

ERNEST RENAN.

SPINOZA: 1677, AND 1877.

ADDRESS

Delivered at the Unveiling of the Monument at the Hague
on 21st February, 1877.

ON this day two hundred years, in the afternoon, and at about this same hour, there lay dying at the age of forty-three, on the quiet quay of the Pavilioengragt a few paces hence, a poor man, whose life had been so profoundly silent that his last sigh was scarcely heard. He had occupied a retired room in the house of a worthy pair, who, without understanding him, felt for him an instinctive veneration. On the morning of his last day he had gone down as usual to join his hosts ; there had been religious services that morning ; the gentle philosopher conversed with the good folk about what the minister had said, much approved it, and advised them to conform themselves thereto. The host and hostess (let us name them, their honest sincerity entitles them to a place in this beautiful Idyl of the Hague related by Colerus), the Van der Spycks, husband and wife, went back to their devotions. On their return home, their peaceful lodger was dead. The funeral on the 25th of February was conducted like that of a Christian believer in the new church on the Spuy. All the inhabitants of the district greatly regretted the disappearance of the sage who had lived amongst them as one of themselves.

His hosts preserved his memory like a religion, and none who had approached him ever spoke of him without calling him, according to custom, "the blessed Spinoza."

About the same time, however, any one able to track the current of opinion setting in among the professedly enlightened circles of the Pharisaism of that day, would have seen, in singular contrast, the much-loved philosopher of the simple and single-hearted become the bugbear of the narrow orthodoxy which pretended to a monopoly of the truth. A wretch, a pestilence, an imp of hell, the most wicked atheist that ever lived, a man steeped in crime this was what the solitary of the Pavilioengragt grew to be in the opinion of right-thinking theologians and philosophers!

Portraits were spread abroad exhibiting him as "bearing on his face the signs of reprobation." A distinguished philosopher bold as he, but less consistent and less completely sincere called him "a wretch." But justice was to have her day. The human mind, attaining, in Germany especially, towards the end of the eighteenth century to a more enlightened theology and a wider philosophy, recognized in Spinoza the precursor of a new gospel. Jacobi took the public into his confidence as to a conversation he had held with Lessing. He had gone to Lessing in hopes of enlisting his aid against Spinoza.

What was his astonishment on finding in Lessing an avowed Spinozist! En kai Pan, said Lessing to him this is the whole of philosophy. Him whom a whole century had declared an atheist, Novalis pronounced a "God intoxicated man." His forgotten works were published, and eagerly sought after. Schleiermacher, Goethe, Hegel, Schelling, all with one voice proclaim Spinoza the father of modern thought. Perhaps there may have been some

exaggeration in this first outburst of tardy reparation; but time, which sets everything in its place, has substantially ratified Lessing's judgment, and in the present day there is no enlightened mind that does not acknowledge Spinoza as the man who possessed the highest God-consciousness of his day. It is this conviction that has made you decree that his pure and lowly tomb should have its anniversary. It is the common assertion of a free faith in the Infinite, that on this day gathers together, in the spot that witnessed so much virtue, the most select assembly that a man of genius could group round him after his death. A sovereign, as distinguished by intellectual as by moral gifts, is among us in spirit. A prince who can justly appreciate merit of every kind, by distinguishing this solemnity with his presence, desires to testify that of the glories of Holland not one is alien to him, and that no lofty thinking escapes his enlightened judgment, and his philosophic admiration.

I.

The illustrious Baruch de Spinoza was born at Amsterdam, at the time when your Republic was attaining its highest degree of glory and power. He belonged to that great race, which, by the influence it has exerted and the services it has rendered, occupies so exceptional a place in the history of civilization. Miraculous in its own way, the development of the Jewish people ranks side by side with that other miracle, the development of the Greek mind; for, if Greece, from the first realized the ideal of poetry, of science, of philosophy, of art, of profane life, the Jewish people, if I may so speak, has made the religion of humanity. Its prophets inaugurated in the world the idea of righteousness, the revindication of the rights of the weak a revindication so much the more violent that, all idea of future recompense being unknown to them, they dreamed of the realization of the ideal upon this earth and at 110 distant period. It was a Jew, Isaiah, who, seven hundred and fifty years before Jesus Christ, dared affirm that sacrifices are of little importance, and that one thing only is needful, purity of heart and hands. Then, when earthly events seemed irremediably to contradict such bright Utopias, Israel can change front in a way unparalleled.

