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Hebraica veritas?
Philosophy, Scepticism, and Politics
in the *Porta Veritatis* (1634–1640)

The Text and its Arguments

This essay[1] aims to offer some theoretical and historical–philosophical insights and some reflections on the *Porta Veritatis*. As I have demonstrated elsewhere,[2] the *Porta Veritatis* was written by Benedetto Pinelli—also known (by his original Portuguese name) as Bento Pinhel, or by his Hebrew name as Jacob ben Amram, his *nom de plume*—between 1634 and 1640, when he was probably at a later stage of his life.[3]

Jacob ben Amram was a New Christian and a jurist, trained at the University of Coimbra, who taught in the first two decades of the seventeenth century in Pisa. Pisa was one of the oldest and most reputed universities in Italy, founded in 1343. Not only did Galileo Galilei first study, then teach there, from 1589–1592, but Pisa was

2 For the aspects of the research relevant to the authorship, original language, date, and codices, see my "Mysteries at the Gate of Truth: A Reappraisal of the *Porta Veritatis* (1634–1640)," *Nuova Rivista Storica* 3 (2016), forthcoming. This article, along with the present essay, anticipates some of the results of my research. I am currently working on an annotated edition of the *Porta Veritatis*, based on the Clark Library (UCLA) codex, which will be published, *si deus vult*, in 2017. Some of the themes dealt with in my introduction to this volume are anticipated in the present essay. All references in this article are to the copy of the manuscript held at Balliol College, MS 251. It is probably the oldest among the surviving codices. However, it was written by six hands, so it cannot be considered the first copy, but rather a copy of the first. All the textual problems will be addressed in the introduction to the annotated edition of the manuscript that I am preparing.
3 In this essay I will use all three names, as to be faithful to his triple identity, an identity he never denied.

also home to a vast community, a real colony of Portuguese New Christians, at least five of whom taught medicine and law.

The *Porta Veritatis* was written in Latin and, so far, four codices of it, all different from one another, are known. There are no traces of an early circulation and reception of this manuscript in continental Europe. Its first circulation and the attacks the manuscript drew upon itself took place in England, and later on, to a lesser extent, in Holland. In Italy, where the work was conceived and written, the impact was equal to zero.

However, the impact of the *Porta Veritatis* in England was initially very strong. The manuscript, brought to England by Menasseh ben Israel in his 'mission' to plead for the readmission of the Jews to England, haunted the nights and days of a number of Anglican, Calvinist, and neo-Platonic writers, as far as we know. It is however possible that its readership was larger and that some of its readers did not express any opinion of this 'burning' text.

The last owner of this copy, Bishop Richard Kidder (1633–1703), before bequeathing the manuscript to Balliol College library, left a note on the front cover that hinted at the dangers present in the text for any Christian approaching it without due instruction. It is worth quoting the note in full, for it is very telling about a number of issues, biases, and attitudes related to the Jews at that time, and not only in England:

> This Manuscript was found in the Library of the very learned Ralph Cudworth D.D. Thence it came into the hands of my learned friend P. Allix D.D. of whom I bought it. I have heard Dr. Cudworth say that he bought of M. Ben Israel a manuscript for 10 pounds, and I believe this to be the same. It hath been thought that M. Ben Israel was the author of it. I cannot affirm that to be so. But I can affirm that I take it to be the greatest effort against Christianity that I ever saw in any language whatsoever. And for that reason I do declare that it is my will that it be not sold to any private person for any price how great so ever. Lest by that means it should be printed, without an answer to the prejudice of Christianity. I rather will that it should be burnt, or given to some public library upon sufficient caution that it be never lent out of the said library, nor transcribed, but locked up by itself and consulted upon occasion in the Library by such only as shall be allowed by the owners of the said library. May 9. 1700. Richard Bath and Wells.[4]

Such a warning was written in or around 1700. However, only a few years later, Jacques Basnage, in his *Historie des Juifs*, published in French in 1706 and in English in 1708, presented a completely different image of the *Porta Veritatis*, removing any sort of 'danger' from the manuscript and disarming rather than confuting some (among many) of its anti-Christian arguments in just a few lines.[5] Basnage referred explicitly to Richard Kidder:

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4 This note is found at the beginning of the Balliol codex (MS 251). From now on, all references to the *Porta Veritatis* in this essay will be to the Balliol codex.

5 See Jacques Basnage, *The History of the Jews, from Jesus Christ to the Present Time: Containing their Antiquities, their Religion, their Rites, the Dispersion of the Ten Tribes in the East, and the Persecutions this Nation has Suffer'd in the West. Being a Supplement and Continuation of the History of Josephus. Written in French by Mr. Basnage. Translated into English by Tho. Taylor, A.M* (London: printed for J. Beaver and B. Lintot in Fleet street, R. Knaplock in St. Paul's Church-Yard, J. Sprint in Little Brittain,

The Rabbis, who govern the synagogue, will not permit any correspondence with the Christians about religion. Dr Kidder (author of the Demonstration of the Messiah) offered a Conference to the Cacam of London,[6] to convince a young Maid, who had already some knowledge of the Truth: the Cacam not only refused, but the Maid was shut up by her Parents, and obliged to stifle the seeds of Truth she had received [...].

XXII. The Bishop, who was taken away by a sad and dreadful accident (he was crushed under the ruins of the Episcopal Palace, in a storm which happened in 1703), has confuted the Gate of Truth, written by Jacob the son of Amram. This author, who was unknown to Bartolocci, lived in the last century (An. 1634) and his work continues in manuscript. Bp. Kidder was afraid it would stagger those who read it, and therefore he answered it. In the mean time [*sic*] Jacob's objections are not considerable. He accused Jesus Christ of being deceived, by saying that David and his companions ate the Shew-Bread, which is false, since he was alone. He maintains, that the Purification of the Virgin contradicts the Immaculate Conception of the Mother and the Son; that the licence given the Devils to precipitate the Swine into the sea[7] is in contrary to Charity since Private Persons lost their herds by it: that Christ did not eat the Paschal Lamb as the Law ordained; that to Saint Mathew, Saint Peter must have renounced his Master before the cock crew, and according to Saint Mark, he did not do it till the second crowing of the Cock; Jesus promised to go before his disciple into Galilee, and yet he did not do it, and, on the contrary, he promised his Disciples not to send them his Spirit till after his Ascension, tho' they had received it before. If these objections breed any doubt of the Truth of the Christian Religion, which the Jewish Doctor designed to shake, a Man may recur to Dr Kidder's preface, who confutes them before he demonstrates Jesus Christ to be the Messiah as long expected.[8]

