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Challenging Religious Authorities

The Scientific Commitment of Simone Luzzatto and Yoseph Delmedigo

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ABSTRACT

This paper offers a brief overview toward Simone Luzzatto's and Yoseph Delmedigo's commitment to secular learning. Their interest to natural sciences which embraces a bride range of fields, as mathematics, physics, medicine, and astronomy will be here considered a special periscope through which to observe and analyze 17th century multifaceted Jewish approach to the new science and how did impact their faith and their respect for religious authority.

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1 _ Introduction

The new experimental method initiated by the age of science deeply affected the way to address the world: instead of being the silent side in the frame of the Scripture and scholastic philosophy, the world with its rules starts to be part of a dialogue revolutionizing the theoretical pre-established order. As it has been underlined by Adam Shear in his chapter of the *Cambridge History of Judaism* devoted to the Early Modern World, the study of secular learning among Jewish intellectuals sets the engagement of the Jews in a «universalistic activity where the Jewishness of the participants is not directly relevant»[1]. However, it is often raised «the central problem of the reconciliation of philosophical traditions emanating from outside Jewish sources with the revealed sources of wisdom that were authoritative in rabbinic Judaism»[2].

Many medieval authors, studied by early modern Jews, considered the contemplation of nature as a part of a Maimonidean program that authorised the study of physics almost as a religious duty[3] and the legacy of Moses Maimonides played a significant role for reconciliation of Judaism, Aristotelian philosophy, medical practice, and scientific study[4]. During the 16th century anti-Aristotelian arguments increased together with the attempt to underline the compatibility of secular and biblical literature as it was the case with David

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de' Pomis (1524-1593) and Abraham Portaleone (1542-1612), although the latter is well-known for his repentance for having studied philosophy and medicine[5]. It must be though underlined that this attempt to harmonize reason and faith was always motivated by theological concerns. The case of 'Azariah de Rossi who «sought to distinguish purely rationalistic inquiry from authorized traditions, was ultimately not as popular as the traditional approach that demanded synthesis of equally authoritative sources of knowledge and maintained that the *Torah* encompassed all knowledge»[6].

This synthetic approach ended at the beginning of the 17th century in which the interest in scholastic philosophy weakening, the Kabbalah gained more attention in Italy, and scientific study continued to be pursued among Jewish authors but with different goals[7]. In this respect, the cases of Yoseph Delmedigo and Simone Luzzatto are two significant examples that display how complex the Jewish philosophical respond to the new era was and to which extent their interests in sciences had affected their religious beliefs. Indeed, we are not facing here the case of Spinoza who was outside the Jewish community but that of the work of traditional Jews who remained deeply rooted in their religion.

Yoseph Delmedigo (1591-1655) was a rabbi and doctor in medicine. He was born in Candia and died in Prague, he was a very restless mind, a man who wandered throughout the world: Crete, Padua, Venice, then north Africa, Poland, Germany, Holland and in1650 he settled in Prague where he died. He lived practicing mostly his medical knowledge and as rabbi[8]. Simone Luzzatto (ca. 1583-1663) was one of the chief rabbis of the Jewish community of Venice and he became the chief of Venetian rabbis' assembly and the official translators from Hebrew for the Venetian government after the death of Leone Modena. He may be considered a quite important mediating personality for Christian-Jewish political relationship in Venice at that time. These two Jews experienced the vibrant cultural life of the city of Venice whereof an important part was also his ghetto which existed from 1516 to 1797. Although the ghetto symbolized a condition of segregation and was mirror of the precarious state of the Jews not only of Venice but of many cities in Italy, nevertheless in the city of Venice flourished an intense economic and cultural exchange between Jews and Christians, fostered mostly by the Venetian attempt to preserve the political autonomy of the Republic from the religious and political interference of the Roman Church.

The city of Venice is famous for having hosted the greatest number of Academies or gatherings at private houses joined by many Venetians and foreigners as well as by the most brilliant minds of early modern age, and some Jews were also related to the members of these academies and

they might have played a role inside of them. Just to mention some of those great thinkers who animated the cultural debates in Venice, we must remember Giordano Bruno (1548-1600) with his radical conception of infinite worlds and universes and of course Galileo Galilei (1564-1642) who with his revolutionary astronomical discoveries not only lent strength to the Copernican theory, but brought forth awareness of the rising new science and the experimental methods of inquiry. The city of Venice was a pole of attraction also for the many who studied at the University of Padua which was only 38 km far away, one of the oldest universities in Europe, known for having hosted the first signs of the experimental era in science and medicine as it was in 1594 the opening of the *Teatro Anatomico* where the first anatomical demonstrations were performed. These were the firsts signs of the new era because the many matters were still treated as part of philosophy and this was the case especially with 'natural philosophy' which was central in the study of philosophy and medicine. To better understand the state of Paduan teaching, we must think that Galileo himself, although he was a convinced believer in the Copernican system during the Paduan period (1592-1610), in his official role as professor of mathematics and astronomy, never taught that system, but only the traditional teaching of Ptolemy, Aristotle, and Euclid[9]. The university of Padua deserves though a special attention because it was one of the very few universities of Italy to accept also Jewish students, who came from different parts of Europe, where the Jews were mostly excluded from universities still in 17th century. So, the university was an interesting cultural and religious melting-pot thanks to the Christian and Jewish presence and the many foreigners who were studying there[10].