Transporting into the domain of pure idealism that kingdom of God with which earth proves incompatible, one moiety of its children founds Christianity, the other carries on, through the tortures of the Middle Ages, that imperturbable protest : " Hear, Israel, the Lord thy God is one; holy is His name." This potent tradition of idealism, and hope against all hope this religion, able to obtain from its adherents the most heroic sacrifices, though it be not of its essence to promise them any certainty beyond this life this was the healthy and bracing medium in which Spinoza developed himself.

His education was at first entirely Hebraic; the great literature of Israel was his earliest, and, in point of fact, his perpetual instructress was the meditation of all his life.

As generally happens, Hebrew literature, in assuming the character of a sacred book, had become the subject of a conventional exegesis, much less intent upon explaining the old texts according to the meaning in their authors minds than on finding in them aliment for the moral and religious wants of the day. The penetrating mind of the young Spinoza soon discerned all the defects of the exegesis of the Synagogue; the Bible, as taught him, was disfigured by the accumulated per versions of more than two thousand years, lie determined to pierce beyond these. He was, indeed, essentially at one with the true fathers of Judaism, and especially with that great Maimonides who found a way of introducing into Judaism the most daring speculations of philosophy.

He foresaw, with wondrous sagacity, the great results of the critical exegesis, destined a hundred and twenty-five years later to afford the true meaning of the noblest productions of Hebrew genius. Was this to destroy the Bible? Has that admirable literature lost by being understood in its real aspect, rather than relegated outside of the common laws of humanity? Certainly not.

The truths revealed by science invariably surpass the dreams that science dispels. The world of Laplace exceeds in beauty, I imagine, that of a Cosmas Indicopleustes, who pictured the universe to himself as a casket, on the lid of which the stars glide along in grooves at a few leagues from us. In the same way the Bible is more beautiful when we have learnt to see therein ranged in order on a canvas of a thousand years each aspiration, each sigh, each prayer of the most exalted religious consciousness that ever existed, then when we force ourselves to view it as a book unlike any other, composed, preserved, interpreted in direct opposition to all the ordinary rules of the human intellect.

But the persecutions of the Middle Ages had produced on Judaism the usual effect of all persecution ; they had rendered minds narrow and timid. A few years previously, at Amsterdam, the unfortunate Uriel Acosta had cruelly expiated certain doubts that fanaticism finds as culpable as avowed incredulity. The boldness of the young Spinoza was still worse received ; he was anathematized, and had to submit to an excommunication that he had not courted. A very old history this ! Religious communions, beneficent cradles of so much earnestness and so much virtue, do not allow of any refusal to be shut up exclusively within their embrace ; they claim to imprison forever the life that had its beginnings within them ; they brand as apostasy the lawful emancipation of the mind that seeks to take its flight alone. It is as though the egg should reproach, as ungrateful, the bird that had escaped therefrom : the egg was necessary in its time, when it became a bondage it had to be broken.

A great marvel truly that Erasmus of Rotterdam should feel himself cramped in his cell, that Luther should not prefer his monkish vows to that far holier vow which man by the very fact of his being contracts with truth.

Had Erasmus persisted in his monastic routine, or Luther gone on distributing indulgences, they would have been apostates indeed. Spinoza was the greatest of modern Jews, and Judaism exiled him : nothing more simple ; it must have been so, it must be so ever. Finite symbols, prisons of the infinite spirit, will eternally protest against the effort of Idealism to enlarge them.

The spirit on its side struggles eternally for more air and more light. Eighteen hundred and fifty years ago the Synagogue denounced as a seducer the one who was to raise the maxims of the Synagogue to unequalled glory.

And the Christian Church, how often has she not driven from her breast those who should have been her chiefest honour! In cases like these our duty is fulfilled if we retain a pious memory of the education our childhood received. Let the old Churches be free to brand with criminality, those who quit them ; they shall not succeed in obtaining from us any but grateful feelings, since, after all, the harm they are able to do us is as nothing compared to the good they have done.

II.

Here then we have the excommunicated of the Synagogue of Amsterdam forced to create for himself a spiritual abode outside of the home which rejected him.

He had great sympathy with Christianity, but he dreaded all chains, he did not embrace it.