On the eve of the Enlightenment, the dangers related to a typically Baroque anti-Christian polemic were no longer evident or present, or at least they were not perceived as such. Dismissed as inoffensive by Basnage, but terribly feared by Kidder, the *Porta*, torn between these two extremes, is well worth a comprehensive reappraisal. When Basnage wrote his work, the tensions that shattered England and continental Europe in the Baroque era had only recently faded, and the early Enlightenment was powerfully entering the scene, with the biblical criticism of Richard Simon, Spinoza, and Georges-Louis Leclerc, among others. This was the time of the birth of the 'radical Enlightenment'. The scholars who worked extensively on the 'radical Enlightenment', from Martin Mulsow to Jonathan Israel, amply demonstrated that works such as the *Porta Veritatis* might still be considered 'dangerous', but that they were much more acceptable than in the Baroque era.[9]

A. Bell, R. Smith, and J. Round in Cornhill, 1708). For an enlightening study of Basnage see Jonathan M. Elukin, "Jacques Basnage and the History of the Jews: Anti-Catholic Polemic and Historical Allegory in the Republic of Letters," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 53.4 (1992): 603–630.

6 The episode is rather obscure: it is not clear whether it actually happened.

7 On the importance of this interpretation, related to the miracle of the swine, see the "Conclusions' of the present essay, *infra*.

8 Basnage, *The History of the Jews*, 681.

9 See in particular Martin Mulsow, *Enlightenment Underground: Radical Germany, 1680–1720* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2015).

To Basnage, arguments like those summarised in the above text seemed to belong to polemics and controversies that had been quenched for some time. The Jews had been 'informally' and later formally readmitted to England, and John Toland had even written a plea for their naturalisation, a legal step (taken only much later) well beyond simple toleration and acceptance.[10] Works like the *Porta* belong to a spiritual atmosphere typical of the Baroque and alien to the early Enlightenment. The argument of the infringement of private property is probably the only 'actual' argument among those recalled by Basnage, and seems to be quite original. This might have been, however, the only one to draw attention in the history of the reception of the work. Basnage's short and dismissive mention of the text sealed the fate of the *Porta* for good. When it was written, however, it was clearly a dangerous and potentially disruptive text. It had its last moment of glory when it (in the Clark codex) was exhibited at the Whitechapel Art Gallery, among the many items on display in the exhibition of 'Jewish Arts and Antiquities,' which lasted from November 7 to December 16, 1906, visited by the staggering figure of 150,000 people.[11] The fact that as late as 1906 a work like the *Porta* could be displayed, among many others, in an exhibition meant for the general public is very revealing, at least of the fact that the impact of the *Porta* lasted well beyond the second half of the seventeenth century.[12]

In this essay, I will attempt to identify the philosophical, sceptical, and finally the political elements that the manuscript presents, without addressing the core of its contents, which are mainly theological and based on the Old Testament, the Talmud, and occasionally the Kabbalah. If there is a clandestine text where the principle of *philosophica ancilla theologiae* ('philosophy is/must be the servant of theology') is truly applicable, this is certainly the *Porta*, for philosophical references are few, but not absent.[13]

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10 I personally first became interested into the *Porta Veritatis* (while working on the British Library Codex, quite similar to that in Balliol and to the fourth (and so far, the last) in the Royal Library in Amsterdam) when preparing the Italian edition of the work of John Toland, the *Reasons for Naturalizing the Jews in Great Britain and Ireland*, published in 1714. See John Toland, *Ragioni per naturalizzare gli ebrei in Gran Bretagna e Irlanda (1714)*, ed. Paolo Bernardini, translated into Italian by L. Orsi (Florence: La Giuntina, 1998): 246.

11 On this exhibition, see Peter Gross, *Representations of Jews and Jewishness in English painting, 1887–1914* (Ph.D. thesis, University of Leeds, 2004), *passim*. On the general theme of Jewish images and depictions, and the relevant iconology, see Richard Cohen, *Jewish Icons* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998).

12 For evidence of quoting the text in the eighteenth century, see my "Mysteries at the Gate of Truth: A Reappraisal of the *Porta Veritatis* (1634–1640)," *Nuova Rivista Storica* 3 (2016), forthcoming. Basically, the text became an exegetical work among many others, and was completely deprived, by those who quoted it, of any 'polemical', 'anti-Christian' meaning.

13 It is worth noting that the same title *Porta Veritatis* indicates more a methodology, or an 'access to the truth', than a real presentation of the 'truth'. From this point of view, the emphasis is on the 'method' rather than on its results. On the one hand, this fits into the late Renaissance and Baroque attitudes to philosophical and theological enquiries. On the other hand, it also terminologically close

The first and principal question regards the use of philosophy within a theological treatise. Secondly, I will discuss the use of sceptical tools and expressions, along with arguments and conceptual strategies more or less relevant to scepticism. Thirdly and finally, I will examine the political context, and the relevant political positions taken by the author, in a manuscript of largely polemical-theological and religious contents.

In principle, within a theological and polemical treatise, philosophical arguments might be entirely excluded. If we take the *Porta Veritatis*, written by a man who was trained as a legal scholar and who taught canon law at the University of Pisa, its main arguments fall within an apparently merely theological framework. They are exposed at the end of the long *Prologus*, firstly in eight points, then immediately afterwards condensed into three main arguments:

1. Si ostendimus, Deum opt. Max. ita esse bonum, ut non recipiat multiplicationem, et distinctionem personarum.[14]
2. Praecepto morali negativo prohibuisse sui ipsius imaginem, aut sculptam similitudinem.[15]
3. Dei legem in Sinai datam Judaeis, per manus Moysis, prefortissimam, iustificatam in se, et iustificatam esse, immutatam, et immutabilem, et consequenter continuo observandam, dum mundus, et Israel persisterint.[16]
4. Sabbati sacrosanctum Diem in sui rigurosa custodia nunc esse debere; sicut et retro sempre, et in posterum.[17]
5. Sacrificiorum sacras leges extare, et extituras.[18]
6. Populum Dei (Judaeos) non fuisse mutatum, nec mutandum: et consequenter eius loco alium non suffectum.[19]
7. Messiam Judaeis a Deo promissum non adhuc venisse.[20]
8. Debere esse purum homine ex semino virili Davidis Regis.[21]

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to other works coming from Jewish environments, such as the *Puerta del ciel* by Abraham Cohen de Herrera (1570–1635), recently published with an Italian translation: *La Porta del Cielo: Prima edizione italiana con testo spagnolo in appendice*, ed. G. Saccaro (Vicenza: Neri Pozza, 2015). It is probable that the two more-or-less contemporaries met in Portugal or in Italy. The analogies between the two works are several; however, de Herrera's work is mainly devoted to Kabbalah, which occupies only a minor space in the *Porta Veritatis*.