The works of Delmedigo and Luzzatto collect a great amount of references to the scientific revolution of their days and what deserves to be mentioned is that both of them acknowledged their mutual value in this field. It is known that Delmedigo did not mention any of the Paduan rabbis, but he rather expressed great admiration for the Venetian rabbis Leone Modena and Simone Luzzatto: especially the latter appears in his main work *Sefer Elim* to be praised together with Ya'acov of Alexandria and Zeraḥ as the only ones among the contemporary Jews who were well versed into mathematics and sciences[11]. The book of Delmedigo, *Elim*, in 1629 received the authorization for its publication by Luzzatto and some other Venetian rabbis: in this occasion Luzzatto praised this work because he believed that the pursuing of 'science' was useful to rise the good reputation of the Jews in the Christian world and he wished that the book might be translated also into Latin in order to reach a greater public.

2 _ Delmedigo and Luzzatto's Pursuing of Secular Learning

As it is known, Delmedigo's *Sefer Elim*[12], published in 1629 by the newly established printing house of Menasseh ben Israel in Amsterdam, is a very voluminous book that in the form of letters sent to Delmedigo by a Karaite scholar, Zerach ben Natan from Lithuania, focuses on mathematics, physics, astronomy. Those letters are the main source of Delmedigo's biography and they condense his philosophical and scientific view and his criticism of Aristotelism, and they also supply an indirect answer to some of the major issues concerning the impact of the new astronomy on religion. First of all, Delmedigo studied medicine, which was the only field among the few academic professions which opened the world of secular knowledge to Jews and at the same time provided them with a lucrative employment. His medical knowledge reflects the ancient and medieval tradition, the Hippocratic and Galenic which still remained fundamental at medical curriculum of the university. Despite his study, he never showed enthusiasm for medicine which he considered to be an art and not a science. His main interest focused on mathematics in general and trigonometry in particular which he praised for its high level of truthfulness. On this regard he wrote:

> It alone imparts true knowledge, whereas all other studies offer only fables, opinions and partisan views. There is no view, queer and strange though it may appear, which does not have its partisans and supporters, ready to marshal all kinds of proofs and evidence in its behalf. Only mathematics full agreement prevails, as there only one truth (*Sefer Elim*, 365)[13].

He emphasizes the instrumentality of mathematics in technology and science and he frequently declared his preference for applied learning over theoretical. Hence, he praised the applied teachings of Archimedes more than the theoretical abstractions of Euclid. Delmedigo displays to be well acquainted with the developments in this field and along the names of the ancient mathematicians he also mentions the moderns who have dealt with arithmetic and geometry, like Regiomontanus (1436-1476), Geronimo Cardano (1501-1576), Niccolò Tartaglia (1500-1557), or John Napier (1550-1617).

As a physician he attached great importance to the experimental method, as it is evident from his words:

> As far as knowledge obtained by the senses and experience is concerned, one must not trust others more than himself. Who can prove that Ptolemy's vision was sharper than ours and Galen's feeling of the pulse, or his taste of medicines, more sensitive and discerning than ours, especially since we have

instruments of much greater precision than he had (*Sefer Elim*, 249)[14].

Although he was still deeply committed to the ancient theories, he shows to be well aware of the extraordinary revolution of his age, which has reduced his admiration for the Ancients together with a new critical attitude toward them and a sense of confidence in the achievements of his own age. He expressed his esteem for those who invent something beneficial for society, the works of alchemists, mineralogists, agronomists, and engineers, which are always useful instead of that of the philosophers and theoretical mathematicians. His studies in physics are symptomatic of a change during the first decades of the 17th century in which the application of mathematics to the description of natural phenomena was growing.

However, during 16th and 17th century the most significant progress in science affected astronomy: Copernicus initiated to free human beings from finite, egocentric, and hierarchical concept of the universe. Delmedigo's *Sefer Elim* is rich of references to astronomers like Tycho Brahe (1546-1601), the second greatest astronomer of the century, whose exact measurements constituted an important step in undermining the bases of the old astronomy; or like William Gilbert (1530-1603), author of a decisive study on earth's gravity, *De Magnete* (London 1600). Among them Delmedigo did not neglect the study of Giordano Bruno and his pantheistic conception of an infinite universe with an infinite number of solar systems to which he oft referred without mentioning explicitly the name of Bruno. The Jewish scientist shows also to be well acquainted with the mathematical formulations of Johannes Kepler (1571-1630) and the discoveries of Galileo Galilei (1564-1642) which were a decisive revolution in astronomy as they drastically overcome the transcendental essences and hierarchies of the Aristotelian dogmatism. His admiration for Galilei is confirmed by the fact that Delmedigo referred in Hebrew to him as *rabbi*, that can be translated into 'my teacher'[15]. He was student of Galilei in Padua and mentions several times his telescope. It is still a question where Delmedigo learnt the heliocentric theory of Copernicus as the basic text of Galilei's lectures on astronomy at Padua, as we said, was the ancient astronomy of *Almagest* of Ptolemy. Barzilay in his monograph on Delmedigo answered that probably he bought the books of Copernicus as he was a passionate bibliophile[16]. It is also interesting to notice that Delmedigo claimed for himself only the authorship of the purely mathematical and experimental works and denied the authorship of the philosophical study of astronomy presented in his *Sefer Elim* attributing it to his disciple Moshe Metz. This was «Delmedigo's device to shield himself against possible criticisms, because of