Descartes had just renewed philosophy by his firm and sober rationalism. Descartes was his master; Spinoza took up the problems where they had been left by that great mind, but saw that through fear of the Sorbonne his theology had always remained somewhat arid.

Oldenburg asking him one day what fault he could find with the philosophy of Descartes and of Bacon, Spinoza replied that their chief fault lay in not sufficiently occupying themselves with the First Cause. Perhaps his reminiscences of Jewish theology, that ancient wisdom of the Hebrews before which he often bows, suggested to him higher views, and more sublime aspirations in this matter. Not only the ideas held by the vulgar, but those even of thinkers on Divinity, appeared to him inadequate. He saw plainly that there is no assigning a limited part to the Infinite, that Divinity is all, or is nothing; that if the Divine be a reality it must pervade all. For twenty years he meditated on these problems without for a moment averting his thoughts. Our distaste nowadays for system and abstract formula no longer permits us to accept absolutely the propositions within which he had thought to confine the secrets of the Infinite. For Spinoza, as for Descartes, the universe was only extension and thought; chemistry and physiology were lacking to that great school, which was too exclusively geometrical and mechanical. A stranger to the idea of life, and those notions as to the constitution of bodies that chemistry was destined to reveal too much attached still to the scholastic expressions of substance and attribute Spinoza did not attain to that living and fertile Infinite, shown us by the science of nature and of history, as presiding in space unbounded, over a development more and more intense ; but, making allowance for a certain dryness in expression, what grandeur there is in that inflexible geometrical deduction, leading up to the supreme proposition : " It is of the nature of the Substance to develop itself necessarily by an infinity of infinite attributes infinitely modified ! " God is thus absolute thought, universal consciousness. The ideal exists, nay, it is the true existence; all else is mere appearance and frivolity.

Bodies and souls are mere modes of which God is the substance : it is only the modes that fall within duration, the substance is all in eternity. Thus, God does not prove Himself, His existence results from His sole idea; everything supposes and contains Him. God is the condition of all existence, all thought. If God did not exist, thought would be able to conceive more than nature could furnish, which is a contradiction.

Spinoza did not clearly discern universal progress; the world, as he conceives it, seems as if it were crystallized in a matter which is incorruptible extension, in a soul that is immutable thought ; the sentiment of God deprives him of the sentiment of man ; forever face to face with the Infinite, he did not sufficiently perceive what of the Divine conceals itself in relative manifestations ; but he, better than any other, saw the eternal identity which constitutes the basis of all transitory evolutions. Whatever is limited seems to him frivolous and unworthy to occupy a philosopher. Bold in flight, he soared straight to the lofty snow-covered summits, without casting a glance on the rich display of life springing up on the mountain's side. At tin altitude where every breast but his own pants hard, he lives, he enjoys, he flourishes there as men in general do in mild and temperate regions. What he for his part needs is the glacier air, keen and penetrating. He does not ask to be followed. He is like Moses, to whom secrets

unknown to the crowd reveal themselves on the heights ; but be sure of this he was the seer of his age, he was in his own day the one who saw deepest into God.

III.

It might have been supposed that, all alone on these snowy peaks, he would turn out in human affairs wrong-headed, utopian, or scornfully sceptical. Nothing of the kind. He was incessantly occupied with the application of his principles to human society. The pessimism of Hobbes, and the dreams of Thomas More were equally repugnant to him. One half at least of the Theologico-Political Treatise which appeared in 1670, might be reprinted to-day without losing any of its appropriateness.

Listen to its admirable title: "Tractatus Theologico-Politicus, continens dissertationes aliquot, quibus ostenditur, libertatem philosophandi non tantum salva pietate et reipublica) pace posse concedi, sed eamdem nisi cum pace reipublice ipsaque pietate tolli non posse."

For centuries past it has been supposed that society rested on metaphysical dogmas.

Spinoza discerns profoundly that these dogmas, assumed to be necessary to humanity, yet cannot escape discussion; that revelation itself if there be one traversing, in order to reach us, the faculties of the human mind, is no less than all else amenable to criticism. I wish I could quote in its entirety that admirable Chapter XX, in which our great publicist establishes with masterly skill that dogma new then, and still contested in our own day which styles itself liberty of conscience.

"The final end of the State," he says, "consists not in dominating over men, restraining them by fears, subjecting them to the will of others, but, on the contrary, in permitting each one to live in all possible security ; that is to say, in preserving intact the natural right of each to live without injury to himself or others.