14 'If we demonstrate that God, Supreme and Excellent, does not accept duplications, and division into more than one person, then [etc.].' (all translations, unless stated otherwise, are my own)

15 'By force of a negative moral obligation, He prohibited any image of Himself, or any duplication in sculptures.'

16 'The Law given by God on Mount Sinai to the Jews through Moses is extremely perfect, justified in itself, and, in general, unchanged, immutable, and therefore to be observed and respected forever, until the end of the world, and of the people of Israel.'

17 'The day of Shabbat is sacred to God, and has been preserved and has to be preserved by Him, as for the past, as well as for the future.'

18 'The laws prescribing sacrifices are sacred, and are present and will be always present in the future.'

19 'The Chosen People, the Jews, have never changed, nor will change; as a consequence of that, it is not possible that a new people could replace it.'

20 'The Messiah, promised by God to the Jews, has still to come.'

After Jacob ben Amram displays his *themata probanda* in this way, he immediately goes on to describe the three sections of the book, sections that also summarise the eight arguments quoted above:

1. *Primus.* De simplicissima, et omnino immultiblicabili unitate Dei; reiecta scilicet distinctione personarum.[22]
2. *Secundus.* De perpetua duratione legis Mosayce; et aeterna electione populi Israel, nempe Iudaeorum.[23]
3. *Tertius.* De unico, futuro adventu Messiae; puri hominis de virile semine Dadivis.[24]

As is immediately clear, Jacob ben Amram is writing within a solid, long-lasting tradition of Jewish apologetics. The human nature of the Messiah, as well as his future coming, are among the tenets of Judaism, along with the denegation of the Trinity and the perpetuity of the validity of Mosaic Law, conferred upon the Chosen People. There are the three main theses which, in a very long treatise, and with a solid and vast array of sources and arguments, ben Amram aims to prove. He does so by referring to interpretations of the Holy Scriptures belonging to the Rabbinic and Talmudic traditions, with a certain space left for Kabbalah as well. His training as a jurist, as we will see, is evident from the very structure of the work: 1100 paragraphs, one following the other, with the 'Christian thesis' followed by the 'Jewish antithesis', and a synthesis favorable to the Jewish interpretation. He is writing, however, in a period—the date of composition is from 1634 to 1640—in which the secular learning, philosophy, including its sceptical elements, reinforced by the publication of Sextus in 1621,[25] could not be avoided in the construction of a sophisticated anti-Christian intellectual weapon. Traditional exegesis was no longer considered the only tool for imposing the truth, even though it is still the tool most used by Jacob ben Amram, and the *sensus literalis sacrorum eloquiorum* (f. 4r) is often corrected by referring to 'tropological' (moral), allegorical, and metaphorical as well as symbolic meanings and

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21 'He has to be of pure semen of Man, the same semen of King David. My translation tries to render more explicit the author's Latin. As a jurist, he wrote in a very concise style that has to be rendered in longer sentences in order to better understand the full meaning of the words.'

22 'First: the unity of God is extremely simple, and for no reason can He be multiplied: as a consequence, we refuse the distinction of God in three persons, or the Trinity.'

23 'Second: the Laws of Moses have a perpetual duration; accordingly, the Jews are to be considered as perpetually chosen, or elected.'

24 'Third: there will be one single, forthcoming advent of the Messiah. He will be of the masculine semen of David.'

25 Sextus Empiricus, *Sextou Empeirikou Ta sozomena. Sexti Empirici opera quae extant. Magno ingenii acumine scripti, Pyrrhoniarum Hypotyposeon libri 3. Quibus in tres philosophiae partes acerrimè inquiritur, Henrico Stephano interprete: Aduersus mathematicos, hoc est, eos qui disciplinas profitentur, libri 10. Gentiano Herveto Aurelio interprete, graecè nunc primùm editi. Adiungere visum est Pyrrhonis Eliensis philosophi vitam: nec non Claudii Galeni Pergameni de Optimo docendi genere librum, quo aduersus academicos pyrrhoniosque disputant*, Coloniae Allobrogum: sumptibus Petri & Jacobi Chouet, 1621. There is no evidence that Jacob ben Amram read this edition of Sextus.

interpretations. Once more, however, we are in the field of theological tradition, a long tradition which never excluded the extensive use of philosophical and logical arguments, from the *Sefer ha-Berit* to the *Milḥamot ha-Šem.*

The Use of Philosophy

Philosophy is a constant, albeit discrete, presence in the *Porta Veritatis.* When the Christian and the Jewish interpretations of certain biblical passages or themes are in conflict, philosophy offers help to Jacob ben Amram; it is a use *aus Not* ('out of necessity') in an argumentative sequence that follows the rules of logic and consequence above all. Philosophy appears thus in several forms. In dealing with the idea of Trinity, of course, logic is not only called upon as in the case of the Aristotelian principle of contradiction, A equals A and cannot be at the same time B (a typical logical anti-Trinitarian argument); but even when theologians and common Christians speak of the Trinity with reference to animal or plant constitution, 'color, caro, semen' for animals or 'stamina, caro, spina' for plants, this way of reasoning is not valid, since the elements that make an up animal, or a plant, are much more than three, at least four, so the analogy with the natural world should rather hint at a *quaternitas*, a concept dear to Jacob ben Amram and also to some Christian heretics.