the radical views expressed therein. But Metz repeatedly stresses that the views he expresses are not his, but drawn from Delmedigo's teaching»[17]. His view appears to be even more radical as not only did he express his agreement with the new mechanistic and materialistic positions, but he went even far beyond Copernicus' theory mentioning references to «infinite space, multiplicity of worlds, the possibility of human life on other planets, and a purely mechanistic explanation of the universal motion»[18].

Luzzatto's approach to science is substantially different from Delmedigo's and a clear explanation may be found in the role played by the two Jewish intellectuals within the society. Both share a prudent attitude toward the new science, nevertheless especially rabbi Luzzatto shows a particular mastery in adapting his prose to the readership and in keeping concealed some of his most controversial views. He is mostly known for his apologetic treatise *Discourse on the State of the Jews*[19], published in 1638, written in Vernacular, and meant to address a Christian readership in order to show the economical utility of the Jews in the city and avoid in this way the current risk to be chased away. His second book *Socrates, Or On Human Knowledg*e was printed in Venice in 1651[20]. The extended title is *The Serio-Ludic Exercise of Simone Luzzatto, Venetian Jew. A Book That Shows How Deficient Human Understanding Can Be When It Is Not Led by Divine Revelation*. Thus, the work is meant as a demonstration of the limits and weaknesses of the human capacity to acquire knowledge without being guided by revelation. It is a sceptical investigation into the validity of human certainties, to which he opposed the solidity of the divine truth. The striking aspect of Luzzatto's commitment into secular learning within this work is that it takes place into an unexpected frame, namely that of the sceptical inquiry. Within this setting the rabbi of Venice displays like Delmedigo an extended knowledge in medicine mainly based on the traditional Galenic and Hippocrates teachings, although we have no evidences that he attended the classes at the Paduan university. On the contrary, his interest in mathematics and physics is still very theoretical and mostly based on Euclid's *Elements* and on Aristotelian natural philosophy. Luzzatto collected in his book a very rich amount of ancient and modern theories of geometry, optics, physics by creating a constellation of opinions that are intentionally meant to dizzy the reader. It is important to notice that with great ability and refined rhetoric he succeeded in developing a plot that remains exclusively into the Greek ancient world, the many characters appearing in his work are all pagan speakers, included the main actor Socrates[21]. The only field in which he gave himself away is astronomy: this is the only area in which Luzzatto displayed his being acquainted with Galilei's telescope and Copernican astronomy. Although the book seems to

be fully immerged into the Greek ancient wisdom, Luzzatto with chronological inconsistency wants to benefit in this field of the modern science. By summarizing Galileian demonstrations he achieved indeed the purpose of showing the inconsistency of Aristotelian astronomy, presented as great falsities delivered from the antiquity. He reported all the important discoveries of Galilei's telescope: he referred to the nature of the Milky Way, the irregular surface of the moon, the phases of Venus, Venus's location between the sun and the earth, the rings of Saturn, and the sun spots.

3 _ Why Apply to Secular Learning?

Delmedigo complained about the attitudes toward science that he had found among the Jews of Poland during his wandering throughout the world, he wrote on this regard:

> They understand neither science nor *Torah*. They have become enemies of science, and despise those who study it. They believe that God has no need for sciences…for mathematics or for astronomy, and He does not desire those who drink from the poisoned well of Greek wisdom[22].

Delmedigo's commitment was to open up the new astronomical world of Galilei and Copernicus to his coreligionists: his wish was to create a scientific literature in modern Hebrew in order to enable the Jewish readership to study astronomy and mathematics. On this point he wrote:

> I had in mind to compose Hebrew books dealing with all kinds of learning and science, in order to place the Jews on a par with other nations and put an end to their degraded position (*Sefer*, *Novloth*, 8a)[23].

He offered to the *yeshivah* students of his day with the following advice showing to be proud of the higher intellectual education he had achieved:

> Listen to my words, comrades in the labor of *Torah*. Behold how my eyes have lit up after I tasted a little of that honey […] by the aid of natural philosophy and mathematics, we may gain greater insight into theology. These secular studies must not be treated as mere confectionaries, cooks, and bakers serving the Cabbalah […] but as means for the attainment of perfection and excellence (*Novloth*, 17a)[24].