No, I say, the State has not for its end the transformation of men from reasonable beings into animals or automata ; it has for end so to act that its citizens should in security develop soul and body, and make free use of their reason. Hence the true end of the State is liberty. Whosoever means to respect the rights of a sovereign should never act in opposition to his decrees ; but each has the right to think what he will, and to say what he thinks, provided he content himself with speaking and teaching in the name of pure reason, and do not attempt on his private authority to introduce innovations into the State. For example, a citizen who demonstrates that a certain law is repugnant to sound reason, and holds that for that cause it ought to be abrogated if he submit his opinions to the judgment of the sovereign, to whom alone it belongs to establish and to abolish laws, and if meanwhile he acts in no wise contrary to law that man certainly deserves well of the State as the best of citizens. . . .

"Even if we admit the possibility of so stifling men's liberty, and laying such a yoke upon them that they dare not even whisper without the approbation of the sovereign, never most surely can they be prevented from thinking as they will. What then must ensue ? That men will think one way and speak another; that consequently good faith a virtue most necessary to the State- will become corrupted; that adulation a detestable thing and perfidy will be had in repute, entailing the decadence of all good and healthy morality. What can be more disastrous to a State than to exile honest citizens as evil-doers, because they do not share the opinions of the crowd, and are ignorant of the art of feigning?

What more fatal than to treat as enemies and doom to death men whose only crime is that of thinking independently? The scaffold, which should be the terror of the wicked, is thus

turned into the glorious theatre where virtue and toleration shine out in all their lustre, and publicly cover the sovereign majesty with approbrium.

Beyond question there is only one thing to be learnt from such a spectacle to imitate those noble martyrs : or, if one fears death, to become the cowardly flatterers of power. Nothing, then, is so full of peril as to refer, and submit to divine rights, matters of pure speculation, and to impose laws on opinions which are, or may be, subjects of discussion among men. If the authority of the State limited itself to the repression of actions, while allowing impunity to words, controversies would less often turn into seditions."

More sagacious than many so-called practical men, our speculator sees perfectly well that the only durable Governments are the reasonable, and that the only reasonable Governments are the constitutional. Far from absorbing the individual in the State, he gives him solid guarantees against the State's omnipotence. He is no revolutionary, but a moderate ; he transforms, explains, but does not destroy. His God is not indeed one who takes pleasure in ceremonies, sacrifices, odour of incense, yet Spinoza has no design whatever to overthrow religion. He entertains a profound veneration for Christianity, a tender and a sincere respect. The supernatural, however, has no meaning in his doctrine. According to his principles, anything out of nature would be out of being, and therefore inconceivable. Prophets, revealers, have been men like others :

" It is not thinking but dreaming," he says, " to hold that prophets have had a human body and not a human soul, and that consequently their knowledge and their sensations have been of a different nature from ours." " The prophetic faculty has not been the dowry of one people only, the Jewish people. The quality of Son of God has not been the privilege of one man only. ... To state my views openly, I tell you that it is not absolutely necessary to know Christ after the flesh ; but it is otherwise when we speak of that Son of God, that is to say, that eternal Wisdom of God, which has manifested itself in all things, and more fully in the human soul, and above all in Jesus Christ. Without this wisdom no one can attain the state of beatitude, since it alone teaches us what is true and what is false, what is right and what is wrong. ... As to what certain Churches have added, ... I have expressly warned you that I do not know what they mean, and to speak frankly I may confess that they seem to me to be using the same sort of language as if they spoke of a circle assuming the nature of a square."

Was not this exactly what Schleiermacher said ? and as to Spinoza, the fellow-founder with Richard Simon of Biblical exegesis, was not he the precursor of those liberal theologians who have in our own day shown that Christianity can retain all its glory without super-naturalism ? His letters to Oldenburg on the resurrection of Jesus Christ, and of the manner in which St. Paul understood it, are masterpieces which a hundred years later would have served as the manifesto of a whole school of critical theology.