The attitude of conferring the possibility of solving problems that cannot be solved by *supremus intellectus* (f. 46v) on the senses is a case of *infelicitas humana* for Jacob ben Amram. In a more sophisticated way, he debunks another of the 'analogies' that should confer validity upon the doctrine of Trinity. For instance, if the soul is one, but its powers are three, *memoria, intellectus, et voluntas*, this does not justify, as a philosophical argument, the metaphysical mystery of the Trinity: first of all, they do not have equal value, and are three different and hierarchically different *potentiae*; secondly, they are *in anima* in the way they are *in subjecto*, where they act in different way. Here, as usual, Jacob ben Amram uses a Christian author, in this case the philosopher Giovanni Battista Rossi,[26] against other Christian authors: his *bête noir*, Tomás de Jesús,[27] and the Jesuit Martin Be-

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26 Giovanni Battista Rossi, *Commentaria et quæstiones in vniuersam Aristotelis metaphysicam. Authore r.d. Io. Baptista Rubeo Ianuense, sacræ familiæ Somaschensium professo & alumno. Nun primum in lucem edita. Cum indice rerum notabilium, & singulorum librorum argumentii*, Venetiis : apud Ioannem Guerilium, 1618. Little else is known by this Genoese scholar, who was active in the first two decades of the seventeenth century.

27 Tomás de Jesús (1569–1627), *Thesaurus sapientiae diuinae, in gentium omnium salute procuranda. Schismaticorum, haereticorum, Iudaeorum, Sarracenorum, caeterorumque infidelium errores demonstrans. Impiissimarum sectarum, maxime Orientalium, ritus ad historiae fidem 12. libris enarrans, errores ad veritatis lucem confutans. Auctore r.p. Thoma à Iesu Bratiensi Hispano, Ordinis carmelitarum discalceatorum in Belgio superiore*, Antuerpiae: sumptibus viduae & haeredum Petri Belleri, sub scuto Burgundiae, 1613.

canus, probably the most important author among ben Amram's contemporary sources.[28]

The section on the Trinity in terms of contents and themes is the most relevant to philosophical (and not dogmatic and theological) discussions, some of them quite interesting: can, for instance, Christ and the Holy Spirit be of 'irrational nature' (*naturae irrationali*)? Can God create a son 'Bucephalus' (a hidden reference to John Wycliffe's well-known and fiercely heretical doctrine)? Well, in principle, yes, but what is potentially possible is *impium, blasphemum et spurium*. Jacob ben Amram concludes his reasoning with an *abyssum abyssum invocat* that closes the paragraph rather abruptly. The same method of reasoning is applied to the creation of man: if he was made *ad imaginem et similitudinem* of God, should he not be himself 'Trinitarian', or rather, tripartite? Well, that is not possible, given the imbalance between the three *animae* of man: 'vegetative', 'sensitive', *rationalis*, a classic Aristotelian argument; for, among other things, the similitude of God and Man is only *in anima*: *in qua sola viditur Dei imago et similitudo* (f. 30v). The *anima sensitiva* and the *anima vegetativa* have their existence *ex vi materia*, *et omnino materiales sunt*, so that *cum ipsa finiuntur, quibus personis tribuarentur*? At this point, Jacob ben Amram begins a long confutation ('Art. Primi secunda pars') of the visual representation(s) of God.

By addressing the problem of the *anima*, Jacob ben Amram touches upon one of the most burning issues of Renaissance and Baroque philosophy. Is he in favour of the mortality of souls, like Uriel Acosta? Not quite. But ben Amram is at least largely aware of all the debates related to the soul of the late Renaissance, from Pierre d'Ailly (Anellus) to Pedro Martinez de Brea.[29]

When dealing with the unicity of God, Jacob ben Amram uses all possible arguments, both philosophical and theological, to affirm the *reductio ad unum* and to deny any validity of the 'mystery' of the Trinity (later, he debunks other Christian 'mysteries', including those related to the Virgin Mary). Judaism, as would be made clear in the second half of the century, and later in the age of the Enlightenment, is a good instrument for free thinking, and for his uses of solid, 'rational' arguments against Christianity, ben Amram is a perfect representative of this tendency. Belief in the Trinity is idolatry, is paganism, is a potentially infinite multiplication of the Gods: referring to Giovanni Botero[30]—once again a Jesuit, for Jesuits were the

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28 Martinus Becanus (1563–1624), *R.P. Martini Becani Societatis Iesu...Opuscula theologica siue Controuersiae fidei inter Catholicos et Haereticos huius temporis. In quibus eorundem haereticon praua dogmata & opiniones explicantur, & egregiè refelluntur*, Duaci: typis Martini Bogardi, typographi iurati, sub signo Parisiorum, 1634. His Dutch name was Martin van der Breck.

29 On this theme, see M. Sgarbi, *Profumo di immortalità. Controversie sull'anima nella filosofia volgare del Rinascimento* (Roma: Carocci, 2016).

30 Giovanni Botero (1540–1617), *Le Relationi universali di Giovanni Botero senese in tre parti, cinque volumi diuise, con tauole di geografia, & indici copiosi & particolari a ciascuno di loro: et in questa noua editione dal proprio autore accresciute, megliorate d'assai*, Bergamo: Per Comin Ventura, 1595

keenest philosophers among the Catholic religious writers, at least when they dealt with theological controversies—he mentions the plurality of the Peruvian gods, 'three hundred thousand,' and *apud Synas, sunt innumeri*. In doing this, ben Amram constantly shows the contradiction in the same Christian doctrine by setting one author against the other: how can God create a Son who is eternal, but who was born, so before his birth or conception did not exist? If for the Christians Christ has been always present, *filius semper fuit*, *ergo frusta gignitur*, why was He conceived and generated? What is *impossibile* is what is *incogitabile*. Here ben Amram uses the arguments of Francisco Vallés against Roberto Bellarmino (f. 17r).[31]

God is *solitaries*, and *incomitatus*, as is clear from the Hebrew text of the Bible, the *hebraica veritas* often opposed to the bad translations of the *Vulgata*.[32] Furthermore, many paragraphs are devoted to debunking the ideas of those Christians who claim to find evidence of the Trinity in the Kabbalah, *qui putant se altius volare (!)* (f. 42r and ff.) In this case, once again there is a danger of 'infinite' projections of God, *quae repugnant simplicissima essentia, et unitati Dei*, proved both by *vera philosophiae ratio* and by the word of God: *concludamus itaque, perfectius, beatius, convenientius, et plusquam necessarium fuisse, ut unus et solitarius in se esset Deus* (f. 46v).[33]