By reading Delmedigo's words one may gather that he was sharing the traditional approach to science, namely the idea that through secular learning one may come closer to God and have a better understanding of Him. In this context the comparison with the Gentile world seems to be a further motivation in his purpose, indeed he wishes that Jews may reach the same scientific level

of the Gentiles that he sees to be much advanced.

Luzzatto seems to be sharing Delmedigo's point of view, although with partial differences: in his *Discourse On the State of the Jews* after twelve pages devoted to the traditional studies of the Scripture, he dedicated one page also to the application to sciences:

> This is what comes to my mind to say about the studies of the Jews concerning the Sacred Scripture. With regard, then, to their study of science, not only are no prohibitions to be found among them, but also the Jews hold it to be a legal precept to dedicate themselves to the contemplation of natural things, in order to obtain a probable knowledge of the grandeur of God. They also consider themselves much more obliged to pursue the study of astronomy, both because of the need they have for determining feast days and also because that science offers a secure introduction to understanding divine knowledge and power, as the Psalmist says: "In the very heavens, Thou dost prepare Thy truth [i.e., faith] in them". This means that by means of the skies, God disposes and [85v] prepares the souls of men for faith, contemplating their vastness, the velocity of motion and the stability of the cycles, and the immutability of their rotations. Certainly, the Jews, finding themselves in their present state of subjection and having no freedom whatsoever apart from applying their minds to study and doctrine, should devote themselves to these with all their skill and industry. They should be aware of the fact that the unity of dogmas, the patronage granted by the princes, and the protection from so much oppression were obtained over such a long period of time, humanly speaking, from the learning of a virtuous few. They acquired credibility and authority under those who ruled, since they were deprived of all other means of aspiring to the favours and graces of the great in any other way[25].

Luzzatto seems to agree with the Maimonidean statement according to which the study of sciences was meant as a religious obligation: he referred especially to astronomy for the practical use in understanding the Jewish calendar and as introduction to the knowledge of divine wisdom and potency. This is what we gather from his first book, *Discourse*, an apologetic book written to save the Jews from the threat to be expelled by the Republic of Venice. Luzzatto's view at first perfectly conforms to the Jewish tradition: the study of secular learning was considered relevant in order to assist human being in acknowledging God and to have also a practical use for the understanding of *Torah*. Contrary to Delmedigo, he never talked about the supremacy of the Gentiles as far as it concerned scientific knowledge, rather he addressed sciences as instruments which might have improved the image of the Jews among Christians and that could have guaranteed their salvation and protection among the political class.

Although references to his wide scientific knowledge are disseminated throughout his *Discourse*, it is in his second book, *Socrates, Or On Human Knowledge* that Luzzatto makes the reader perceive in each page his profound expertise in astronomy, mathematics, physics, and medicine. The great erudition and the fact that it wasn't written in Hebrew are evidence of Luzzatto's attempt to make in this way the non-Jewish readership aware of the high level achieved in secular learning by the Jews as well.

Both Delmedigo and Luzzatto furthermore believe that the allowance to pursue secular knowledge must be considered to be deriving directly from God. According to Delmedigo God's mercy and goodness toward human beings permit the study of science, indeed he wrote that «the light of the intellect is gathered from God who grants knowledge to man, and the Father of truth will not bequeath lies to him»[26].

In a brief introduction composed for the *Tzafnat Pa'aneach* (*Revealing Enigmas*) in 1640 written by rabbi Samuel ha-Cohen of Pisa and published in 1656 in Venice, Luzzatto developed the defense of Job, accused of having denied resurrection after death, in a few pages of text:

> It is also part of God's mercy and goodness toward His creatures that He has permitted them to inquire into and examine the way in which the world is governed and [the way in which] His ways are balanced (*hashva'at middotav*) in his glorious order […]. And just as choice flows from the will [so that] a man may incline it toward whatever he turns and decides, so the intellect is free, according to each and every man's level, to consider and explore any subject he wishes[27].

Although we are still in the sphere of what is permitted by God, Luzzatto does not fail to point out that the human being who intelligises (*lehaskil*) and explores (*latur*) strengthens a specific freedom, human curiosity, which as is known, is limitless and thus it cannot be foreseen how far it may go.

4 _ Scientific Commitment and The Religious Authority of the Rabbis and of Scripture

Delmedigo like also his teacher Galilei, stressed the difference between reason and faith, namely philosophy and science, on the one hand, and the Bible on the other. According to the general idea of a double truth Delmedigo claimed to separate Bible and free inquiry:

> It is not the intent of the Bible to impart secular learning. Prophecies are the product of the prophet's imagination, and are not meant as a description of reality. Their main goal being functional, to encourage the keeping of the commandments, the words of Scripture ought not to be used either to uphold or to

refute scientific or philosophical data (*Masref*, p. 85)[28].