In the eyes of Spinoza it signifies little whether mysteries be understood this way or that, provided they be understood in a pious sense. Religion has one aim only, piety; and we are to appeal to it, not for metaphysics, but for practical guidance. At bottom there is but one single thing in Scripture as in all revelation: "Love your neighbour." The fruit of religion is blessedness ; each one participating in it according to his capacity and his efforts. The souls that are governed by reason the philosophic souls that have even in this world their life in God are safe from death ; what death takes from them is of no value ; but weak or passionate souls perish almost entirely, and death, instead of being for them a simple accident, involves the foundation of their being. . . The ignorant man, who lots himself

beswayed by blind passions, is agitated in a thousand different directions by external causes, and never enjoys true peace of soul; for him ceasing to suffer means ceasing to be. The soul of the wise man, on the other hand, can scarcely be troubled.

Possessing by a kind of eternal necessity the consciousness of itself and of God and of things, he never ceases to be, and ever preserves the soul's true peace.

Spinoza could not endure his system to be considered irreligious or subversive. The timid Oldenburg did not conceal from him that some of his opinions seemed to certain readers to tend to the overthrow of piety.

"Whatever accords with reason," replied Spinoza, "is in my belief most favourable to the practice of virtue." The pretended superiority of coarsely positive conceptions as to religion and a future life found him intractable. "Is it, I ask, to cast off religion," he was wont to say, "to acknowledge God as the Supreme Good, and thence to conclude that ho must be loved with a free soul ? To maintain that all our felicity and most perfect freedom consists in that love that the reward of virtue is virtue, and that a blind and impotent soul finds its punishment in its blindness is this a denial of all religion?" At the root of all such attacks ho traced meanness of soul.

According to him any one who felt irritated by a disinterested religion involuntarily confessed reason and virtue to have no charm in his eyes, and that his pleasure would lie in living to indulge his passions if he were not restrained by fear. " Thus then," he would add, " such a one only abstains from evil and obeys the Divine commandment regretfully as a slave, and in return for this slavery expects from God rewards which have infinitely more value in his eyes than the Divine law. The more aversion and estrangement from good he may have felt, the more he hopes to be recompensed, and imagines that they who are not restrained by the same fear as himself do what he would do in their case that is to say, live lawlessly." Spinoza held with reason that this manner of seeking heaven was contrary to reason, and that there is an absurdity in pretending to gain God's favour by owning to him that, did one not dread him, one would not love.

IV.

He was, however,, well aware of the danger of interfering with beliefs, in which few admit these subtle distinctions. Canto was his motto, and, his friends having made him aware of the explosion that the *Ethica* would infallibly produce, he kept it unpublished till his death. He had no literary vanity, nor did he seek celebrity possibly, indeed, because he was sure to obtain it without seeking. He was perfectly happy. He has told us so let us take him at his word. He has done still better ; he has bequeathed us his secret. Let all men listen to the recipe of the " Prince of Atheists " for the discovery of happiness it is the love of God. To love God is to live in God. Life in God is the best and most perfect because it is the reasonablest, happiest, fullest in a word, because it gives us more being than any other life, and satisfies most completely the fundamental desire that constitutes our essence.

Spinoza's whole practical life was regulated according to these maxims. That life was a masterpiece of good sense and judgment. It was led with the profound skill of the wise man who desires one thing only, and invariably ends by obtaining it. Never did policy so well combine means and end. Had ho been less reticent, lie would perhaps have met the same fate as the unfortunate Acosta. Loving truth for its own sake, he was indifferent to the abuse that his constancy in speaking it entailed, and answered never a word to the attacks made

on him. For his part he attacked no one. "It is foreign to my habits", he said, "to look out for the errors into which authors have fallen. "Had he desired to be an official personage, his life would no doubt have been traversed by persecution, or at least by disgrace. He was nothing, and desired to be nothing. *Ama nesciri* was his desire, as well as that of the author of the *De Imitatione*. He sacrificed everything to peace of mind; and, in so doing, there was no selfishness, for his mind was of importance to the world. He frequently refused wealth on its way to him, and desired only what was absolutely necessary. The King of France offered him a pension ; he declined. The Elector Palatine offered him a chair at Heidelberg: "Your freedom shall be complete," he was told, " for the prince is convinced that you will not abuse it to disturb the established religion." "I do not very well understand," he replied, "within what limits it would be necessary to confine that philosophical freedom granted me on condition of not disturbing the established religion; and then again, the instruction I bestowed on youth would interfere with my own advance in philosophy. I have only succeeded in procuring for myself a tranquil life by the renunciation of all kinds of public teaching." He felt that his duty was to think. He thought, in fact, for humanity, whose ideas he forestalled by more than two centuries.