This text is a long refusal of every possible visual representation of God, and in general of religious elements. Once again, from Thomas Aquinas to Bellarmino, a number of Christian authorities are quoted, and pitted against one another. While Menasseh ben Israel was reconciling the Jewish textual contradictions in his work, Jacob ben Amram did the opposite with the Christian truths: he shows all the contradictions by juxtaposing several authors, in a most systematic way. It comes as no surprise that Menasseh admired this work, where his own *Conciliador* stands out as one of the most quoted and endorsed exegetical sources.[34]

At the end of the second article, on the validity of laws, Jacob ben Amram discusses the co-existence of 'philosophy' and 'theology', and the fact that both concur

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31 Francisco Vallés (1524–1592) is one of the most-quoted Christian authors in the *Porta*. A key author in the medicine of the late Renaissance, he offers a number of daring interpretations from the point of view of his rational science—medicine—of the Old and the New Testament. His *De sacra philosophia* (1587) circulated widely in Spain and Portugal, as well as in Italy, and was a watershed in Biblical exegesis. The target of Vallés' polemics is Bellarmino's *Disputationes de Controversiis Christianae Fidei adversus hujus temporis hereticos*, which had a great number of editions: Ingolstadt (1586–89), Venice (1596), Paris (1608), and after his death, Prague (1721), and Rome (1832).

32 Certainly, the use of the term *hebraica veritas* can be misleading, since it is normally used to refer to the *Vulgata*; (the *Vulgata* as *hebraica veritas*). In this essay, we refer, as ben Amram did and intended when using the term *hebraica veritas*, to the absolute validity, in conceptual, theological terms, of *hebraica veritas*, a 'Jewish Truth' as 'absolute Truth', not to be identified with the *Vulgata*.

33 'We therefore conclude that the most perfect, most felicitous, most convenient and most necessary thing is that God be one for himself and solitary.'

34 This extremely important work by Menasseh, dated 1632, is now available online in English translation, in its entirety: https://catalog.hathitrust.org/Record/009731624.

with the truth: *philosophicus theologicus*, and *theologus scripturarum*, i.e., a proper interpreter of the Holy Scriptures (f. 106r). This is made clear in the epistolary exchange at the end of the manuscript. This short and revealing correspondence makes a number of references to the role of philosophy in a theological, apologetic, or religious-controversial context. Once again, the polemical target is Thomas à Jesus. Like the Socinians—to whom a text like this should have been extremely dear—Jacob ben Amram denies the divine nature of Christ, even in a comical way: he made all the possible *naturales operations: ultra alia comedebat, bibebat, et caetera, quae ingestum cibum, et potuum sequuntur.* Christ too 'ate, drank, and did all the things a man does after having eaten and drank: He used to go to the toilet!' Thomas argues, in this case, in the most dogmatic possible way: *Responded Biatens* [Thomas à Jesus] *non esse attendendam humanae philosophiae rationem; sed recurrendum [est] ad auctoritates Sacrae Scripturae, quae dictam unionem suadent* (f. 242r).[35] Ben Amram's reply is sharp:

> Ratio quoque verae philosophiae humana attendenda est cum implicationes continet: nam quae implicant, potentiam Dei effugiunt, quin aliqualiter ostendatur. Etenim contradictoria uniri sub eadem subsistentia implicat: nihilque magis contradictorium est, quam Deitas humanitati, et contra; ita ut posito uno alterum tollatur, necesse sit (f. 242v; vd. also f. 176v: 'non homo Deus').[36]

Jacob ben Amram makes reference to one of the clearest passages in the Holy Scripture, where every possible human nature of God is denied, Num. 23:19: 'God is not human, that he should lie, not a human being, that he should change his mind. Does he speak and then not act? Does he promise and not fulfill?' (New International Version)

God is therefore fully rational, created 'reason' himself, and cannot go against His own creatures. It is clear that, from a Jewish, theistic point of view, many of the arguments of Deism and free thinking are well anticipated here. Thomas à Jesus worked with *diligentia* against the *splendorem veritatis*, turning the *tenebrae* into *lux*, and vice versa. Rationality goes along with 'literal', 'corporeal' interpretation of the Scripture, which should only rarely be integrated with other forms of interpretation, allegorical, 'tropological' (moral), and especially mystical. This is made clear several times in the 1100 paragraphs of the work. The literal, 'corporeal' interpretation of the Old Testament is made necessary by the same *simplicitas* of God:

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35 'Thomas à Jesus, of Beze, replied that we did not have to follow the reason of human philosophy, but rather, we had to refer to the authority of the Holy Script.'

36 'The human reason of the truth of philosophy has to be followed, for it also has implications: those implications refer to things that go beyond the power of God, a power that is shown in other forms. As a matter of fact, to unite in the same essence elements that are contradictory includes the utmost contradiction: the fact that God is united with humanity, and the contrary. So it is necessary for human reason that when one thing is added, another is subtracted.'

> Via Domini unica, simplex, splendens, immaculata, directa [...] quia fundatur in illa sacratissi-
> ma Lege, quae clare, sine ambagibus, laboryntis, implicationibus, contradictionibus, et impos-
> sibilibus, in Sinai lata et filiis Israel, et iis qui libere et spontanee ei aggregantur (f. 233r).[37]

This is an important passage, in which Jacob ben Amram makes clear that Judaism does not force conversions, but is open to all men and women who, in freedom and with spontaneity, decide to join the faith. The Catholic religion, and in particular its 'modern' interpreters, are full of *novationes, sophismata, argutias, et inania argumenta*, and they all want *omnibus silentium imponere* (f. 230v). Judaism seems to be a 'religion of reason': a long tradition of thought that would culminate in Spinoza and the radical Enlightenment, amongst whose involuntary forerunners ben Amram is well placed.

The Presence of Scepticism

In the spirit of his times, Jacob ben Amram often refers to methodological strategies that relate to scepticism. He is not a radical sceptic, does not question the truth of God, or of the tenets of his own religion: his is a variety of fideistic Scepticism, in the meaning conferred upon the term by the late Richard Popkin. Furthermore, ben Amram is clearly against atheism and idolatry, while he sees a sort of hierarchy in the revealed religion, with Judaism in the first place, followed by Christianity and Islam.