Some years earlier Galilei, whose defense of freedom of scientific enquiry belongs to the earliest and classical formulations of this principle, wrote in a letter to Costelli of 1614:

> I am inclined to think that Holy Scriptures is intended to convince men of those truths which are necessary for their salvation, and which, being far above man's understanding, cannot be made credible by any learning, or by any other means than revelation. But that the same God who was endowed us with senses, reason, and understanding, does not permit us to use them, and desires to acquaint us in another way with such knowledge as we are in a position to acquire for ourselves by means of those faculties – that, it seems to me, I am not bound to believe, especially concerning those sciences about which the Holy Scriptures contain only small fragments and varying explanations […] I think that in discussing natural phenomenon, we ought not begin with texts from Scripture, but with experiment and demonstration[29].

It is known that in the case of Delmedigo his commitment into secular learning had deep similarities also with his much younger contemporary Baruch Spinoza. Spinoza and Delmedigo share the idea that knowledge of Biblical narrative and Law is not necessary to those living by the light of their reason. For example, Spinoza's naturalization of miracles, was already an important point in Delmedigo's writing where he condemned the irrational components of Jewish literature still of his time. Sharp criticisms of the rabbis are very frequent in his work; although he was descendant of a long line of rabbinical tradition, the famous rabbi Elia Delmedigo was his ancestor, he criticizes them for their cultural shortcomings and intellectual narrowness both in Jewish knowledge and secular learning. As it has been pointed out by Barzilay, this attitude was a result of the wider perspective he gained thanks to his studies and travels: his rationalism and his enthusiastic commitment to secular learning undermined his esteem for his own culture. Delmedigo's criticism involved not only the metaphysical foundation of religion in general, like creation, the immortality of the soul, or providence, but also the inadequacy of philosophy itself: he went so far as to reject the Maimonidean program to harmonize reason and faith and he came to share the Galileian view that the two belong to different and separate spheres, each one endowed of its own truth and method. Although the relationship between reason and faith remains a leitmotiv of his thought, «he assumes though contradictory attitudes toward this problem in his various works: he embraces the demonstrative and experimental method; he identifies with the Cabbalists; and he also fluctuates between mysticism and rationalism.

However, it is the rationalist essence of his personality and views that breaks through and impresses itself as the essential and authentic in him»[30].

Luzzatto's approach to religious authority must be considered a very problematic aspect of his thinking as he offered throughout his works only some fragmented considerations on this issue. In a passage of his *Discourse* Luzzatto criticized the role of the rabbi as religious leader within a society:

> The Jews are respectful to the above-mentioned learned men as far as opinions and dogmas pertaining to the articles of their religion are concerned. [They also rely on them] as far as morality and ways of conversing and behaving in society and civil life, with whatever people or nation, are concerned. Although the rabbis have said things about such matters that have not confirmed the present condition, they hold that these words should not be considered [80r] inalterable and eternal laws. [In fact, the Jews] assume that they wrote in an appropriate manner with regard to the state and condition of those people among whom [the rabbis] were dispersed. [In fact, the Jews] deem them uncorrupted relators of ceremonial observations, not prophetic legislators for all posterity, especially for the things that pertain to human affairs, which are subject to such contingencies and variations and which depend upon an alterable infinity of circumstances. Their [the rabbis'] civil law is not legally binding or mandatory, for [the rabbis] themselves have taught that every pact, voluntary constitution, and convention in civil matters has [the power] to dissolve any of their rulings[31].

Contrary to Delmedigo, Luzzatto did not complain about the rabbinic wisdom, but he put into question their sphere of religious influence[32]. According to him, this must not be independent from the civil laws and the conditions of the state in which the Jewish community lives, but it must always be relative and suitable to them. Luzzatto strengthens in this way the separation between religious and civil life by revealing also to be aware of the necessity to set though the religious authority on a secondary position in relation to the laws of civil society, and therefore he must be considered to be inclined to restrict the rabbinical sphere of action.

As in Delmedigo's work Luzzatto's approach to Scripture seems to be in accordance with the traditional separation between faith and reason: the title of his *Socrates* anticipates Luzzatto speculative purpose, namely to show the limits of human faculty when it is not under the guidance of divine revelation. This book seems to be meant to strengthen the separation between reason and faith and to be evidently inclined to show the superiority of the revelation on human rationality. It is indeed human reason and its capacities to be on trial in his book: he denounced the results of the free human inquiry, namely the existence of many

philosophical opinions, many theories whose validity has been dogmatically accepted over the centuries, although their weakness has been also demonstrated by the progress of knowledge itself.

The beginning of his Socrates may give some clues concerning the way Luzzatto was conceiving the Scripture and the similarity with Delmedigo's and Galilei's point of view:

> Socrates confutes human knowledge, but not that [knowledge] which is inspired and instilled by a superior mind, and he comes to this consideration by acknowledging that the weakness of our innate understanding makes us pliant to the sentiments and testimonies of the Holy Scripture[33].