The same instinctive sagacity was carried by him into all the relations of life ; he felt that public opinion never permits a man to be daring in two directions at once; being a free-thinker, he looked upon himself as bound to live like a saint. But I am wrong in saying this ; was not this pure and gentle life rather the direct expression of his peaceful and lovable consciousness ? At that period the Atheist was pictured as a villain armed with daggers. Spinoza was throughout his whole lifetime humble, meek, pious. His enemies were ingenuous enough to object to this : they would have liked him to live conformably to the conventional type, and, after the career of a demon incarnate, to die in despair. Spinoza smiled at this singular pretension, and refused to oblige his enemies by changing his way of life. He had warm friends, he showed himself courageous at need, he protested against popular indignation wherever he thought it unjust. Many disappointments failed to shake his fidelity to the Republican party; the liberality of his opinions was never at the mercy of events. What perhaps does him more honour still, he possessed the esteem and sincere affection of the simple beings among whom he lived. Nothing is equal in value to the esteem of the lowly; their judgment is almost always that of God. To the worthy Van der Spycks, he was evidently the very ideal of a perfect lodger. "No one ever gave less trouble" was their testimony given some years after his death to Colerus. "While in the house he inconvenienced nobody; he spent the best part of his time quietly in his own room. If he chanced to tire himself by too protracted meditation, he would come down stairs and speak to the family about any subject of common talk, even about trifles." In fact, there could never have been a more affable inmate. He would often hold conversations with his hostess, especially at the time of her confinements, as well as with the rest of the household when any sorrow or sickness befell them. He would tell the children to go to divine service, and when they returned from the sermon ask them how much they remembered of it. He almost always strongly seconded what the preacher had said. One of the persons he most esteemed was the Pastor Cordes, an excellent man and good expounder of the Scriptures : sometimes, indeed, he went to hear him, and he advised his host never to miss the preaching of so able a man. One day his hostess asked him if he thought she could be saved in the religion she professed: "Your religion is a good one/ he replied, "you should not seek any other, nor

doubt that yours will procure salvation if in attaching yourself to piety you lead at the same time a peaceful and tranquil life."

His temperance and good management were admirable. His daily wants were provided for by a handicraft in which he became very skilful the polishing of lenses. The Van der Spycks made over to Colerus scraps of paper, on which Spinoza had noted down his expenses; these averaged about fourpence halfpenny a day. He was very careful to settle his accounts every quarter, so as neither to spend more nor less than his income. He dressed simply, if not poorly, but his aspect radiated serenity. It was evident that he had found out a doctrine which gave him perfect content.

He was never elated, and never depressed; the equability of his moods seems wonderful. Perhaps, indeed, he may have felt some sadness when the daughter of his Professor, Van den Ende, preferred Kerkring to him ; but I suspect that he soon consoled himself.

"Reason is my enjoyment/ lie would say, and the aim I have in this life is joy and serenity."

He objected to any praise of sadness:

"It is superstition," he maintained, "that sets up sadness as good, and all that tends to joy as evil. God would show himself envious if He took pleasure in my impotence, and in the ills I suffer. Bather in proportion to the greatness of our joy do we attain to a greater perfection, and participate more fully in the divine nature. . . . Joy, therefore, can never be evil so long as it be regulated by the law of our true utility. A virtuous life is not a sad and sombre one, a life of privations and austerity. How should the Divinity take pleasure in the spectacle of my weakness, or impute to me, as meritorious, tears, sobs, terrors signs all of an impotent soul? Yes," he added emphatically, "it is the part of a wise man to use the things of this life, and enjoy them as much as possible; to recruit himself by a temperate and appetizing diet ; to charm his senses with the perfume and the brilliant verdure of plants ; to adorn his very attire, to enjoy music, games, spectacles, and every diversion that any one can bestow on himself, without detriment to character." "We are, incessantly spoken to of repentance, humility, death ; but repentance is not a virtue, but the consequence of a weakness. Nor is humility one, since it springs in man from the idea of his inferiority. As to the thought of death, it is the daughter of fear, and it is in feeble souls that it sets up its home." "The thing of all others," he would say, "about which a free man thinks least is death. Wisdom lies in the contemplation not of death but of life."

V.