The function of 'doubt' is stressed more than once, from the very beginning of the work:

> Lege itaque, vel communi consensu pateat cuilibet libertas disputandi, ac praelo committendi
> de lege Moysis, immo Dei; non tum Iudaeis modo, sed inter ipsomet Christianos etiam; *non sup-*
> *ponendo, sed dubitando* [my italics], fingendo se quispiam ex animo nudum lege, et sola indu-
> tum veritatis inveniendi affectione, ut veritati locus patescat (f. 7v).[38]

The *dubitare de fide Christiana* is a philosophical-theological activity, which does not lead to a disruption of the Christian political system and relevant states: *non parumque politica Christianorum quies turbaretur* (f. 8r). Doubts are raised, interestingly, against the *fides Christiana odierna*, or *moderna* (f. 11r), *quia antica non frangebat*

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37 'The way of God is unique, simple, bright, immaculate, direct [...] for it is grounded in that most sacred Law, a law that in a clear way, without delay, labyrinths, implications, contradictions, and impossible things, was given on Mount Sinai to the children of Israel, and to those who join them freely and in a spontaneous way.'

38 'Thanks to the law, therefore, and to the common consent, therefore, the freedom to dispute, and to publish on the Law of Moses, that is, of God, may be open to whomever. Not only to the Jews, but also to the Christians. Not by suppositions, but by doubts, having in mind the letter of the law, and moved only by the passion of finding the truth, so that the place for the truth could become open and clear.'

legem Moysis (*ibidem*). So, the doubts follow an argument of impossibility (*argumentum ab impossibilitate*), the *physica repugnantia*, i.e. what goes against the laws of nature, and the *imperfectio in dicta fide*.

The fact that, according to the Church Fathers, the Apostles did not 'dispute' in matters of faith only consolidated a dogmatic faith, which is against the very nature, interest, and spirit of Christianity itself. The conclusion is that *posse omnes et debere gentem Christianam [...] disceptare, et indagare, diligentissime, liberrime*, in particular of the perpetuity and perfection of the Law of Moses, which is also binding for them (f. 8v). The great advantage of Judaism over Christianity is therefore its *conformitas*, while a strong doubt, *suspicion*, is cast upon the *difformitas* of the Gospels and their later interpretations: *difformitas scripturarum in divinis suspecta* (f. 248r).

Scepticism, therefore, in a 'loose' form far away from Sextus' technicalities, is turned here into a tool for debunking a faith which expresses its hatred against Judaism through doctrines which are not animated and inspired by the *zelo veritatis*, but rather by *odio in Judaeos, belluino* (so not human) and *immani*; those who practice that hatred do so *tenebras quarere, ac subterfugia*. Why then, *Porta Veritatis*? Why such a title?:

> Quia solidam veritatem quis accepit non potest, nisi praevia completa cognitione veritatis simplicissima Dei, et legis sacrae, electisque Populi. Vel *Compendiaria via ad beatitudinem*, quia brevi studio [...] ad veram felicitatem pervenitur.[39]

The beatitude is not only a celestial beatitude, but also a *felicitas* ('happiness') in this world. The link between exact knowledge, perfect morality, and finally individual happiness is the centre of the *Porta Veritatis*.

Obviously, it is not simple reasoning, or scepticism, to bring the truth to light: it is rather a systematic reference to the 'fonts', *in fontibus quaerere et invenire veritatem, et si quid in his dubium, aut obscurum recipiatur, ad fontes reducere, indeque hauxire verum sensum*, the 'true meaning, i.e. the true interpretation.' To go directly to the sources, and dig out of them the 'real meaning': this is the task ben Amram set for himself, and for the true lover of the Truth.

For some questions, such as those related to the infinity of world, and the relations of this infinite with a correlative infinite action of God—for God could not have been *otiosus*–Jacob ben Amram arrives, unable to find a solid conclusion, at a sort of 'suspension of judgement,' referring to authors such Leo Hebraeus (f. 44r), who discuss *philosophice* the topic:

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39 'For it is not possible for someone to obtain the solid truth, unless this person obtained beforehand the complete and very simple truth of God, and of the sacred Law, and of the Chosen People as well. A compendium for beatitude, for with a short study [...] one reaches the true happiness.'

> Nobis autem (quibus non licet disputare de iis, quae praecedunt mundi creationem) sufficit di-cere, Deum nostrum non produxisse alterum eundem Deum; non tamen fuisse otiosum: et ipse solus fecit suas ab aeterno operationes, nec alio cogit ulla efficax ratiocinatio, seu implicatio.[40]

Here there is a reference, once again, to Francisco Vallés, whose *De sacra philosophia* (I, 17) clearly says that God was not idle, but that at the same time all He did was to consider that it was done by an Entity *sibi sufficientissimus erat, et est*. The *efficax ratiocination*, a reference to Thomas Aquinas, is a key concept in this work. It relates to a method of argumentation that should answer precise technical problems in an 'efficient' and not merely speculative way.

Other sceptical elements are present in the work, such as the use of *paradoxa*, when referring, for instance, to the famous novel of Giovanni Boccaccio (f. 99r), where Abraam Giudeo converts to Christianity after having seen the corruption of the Catholic Church in Rome, and having realised that Christianity, in spite of this, is a growing and universal religion (an argument, obviously, very dear to the Protestants, who obviously read this work by Boccaccio through their own lenses).[41]

Similarly, Jacob ben Amram more than once uses arguments from relativism (if Christianity is so big, why are there civilisations, such as the Chinese and the Islamic, which are even bigger and not affected by Christianity at all?), and refers more than once to the *consensus omnium* to judge an argument. He is able to use, within a strictly theological, apologetic, and anti-Christian work, a number of extra-theological sources, including Giovanni Boccaccio—certainly not a surprise for a Jew living for decades in Tuscany—Botero, and other authors who mainly dealt with extra-theological themes.

Finally, the *Porta Veritatis* contain long sections devoted to chronology and Jewish history. The systematic debunking of Christian chronology is an aspect of this work that should be addressed in a separate essay, given its importance and the amount of fascinating arguments used by ben Amram.

