full voice, but against the great teacher and saint Rabbi Isaiah Hurwitz [1555—1630] himself, who gave expression to exactly the same opinion in the *Two Tables of the Covenant*, [one of the most popular mediaeval ethical treatises, written from the Kabbalistical point of view] a book which is accepted and treasured throughout all the dispersion of Israel. For in the beginning of this book, in the chapter entitled *Beth Aharon*, he writes in the name of the author of the *Abodath Hakkodesh* [Rabbi Meir ben Ezeckiel Ibn Gabai, ethical writer and Kabbalist, 15th — 16th cent.], a great Spanish Rabbi celebrated for knowledge and saintliness whose works have spread throughout the land, that *the reward of those who perform the commandments of God and the punishment of those who transgress them, are natural.* In this opinion all with eyes for the truth concur, as may be seen from the further discussion of Rabbi Isaiah (we need not repeat it here as the book is in every one's hand and is easy of reference), and from the accepted opinion of all the truly wise that *it was the aim and purpose of the creation that it should be of the nature of the good to produce good* [הַפֵּיץ הַטוֹב לְהַיְטִיב וּרְצוֹן הַבְּרִיאה הִיטָה כִּי מִטְּבַע הַטּוֹב הַטּוֹב לְהַיְטִיב]. Whatever objections Rabbi David's opponents have to make, therefore, should have been made not against him but against all those truly wise men, God's holy ones, from the utterance of whose lips we live. On this score, too, then, there is no possible ground of objection, because the

word Nature as applied to God is not the particular natural thing which acts by necessity but the will and purpose of the Holy King.

These points have been brought out so clearly and logically by Rabbi David that we are bound to offer him our thanks both for the warning which he gave to the people in his sermon against inclining their hearts after the dangerous and mischievous opinions of the naturalistic thinkers and for the light which he has given us in our true belief that everything depends directly on the providence of God. I say therefore that he has done well; and that anyone who raises objections against him after seeing this our answer shall be accounted a transgressor.

Although all this is clear and plain and needs no confirmation, in order to remove any possibility of complaint or opposition I have chosen out two of the great scholars of this city to sit with me and discuss the matter; and after due deliberation we have agreed all three concerning the correctness and truth of all the above.

Given here in Altona on Friday the seventeenth day in Ab, 5465 [June 1705].

Zevi Ashkenazi son of Rabbi Jacob of blessed memory.