Although the authority of the Scripture remains in this few lines uncontested, as it is inspired by divine revelation, the rabbi shows a new critical awareness toward the way the Scripture communicates the revelation: because of the deficiency of our understanding we are inclined to believe the Scripture which provides us with opinions and testimonies. So, he did not really say something against the truth of the Scripture, but certainly about the way the Scripture addresses human beings, namely through opinions and testimonies, something that Luzzatto has widely criticised throughout his *Socrates*, because of their uncertainty and instability. What is missing in Luzzatto's work is the confidence in human rationality shown rather by Galilei and defended partially by Delmedigo. The partial defense of reason condensed in Delmedigo's writing is due to his anti-rationalist stand, a kind of scepticism that rises toward the uncertain results that reason may achieve: he criticized the many speculations and opinions overlapping one another, a cause of which he warned to develop an immunity to them and remain faithful to the belief of his people. Apparently contradicting his earlier view, Delmedigo went even further advising to restrain reason from rationalizing not only on matters of faith, but on all matters of abstract speculations, because not only useless, but even harmful:

> He who searches for God and his divine words in the books of the philosophers is like he who searches for the living in a cemetery; and conversely, he who interprets the words of the law and scripture according to the ideas of the philosophers is seeking the dead amongst the living (*Sefer Elim*, 94)[34].

Delmedigo's words of piety must not be interpreted as a mere pretense, but as genuine as his opposite view toward rationalism, they are indicative of the polarity of his thought. Delmedigo and Luzzatto display to be both deeply affected by early modern debates about the respective roles of human reason and the senses in knowledge, which had long been important, but are for them incredibly actual thanks to the revived

interest in scepticism and the possibility of knowledge, and the impact of great developments in the new science.

Anyhow, Luzzatto unlike Delmedigo is consistent within his thought: as rabbi he pursues the secular learning trying to fulfil the Maimonidean urge to investigate the world created by God which has been explained over the centuries according to the Aristotelian natural philosophy. However, the Galileian demonstration of the truthfulness of the Copernican theory, whereof Luzzatto is well aware, is an evident proof of the inconsistency of Aristotelian physics. It cannot be overlooked anymore that to be interested in science in the seventeenth century means to endorse the new knowledge, as Adam Shear has underlined in his significant chapter:

> One could still think of oneself as a Maimonidean but in the new era Maimonideanism would need to encompass a non-Aristotelian physics and cosmology. The new discoveries were taken up (enthusiastically) by some thinkers, causing them to reinterpret existing biblical texts, as in the case of Portaleone's *Shilte ha-Gibborim*. Or the new scientific discoveries could be described and endorsed as worthwhile areas of study, as in Gans's *Nechman ve-na'im* or Yoseph Delmedigo's *Sefer Elim*. In the area of Jewish law, the new science posed additional challenges. Some rabbis tried to reconcile rabbinic discussions with new science or to use the new science to respond (perhaps a bit belatedly) to radical Aristotelianism[35].

In order to understand how Luzzatto responds to this challenge one should take into account his *Socrates* which is a proof of his commitment into scientific ancient and modern theories. By reading it, one comes to the conclusion that after having applied himself to this study, then he felt lost. He shows to believe in the free inquiry allowed by God to humans, but at the same time in the idea that 'free inquiry' concretely means that the promotion of new theories one after the other along human history will be endless and will proceed denying the previous theory and providing new alternatives:

> I believe that human curiosity will produce other dogmata […], because it is pushed by a natural desire always inclined more to contradictions than to novelty. Yet which of these aforementioned opinions is the truest does not really concern my proposal. The reason for this is that I did not put forth these opinions to debate them, but I want to infer from this collection of various opinions only this: for example regardless of whether vision happens in this way or in other ways, it is necessary [to point out] that there is a great diversity between the appearance of objects and their true reality[36].

Scepticism became the only way he found to manage the immense freedom of inquiry open up by the new era of science, no dogmas in nature any more but only hypothesis, experiments and

demonstrations, so how to believe in what cannot be demonstrated, but also how to believe in what can be experimentally demonstrated if human faculties are so weak, so deceitful, source of so many illusions? The great relativism to which human investigation leads, displays the many cultural, religious, traditional differences into the same world, or even considers the infinity of the universe and the existence of many solar systems. This relativizes every belief and breaks down the concept of true and false, fair or unfair. For this reason, Luzzatto chooses the probable as tool for his life and thanks to this approach he seems concretely to be liberated, to emancipate himself from any rational and religious sights.

As a rabbi but also scientist he seems to be sensible of the immense freedom gained by the scientific research, the break of old dogmatic limits, the curiosity to walk this path, and the terrifying awareness of the limit of human faculty. He wrote:

> Yet if the human intellect's task is the cognition of natural things, it always becomes embroiled, among its other torments, in five cruel and constantly flagellating things: the infinite, which distracts it [i.e. the intellect]; the indivisible minimum, which burdens it; motion, which agitates it; time, which consumes it; and space or the void, which reduces it to nothing. They are such thorny matters that anyone who presumed to have finally intelligised them while he was entangled in them would certainly be unfortunate[37].