The Political Dimension of the Text

The *Porta Veritatis* was written at a very crucial moment in the history of the Jewish diaspora. While in England there were discussions about whether to officially readmit the Jews into the country, discussions which led to the inconclusive Whitehall Conference of 1655, in Italy the situation was critical. Simone Luzzatto published

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40 'To us therefore—to whom it is not licit to dispute of what preceded the creation of the world—it is enough to say that our God did not produce another God; at the same time, He was not idle; and He did what He does during eternity, and there is no other efficient reasoning, or implication from that.'
41 There are many works dealing on the tradition of Boccaccio in Protestant countries. Among the most recent, see Herbert G. Wright, *Boccaccio in England from Chaucer to Tennyson* (London: Bloomsbury, 2014).

his *Discorso* in 1638, for the Jews of Venice, for a number of reasons, might have expelled from the Ghetto, erected in 1516. The Inquisition burnt a Portuguese Marrano at the stake in Rome in 1640. All these signs and events indicated dire times for the Jews. The situation got worse all over Europe when the Ottoman Empire began its attacks to Europe, and Vienna was put under siege in 1683.

Even in tolerant and open societies, like the Grand Duchy of Florence, the growing importance acquired by the Jews of Leghorn in trade and society after the 'open-gates' decrees of Ferdinand I in 1591 and 1593 (an importance matched, at the academic level, by the number of New Christians who were offered top positions in Pisa) started to provoke envy and threats in the local society. Europe was struck by the Thirty Years War and by the plague, and the position of the Jews, accused of voluntarily spreading the plague and of having commercial interests in the war economy, was not an easy one. For this reason, the *Porta Veritatis*, from its very beginning up until its end, in a dense theological, doctrinal, exegetical narrative, intersperses several political references:

> Quapropter vos Caesares, Reges, Duces, principes, magnates ac illustres viri, quibus subditorum cura incumbit (ad Vos namque praesertim dirigitur praefatio ista) rogatos velim, ut sicut sub vestra pia umbra protegitis Judaeos (non-nulli [sic] vestrum veluti mitissimi parentes, potius quam Domini), ita et Iudaeorum causam, ac legem libere disquiri, ac palam, permittatis. Non enim imperium, aut dominium vestrum (quod omne a Deo est) propterea corruet; quin immo securius fulcietur (f. 7r).[42]

Interestingly, Jacob ben Amram explicitly states that this 'preface' is generally directed to the political authorities. The presence of Jews, and the freedom granted to them to openly discuss their faith, does not constitute a risk for the political powers. The new religious scenario for Christianity in Europe, where there are plenty of denominations, mostly freely discussing matters of faith, *Papista, Lutheranus, Calvinista, Protestans, Reformatus*, is the breach that should also allow the Jews to enter the building and express their own thoughts. This is a new situation, ben Amram clearly admits. We are in a *nova fides* dimension. Interestingly, to prove the variety of faiths, ben Amram does not refer to contemporary sources, but rather to Isidore of Seville. His *Etimologiae* contains not only a long list of Christian heresies, but also a short list of Jewish heresies (8:5). Already by the ninth century, when Isidore wrote the book, Christianity was divided into a number of sects.[43]

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42 'For this reason, you, Caesars, and Kings and Dukes, princes and wealthy men and illustrious persons, upon whom the care of the subjects is conferred (the present preface is meant for you): I ask you to protect under your pious shadow the Jews—and be at least some of you like fathers more than Lords—and to let all the discussions and debates on the law and the cause of the Jews be set free. This does not corrupt your power and domination (which by the way comes from God), but, on the contrary, it will shine more securely than before.'

43 Sunt et aliae haereses sine auctore et sine nominibus: ex quibus aliae triformem putant esse Deum: aliae Christi divinitatem passibilem dicunt: aliae Christi de Patre nativitati initium temporis

Jacob ben Amram quotes a number of historical instance of kings and queens who were either in favor of or against the Jews, culminating in the fatal year 5252, i.e. 1492, which saw the expulsion of the Jews from Spain (and later from Portugal in 1497). It is quite different from the situation with a king, Alphons (1416–1454), whom ben Amram praises for what he did for the Jews, including from a legal point of view, and calls *pius, sapiens, vere Catholicus, non tamen catolicus vocitatus est* (f. 7v). He was indeed a true Catholic, in the sense of a true universalist, friend, and tolerant of all the denominations.

Furthermore, Jacob ben Amram quotes the *Summus quoque Pontifex, simul ut purpurea Societas*, bishops and cardinal, *Judaeis favent, adiuvant, et protegunt sub sua ditione*, they help and protect the Jews. Finally, ben Amram cites Venice and the other Italian republics: *Iudaeis etiam favent, ac protegunt sub se Serenissimae Reipublicae, ac serenissimi Principes Itali; nec non alii complures exteri* (f. 7v). Not only the Italian principalities, first and foremost Venice, protect and help the Jews, but also a number of Princes outside of Italy do the same. The reference to Tacitus, which is presented later, is of extreme importance. With the *ratio status* theories of the late sixteenth and early seventeenth century, political Tacitism took root in Europe, and Tacitus was far from being a friend of the Jews, as is well known. For this reason, ben Amram debunks Tacitus' views of the Jews. Anti-Semitic arguments seem to be *non subsistentes in naturali, morali, aut philosophica ratione* (f. 9v). The same Roman nation, furthermore, was, like that of the 'Chinese', full of idolatry, *idolis dedita*, and only later accepted Christianity, thanks to its antiquity, miracles, martyrs, and, once again, thanks to the *consensus populorum* (f. 10r).

The coincidence of the moral and natural laws in Moses's legislation, the indifference in terms of which kind of government is the best, and the praise of free *disputatio*, of free thinking (not to be confused with atheism or idolatry), together with the Jewish origins of Christianity, are more than once evoked as the basis for religious tolerance. This makes the *Porta Veritatis* a solid product of its times, where the skills of the jurist and lawyer surface more than once. In the text, there are many references to the relationships that should be created among the citizens, and between citizens and their king, which mainly refer to the present enjoyment of this life in a pact of mutual respect rather than to the 'promise' of the redemption

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dant: aliae liberationem hominum apud inferos factam Christi descensione non credunt: aliae animam imaginem Dei negant: aliae animas converti in daemones et in quacumque animalia existimant: aliae de mundi statu dissentiunt: aliae innumerabiles mundos opinantur: aliae aquam Deo coaeternam faciunt: aliae nudis pedibus ambulant …(f. 70r). 'There are also some heresies without authors and names; some of them think God has three forms. Others admit the divinity of Christ as transitory; others think that Christ is as eternal as God; others think that the liberation of men did not occur when Christ went to Hell; others deny that the soul is the image of God; others think that souls turn into demons, and exist in every sort of animal; others have different opinions on the state of the world; others think that the number of worlds is infinite; others think that water is co-eternal with God; others walk with bare feet [etc.].'