Since the days of Epictetus and Marcus Aurelius, no life had been witnessed so profoundly penetrated by the sentiment of the Divine. In the twelfth, thirteenth, and sixteenth century, rationalistic philosophy had numbered very great men in its ranks, but it had had no saints. Occasionally a very repulsive and hard element had entered into the finest characters amongst Italian free-thinkers. Religion had been utterly absent from those lives not less in revolt against human than divine laws, of which the last example was that of poor Vanini. Here, on the contrary, we have religion producing free- thought as a part of piety. Religion in a system such as this is not a portion of life, it is life itself. That which is seen to matter here is not the being in possession of some metaphysical phrases more or less correct, it is the giving to one's life a sure pole, a supreme direction the ideal.

It is by so doing that your illustrious countryman has lifted up a banner, which still avails to shelter beneath it all who think and feel nobly. Yes, religion is eternal; it answers to the first

need of primitive, as well as of civilized man ; it will only perish with humanity itself, or, rather, its disappearance would be the proof that degenerate humanity was about to re-enter the mere animalism out of which it had emerged. And yet no dogma, no worship, no formula, can in these days of ours exhaust the religious sentiment. We must confront with each other these seemingly contradictory assertions.

Woe to him who pretends that the era of religions is past! Woe to him who imagines it possible to restore to the old symbols the force they had when they leant upon the imperturbable dogmatism of other days! With that dogmatism we, for our part, must needs dispense; we must dispense with those fixed creeds, sources of so many struggles and divisions, but sources no less of such fervent convictions ; we must give up believing that it is our part to hold down others in a faith we no longer share. Spinoza was right in his horror of hypocrisy.

Hypocrisy is cowardly and dishonest, but, above all, hypocrisy is useless. Who is it, indeed, that is deceived here ? The persistency of the higher classes in unqualifiedly patronizing, in sight of the uncultivated classes, the religious reforms of other days will have but one effect that of impairing their own authority at those times of crisis, when it is important that the people should still believe in the reason and the virtue of a few.

Honour then to Spinoza who has dared to say: Reason before all ; reason can never be contrary to the well-understood interests of humanity. But we would remind those who are carried away by unreflecting impatience that Spinoza never conceived of religious revolution as being aught else than a transformation of formulas.

According to him what was fundamental went on subsisting under other terms. If he on one hand energetically repudiated the theocratic power of the clergy, as distinguished from civil society, or the tendency of the State to occupy itself with metaphysics, on the other hand he never denied either the State or religion. He wished the State tolerant and religion free. We wish for nothing more. One cannot impose on others beliefs one does not possess. That the believers of other days made themselves persecutors proved them tyrannical, but at least consistent ; as for us, if we were to act as they did, we should be simply absurd. Our religion is a sentiment capable of clothing itself in numerous forms. These forms are free from being equally good ; but not one of them has strength or authority to expel all others.

Freedom this is the last word of Spinoza's religious policy. Let it be the last word of ours ! It is the most honest course ; it may, perhaps, also be the most efficacious and certain of the progress of civilization.

Humanity, indeed, advances on the way of progress by prodigiously unequal steps. The rude and violent Esau is out of patience with the slow pace of Jacob's flock. Let us give time to all. We may not, indeed, permit simplicity and ignorance to hinder the free movements of the intellect, but let us not either interfere with the slow evolution of less active intelligences. The liberty of absurdity in these is the condition of the liberty of reason in those. Services rendered to the human mind by violence are not services after all. That such as lay no stress on truth should exercise constraint in order to obtain outward submission, what can be more natural?

But we, who believe that truth is something real, and deserving of supreme respect, how can we dream of obtaining by force an adherence, which is valueless except as the fruit of free conviction ? We no longer admit sacramental formulas, operating by their own virtue, independently of the mind of him to whom they are applied. In our eyes a belief has no worth if it be not gained by the reflection of the individual, if he have not understood and

assimilated it. A mental conviction brought about by superior order is as absolute nonsense as love obtained by force or sympathy by command. Let us promise to ourselves not only to defend our own liberty against all who seek to attack it, but, if need be, to defend the liberty of those who have not always respected ours, and who, it is probable, if they were the masters, would not respect it.

It is Holland that had the glory, more than two hundred years ago, to demonstrate the possibility of these theories by realizing them.