In this passage there is the awareness of the human knowledge incapacity to penetrate some very thorny issues, namely the infinite, the indivisible minimum, motion, time, and space and void, and so to achieve any certainty on them. The scepticism of the rabbi seems to find an explication in the miserable condition of the human being whose curiosity and inquisitive attitude are restless but his concrete capacity to achieve certainty is invalid.

5 _ Conclusion

One may conclude that Delmedigo and Luzzatto share a revolutionary approach to religion although in a different way: Delmedigo is fully committed to the new science and the new experimental method, which broadened his perspective but did not compromise his faith. Science provided him with a strong critical approach to faith, and as Galilei did, fostered the idea of a separation between rational and religious spheres: according to him demonstrative knowledge can be attributed only to such studies which teach us the causes of things; and whose truth yields to demonstration while faith demands to believe. Though this separation does not exclude any further critical evolution of the relationship to faith: in-

deed, Delmedigo considered faith based on an assumed tradition, on testimony received from the mouth of prophet, teacher or father and thus lacking any certainty. On the contrary certainty may be acquired through demonstration in the field of the experimental science.

On the other side Luzzatto stressed his criticism of human understanding and consequently of the knowledge acquired over the history: his target is scholastic philosophy and in general all the philosophy becomes dogma. The criticism investing philosophical knowledge seems though to leave some traces of a possible overcoming the philosophical limit and invest also traditional theology.

In Luzzatto's *Socrates* the name and nature of God overlap with that of Nature. The polyphonic form of Luzzatto's book in which many are the voices speaking may confuse the reader who tries to identify the position of Luzzatto himself. Nevertheless, by isolating some passages we gather that Luzzatto seems to find a solution from the dizzy results of free inquiry and dogmatic knowledge thanks to Nature: Nature is praised because of its neutrality, of its being equal with everyone as it is called «a lover of equality»[38]. The fact that Luzzatto turns the name of God into that of Nature means to turn the God of the Scripture into an impersonal entity free from traditional characters featuring it. On the contrary by adopting Nature he is implicitly attacking the hierarchy promoted by traditional theology. He believed that Nature must be considered instead the true source of moral values:

> You must not even doubt that in discrediting its own judgement and accusing it of falsity, the court of conscience attended by the human mind would be debased and lacking in authority, because it will be [308] replaced by the majesty of Nature, which will lead the way more decorously towards the good and remove the evil[39].

This denies indeed the central position of human beings in the world and even defends their equality:

> Humanity must be considered not as something abstracted and excluded from the universal Nature, but as something included in it [i.e. Nature] that should be adjusted to it and ably ruled by it like the other mundane things[40].

Luzzatto's thought must not be considered atheistic, but it is rather a theistically inspired religiosity which does not need any particular creed. Specifically, the final part of his *Socrates* shows that in his view, proper religious behavior conforms to reason, is universal, and is against superstition and degenerated beliefs:

> For it is sufficient for my defence that you observe the public and private reasonings that I have always delivered concerning

> the reverence due to the first and worthiest cause, which moves and rules everything. Indeed, I have always promulgated that the cognition that one has of it and the veneration that is due to it come not only from subtle and wide-ranging deductions, but were also given to us along with milk by Nature itself. Hence, it follows that the human mind is so inclined and favourably disposed to religion and divine worship that if it were deprived of such a pursuit, he would not be very different from brute animals. I have never despised or omitted [to perform] ceremonies or institutions ordered by our city for the observance of religion, but I have always publicly offered sacrifices in accordance with the rites of my homeland, in appropriate places, at the right moment, and in a legitimate manner. And if I sometimes took a position against the ignorant by reprehending them for their ridiculous superstition or degenerate religion, I was not then attempting, as the Giants did, to expel Jupiter from the sky, but rather trying to remove those despicable concepts which disfigured the beauty and grace of the true religion in their minds. Therefore, I have often solemnly said to those who were truly prudent that they must protect themselves from the infection of superstition, an epidemic and serious disease of the people. They [must] be aware that often the religion of the vile common people is abominable blasphemy for wise men and that the true temple of God is in the wise man's mind, where He is adored through offerings of love and sacrifices of veneration[41].

Although Luzzatto's opinion is presented very prudently in this passage – likely due also to his consistency to the sceptical outlines of Sextus, which invite the sceptic to be respectful of the social laws of the city in which one lives[42] – it is, however, evident that he deploys reason as the true temple of God. Only there, in his opinion, does true religion seem to find shelter from 'the infection of superstition' and 'abominable blasphemy'. The radical potential of *Socrates*' critique increased when transferred from the forum of the ancient Athens to the Jewish ghetto and rabbinate of 17th century Venice. Indeed, scepticism could be redirect from targeting scholastic philosophy to targeting established religious faith and praxis, as it happens with some authors like Montaigne, or La Peyrère, and Spinoza.

_ NOTE

1 _ A. Shear, *Science, Medicine, and Jewish Philosophy*, in J. Karp, A. Sutcliffe (eds.), *The Cambridge History of Judaism: Volume 7, The Early Modern World, 1500-1815*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge-New York 2018, p. 522.