of sins and enjoyment of Paradise in the next life. The (relatively) mundane character of Judaism in terms of its political allegiance with the present power is reinstated:

> Si Deus noster promittere remissionem peccatorum, et fruitionem spiritualium in caelo [...] Quis libere non irrideret? Sicut irrident Romanorum Pontificum indulgentias, ac remissiones peccatorum, etiam illi, qui Christiani cum sint, Papistae non sunt (f. 72r).[44]

Here Jacob ben Amram refers to two rather interesting figures in the political thought of that time, Joannes Marquez, a relatively minor figure who wrote *De gubernatore christiano*, and died in 1621, and, once again, to the Jesuit Martin Becanus. The God of Israel promises temporal goods: *Deus noster [...] optime noscere corda hominum, quae ipse efformavit, bona temporalia latius promisit, qua videri et tangi possunt* (f. 72r). The Jewish God, knowing the souls and hearts of His people, the people He himself created, promised very concrete goods, on earth and not in heaven. The *bona temporalia* are here the basis for a *fiducia circa spiritualia*, which is otherwise difficult to obtain. The attention towards earthly goods, private property, and life in this world is not only typical of a rich New Christian, like ben Amram was, but also of someone who, as a jurist, had constantly to work in defence of individual property and in mundane affairs.

Conclusions

With its rationalistic approach to religion, the *Porta Veritatis* belongs to those texts which paved the way, among 'sceptics, millenarians, and Jews' (and those who shared all these belongings, and maybe more) to the later period of Spinozism, rationalism, and critical exegesis.[45] Certainly, it is a text where the truth of Revelation is not challenged, and therefore it belongs to a long-lasting, Maimonidean tradition of Jewish rationalism, within the context of traditional Jewish faith. Its criticism of the New Testament in particular offers interesting approaches that include attitudes typical of a jurist, such as the defence of private property when dealing with Mark 5:12 (f. 216r). It gives, as already noted, a fascinating interpretation of the miracle of the pigs, told in all the synoptic Gospels, with minor variations. The argument by Jacob ben Amram is very innovative, even within the tradition of anti-Christian works. The pigs were *sub domino et pastore*, in the actual possession and full property of an individual, who, therefore, must have suffered major economic damage. While Jesus had probably the power to perform such a miracle, the fact that it im-

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44 'If our God promised the remittance of the sins and the enjoyment of spiritual goods only in Heaven, who would not be free to laugh at us? For this reason, even those who are Christians, but are not Papists, laugh at the remittances of sins given by the indulgences issued by the Roman Popes.'
45 Here I am referring to the groundbreaking work by David S. Katz and Jonathan I. Israel, *Sceptics, Millenarians, and Jews* (Leiden and New York: Brill, 1990).

plied a lack of respect for private property makes the possibility of it actually having happened very dubious. Certainly, as Bishop Kidder made clear in his reply, were the pigs not 'filthy animals', meaning that whoever was their owner was himself outside the law? But was this true among the Gadarenes? Did they really consider pigs 'filthy animals?' Why then they were breeding and take care of them?

Jacob ben Amram offers elegant, textually accurate interpretations of the Bible. He is an enemy of 'obscurity', and more than once says that *verba enim obscura facile contorquentur* (f. 35v). At the same time, the 'natural' and 'rational' meaning of the Old Testament, and the coincidence of reason, nature, and the divine precepts of Moses, is not always self-evident. Like in the case of Shabbat, it is a norm that is not rational, or subject to natural explanations: it is good, for it is a precept; and the contrary is not true (f. 59v): *Sabbatum non est praeceptum, quod simpliciter, et naturaliter, bonum est, sed bonum, quia praeceptum est, cum alius dies possit cultui divino dicari*. At the same time, the cult of Shabbat, even if this is a prerogative given to the Jews by God, does not go against any universal law of morality: *ratio moralis, qua universalis et communis omnibus est* (f. 60v). Jacob ben Amram is certainly using a large number of rational arguments, but reason is always, or almost always, combined with authority. Like in the case of the immutability and perfection of the Laws—including that of observing Shabbat—given to Moses by God, *evidenti ratione, et autoritati probatur* (f. 63r). The perfection of the Law is such that any possible contingency and variation is included in the text, and whatever is not in the text can analogically or by means of other arguments be brought under the interpretative umbrella of the Law itself, including *mutatio momentanea*, and *quae per aliqua particulari causa sit* (f. 88r).

The combination of 'reason' and 'authority' is evident all over the text. After all, this is the work of a man skilled in law, and in particular in canon law, which is evident in the structure and in the arguments of the treatise, concluding with a most impressive alphabetical index of the themes (ff. 246r–256r).

Jacob ben Amram, aka Benedetto Pinelli, aka Bento Pinhel, wanted to leave a monumental anti-Christian, pro-Jewish work, using a concise style, typical of a legal scholar, and an incredible amount of sources that included Spanish, Portuguese, and Italian scholars. He chose Latin as he probably had a limited command of Hebrew, and did not want to write in Spanish or Portuguese so as to reach a broader audience. At the same time, he probably did not have a strong command of Italian, for his classes in Pisa were, as was common at that time, all in Latin.

Did the extreme rationalism of such works pave the way for materialism and atheism? This has been a key question for scholars for a long time. Certainly, he was not an atheist, nor a materialist. Simply put, he denied the obscurity and the fascination for 'mysteries' of Christian exegesis. But are the same existence of God, and the ways He created the world, not the 'supreme mysteries', even though narrated in the plain Hebrew of the Bible? From this kind of scepticism to atheism, there is indeed a long way. Can we however trace, by approaching *ex novo* texts of this kind, the unhappy turn in Judaism, which eventually brought to nineteenth-cen-

tury 'religious atheism'? If Catholicism is the religion of 'mysteries', it is the same meaning of the word 'mystery' that should be reassessed, as to understand the reason(s) why Judaism could not be considered a religion of 'mysteries', but rather of self-evident truths. How can we extend the notion of *credo quia absurdum* to Judaism, and Jewish faith, as well? This a crucial question to understand, *inter alia*, the relation between emerging philosophy and theological arguments in the age of the late Renaissance, until the early Enlightenment.

This is a question however that we are also allowed to ask here. Certainly, this is not the place to find a proper answer to it.