"Must we prove," said Spinoza, "that this freedom of thought gives rise to no serious inconvenience, and that it is competent to keep men, openly diverse in their opinions, reciprocally respectful of each other's rights ! J Examples abound, nor need we go far to seek them ; let us instance the town of Amsterdam, whose considerable growth an object of admiration to other nations is simply the fruit of this freedom. In the midst of this nourishing Republic, this eminent city, men of all nations and all sects live together in most perfect concord; . . . and there is no sect, however odious, whose adepts, provided they do not offend against the rights of any, may not meet with public aid and protection before the magistrates."

Descartes was of the same opinion when he came to ask from this country the calm essential to his thinking. Later, thanks to that noble privilege of a free land so gloriously maintained by your fathers against all opponents, your Holland became the asylum where the human intellect, sheltered from the tyrannies that over spread Europe, found air to breathe, a public to comprehend it, organs to multiply its voice then gagged elsewhere.

Deep assuredly are the wounds of our age, and cruel are its perplexities. It can never be with impunity that so many problems present themselves all at once before the elements for solving them are in our possession. It is not we who have shattered that paradise of crystal, with its silver and azure gleams, by which so many eyes have been ravished and consoled. But there it is in fragments. What is shattered is shattered, and never will an earnest spirit undertake the puerile task of bringing back ignorance destroyed, or restoring illusions dispelled. The populations of great towns have almost everywhere lost faith in the supernatural ; were we to sacrifice our convictions and our sincerity in an attempt to give it them back, we should not succeed. But the super natural as formerly understood is not the ideal.

The cause of the supernatural is compromised, the cause of the ideal is untouched. It ever will be so. The ideal remains the soul of the world, the permanent God, the primordial, efficient, and final Cause of this universe. This it the basis of eternal religion. We, no more than Spinoza, need, in order to adore God, miracles or self-interested prayers. So long as there be in the human heart one fibre to vibrate at the sound of what is true, just, and honest, so long as the instinctively pure prefer purity to life, so long as there be found friends of truth ready to sacrifice their repose to science, friends of goodness to devote themselves to useful and holy works of mercy ; woman-hearts to love whatever is worthy, beautiful, and pure; artists to render it by sound, and colour, and inspired accents so long will God live in us. It could only be when egoism, meanness of soul, narrowness of mind, indifference to knowledge, contempt for human rights, oblivion of what is great and noble, invaded the world it could only be then that God would cease to be in humanity. But far from us be thoughts like these !

Our aspirations, our sufferings, our very faults and rashness, are the proof that the ideal lives in us. Yes, human life is still something divine ! Our apparent negations are often merely the

scruples of timid minds that fear to overpass the limits of their knowledge. They are a worthier homage to the Divinity than the hypocritical adoration of a spirit of routine. God is still us, believe it. God is in us! Est Deus in vobis.

Let us all unite in bending before the great and illustrious thinker, who two hundred years ago proved better than any other, both by the examples of his life and by the power still fresh and young of his works how much there is of spiritual joy and holy unction in thoughts like these. Let us with Schleiermacher pay the homage of the best we can do to the ashes of the holy and misunderstood Spinoza.

"The sublime spirit of the world penetrated him, the infinite was his beginning and his end ; the universal his only and eternal love ; living in holy innocence and profound humility, he contemplated himself in the eternal world and saw that he too was for that world a mirror worthy of love ; he was full of religion and full of the holy spirit; and therefore he appears to us solitary and unequalled: master in his art, but lifted above the profane, without disciples and without right of citizenship anywhere."

That right of citizenship you are now about to confer on him. . Your monument will be the link between his genius and the earth. His spirit will brood like a guardian angel over the spot where his rapid journey among men came to its end. Woe to him who, in passing by, should dare to level an insult at that gentle and pensive figure ! He would be punished as all vulgar hearts are punished by his very vulgarity, and his impotence to comprehend the divine. Spinoza mean while from his granite pedestal shall teach to all the way of happiness he himself had found, and for ages to come the cultivated man who passes along the Pavilioengragt will inwardly say, "It is from hence perhaps that God has been seen most near!"

Colofon

In: Knight, William Angus, 1836-1916,
Spinoza: four essays by Land, Kuno Fischer, J. Van Vloten and Ernest Renan. Publisher:
London, Williams and Norgate, 1882.

http://www.archive.org/stream/spinozafouressay00kniguoft/spinozafouressay00kniguoft_djvu.txt

21-01-2010

http://www.benedictusdespinoza.nl/lit/Ernest_Renan_SPINOZA_1677-1877.pdf