2 _ *Ibidem.*

3 _ On this topic see C. Fraenkel, *Philosophical Religions from Plato to Spinoza: Reason, Religion, and Autonomy*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2012 and A. Viterbo, *La Mitswa di studiare le scienze nell'opera di Rav Simcha (Simone) Luzzatto*, «Segulat Israel», 4 (1997), pp. 54-67.

4 _ Cf. A. Shear, op. cit., p. 523.

5 _ Cf. the introduction of Portaleone's *Shilte ha-Gibborim* (1612). On this topic see A. Guetta, *Avraham Portaleone, le scientifique repenti*, in G. Freundenthal, J.-P. Rothschild, G. Dahan (eds.), *Torah et science: perspectives historiques et théoretiques*, Peeters, Paris 2001, pp. 221-223.

6 _ A. Shear op. cit., p. 531. On this topic see G. Miletto, *Tradition and Innovation: Religion, Science, and Jewish Culture between the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries*, in J. Helm, A. Winkelmann (eds.), *Religious Confessions and Science in the Sixteenth Century*, Brill, Leiden 2001, pp. 99-107 and G. Veltri, *Renaissance Philosophy in Jewish Garb: Foundations and Challenges in Judaism in the Eve of Modernity*, Brill, Leiden 2009.

7 _ Cf. D. Ruderman, *Jewish Thought and Scientific Discovery in Early Modern Europe*, Yale University Press, New Haven 1995, pp. 119-133.

8 _ On the life and work of Yoseph Delmedigo see I. Barzilay, *Yoseph Shlomo Delmedigo (Yasher of Candia). His life, Works and Times*, Brill, Leiden 1974.

9 _ Cf. I. Barzilay, op. cit., p. 151.

10 _ On the Jews at the University of Padua see D. Ruderman, op. cit., pp. 100-117.

11 _ Cf. I. Barzilay, op. cit., p. 42; p. 312.

12 _ The title *Sefer Elim* is because these numbers corresponded to the 12 fountains and 70 palm trees at Elim as mentioned in the *Torah* (*Numbers* 33:9), see I. Barzilay, op. cit., p. 95.

13 _ Ivi, p. 134.

14 _ Ivi, p. 132.

15 _ Ivi, pp. 42-43 and also J. Adler, *Joseph Solomon Delmedigo: Student of Galileo, Teacher of Spinoza*, «Intellectual History Review», 23 (2013) 1, p. 142.

16 _ Ivi, p. 137.

17 _ Ivi, pp. 158-159.

18 _ *Ibidem.*

19 _ S. Luzzatto, *Discourse on the State of the Jews of Venice*, eds. G. Veltri and A. Lissa, De Gruyter, Berlin 2019.

20 _ S. Luzzatto, *Socrates, Or On Human Knowledg*e, eds. G. Veltri and M. Torbidoni, De Gruyter, Berlin 2019.

21 _ On this topic cf. M. Torbidoni, *What Does* philosopher à l'antique *Mean to Simone Luzzatto*? in S. Luzzatto, *Socrates*, cit., pp. 530-541.

22 _ J. Brown, *New Heavens and new Earth. The Jewish Reception of Copernican Thought*, Oxford University Press, New York 2013, p. 78.

23 _ I. Barzilay, op. cit., p. 93.

24 _ Ivi, pp. 307-308. See also p. 320 on this topic.

25 _ S. Luzzatto, *Discourse*, cit., p. 225.

26 _ I. Barzilay, op. cit., 178.

27 _ Samuel ha-Cohen, *Tzafnat Pa'neach*, Martinelli, Venice 1656, pp. 2v-4r. The translation is from B. Septimus, *Biblical Religion and Political Rationality in Simone Luzzatto, Maimonides and Spinoza*, in I. Twersky, B. Septimus (eds.), *Jewish Thought in the 17th Century*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Mass. 1987, pp. 399-400.

28 _ I. Barzilay, op. cit., 178.

29 _ *Ibidem*, footnote 3.

30 _ I. Barzilay, op. cit., p. 177.

31 _ S. Luzzatto, *Discourse*, cit., p. 209.

32 _ On the authority of the rabbis within Luzzatto's writing, see the essay of G. Bartolucci in this volume.

33 _ S. Luzzatto, *Socrates*, cit., p. 29.

34 _ I. Barzilay, op. cit., p. 180.
35 _ A. Shear, op. cit., p. 539.
36 _ S. Luzzatto, *Socrates*, cit., p. 161.
37 _ Ivi, p. 363.
38 _ Ivi, p. 241.
39 _ Ivi, p. 471.
40 _ Ivi, p. 307.
41 _ Ivi, pp. 479-481.
42 _ Cf. M. Torbidoni, *Il metodo del dubbio nel Socrate di Simone Luzzatto*, in G. Veltri (ed.), *Filosofo e rabbino nella Venezia del Seicento*, Aracne, Roma 2015, pp. 243-45.

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