# 14. THE SPIRIT OF THE EIGHTEENTH CENTURY IN THE ANTI-SABBATEAN POLEMICS OF HAKHAM DAVID NIETO

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I had many conversations with Dick Popkin about Hakham David Nieto and his unique place in the rapidly shifting world of Jewish thought at the turn of the eighteenth century. Dick thought Nieto, as a critic of the Shabbatai Zvi movement, was an anti-enthusiastic sceptic. He was especially interested, however, in Nieto's positive stance toward both science and Kabbalah. Nieto's diplomatic solution to the problem of the age of the *Zohar* places him squarely in the middle of Dick's sceptical tradition. My investigations into Nieto's thought, like everything else I do, are heavily colored by both Dick's advice and his published research. This will be immediately clear to anyone who peruses the footnotes below. *Yehe zikhro barukh*.

Perhaps no passage in the voluminous writings of the Kabbalah scholar Gershom Scholem is more famous than his comment at the end of his 1937 essay "Mitzvah ha-Ba'ah be-Averah" (translated as "Redemption through Sin")[1] positing a close connection between the messianic movement of Sabbatai Zevi, which peaked in 1665–1666, and the rise of Jewish Enlightenment (*Haskalah*) and Reform. Describing the Sabbatean believers of the eighteenth century, he comments,

> Even while still "believers"—in fact, precisely because they were "believers"—they had been drawing closer to the spirit of the Haskalah all along, so that when the flame of their faith finally flickered out they soon reappeared as leaders of Reform Judaism, secular intellectuals, or simply complete and indifferent skeptics…. Men like [the Sabbatean] Wehle intended to use the Haskalah for their own Sabbatian ends, but in the meanwhile the Haskalah went its way and proceeded to make use of them….The leaders of the "School of Mendelssohn," who were neither Sabbatians themselves, of course, nor under the influence of mysticism at all, to say nothing of mystical heresy, found ready recruits for their cause in Sabbatian circles, where the world of rabbinic Judaism had already been completely destroyed from

[1] Scholem, *The Messianic Idea in Judaism* (New York: Schocken, 1971), 140–141.

> within, quite independently of the efforts of secularist criticism. Those who had survived the ruin were now open to any alternative or wind of change; and so, their "mad visions" behind them, they turned their energies and hidden desires for a more positive life to assimilation and the Haskalah…[2]

Some other recent scholarship, particularly that of Andrew C. Fix, has demonstrated how prophetic, apocalyptic, messianic, or mystical movements, especially in the early modern era, became the direct progenitors of rationalist or secularizing trends.[3] Related ideas were expressed earlier in the twentieth century in the field of anthropology through the "cargo cult" model, which articulates the evolution of apocalyptic yearning into modern political consciousness.[4] The "Yates Thesis" in the history of science, proposing the metamorphosis of astrology, alchemy, and other occult arts into modern science, follows a similar pattern.[5]

The more easily recognizable pattern, nevertheless, is that the forces *opposing* such occult and prophetic "enthusiasm" were those associated with reason, science, and Enlightenment.[6] The prophets and apocalyptics were painted by their opponents as gullible believers in superstition, parlor tricks, mind games, and charlatanism. The opponents, meanwhile, were most often associated with scientific societies and rationalist branches of the church. It is impor-

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[2] Ibid. On responses to Scholem's view, see the literature quoted in Matt Goldish, *The Sabbatean Prophets* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004), 210 n. 16 and 17.

[3] See Fix, *Prophecy and Reason: The Dutch Collegiants in the Early Enlightenment* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1991).

[4] This model is stripped down to its essentials and explained with particular cogency in I.C. Jarvie, *The Revolution in Anthropology* (Chicago, IL: H. Regnery, 1967). For a discussion of Sabbateanism and the cargo cult model, see Hillel Levine, "Frankism as a 'Cargo Cult' and the Haskalah Connection: Myth, Ideology and the Modernization of Jewish Consciousness," in *Essays in Modern Jewish History: A Tribute to Ben Halperin* eds. F. Molino and P.C. Albert (Rutherford, NJ: Farleigh Dickenson University Press, 1982), 81–94.

[5] See, e.g., Frances A. Yates, *Giordano Bruno and the Hermetic Tradition* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1964); eudem, *The Rosicrucian Enlightenment* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1972); Henry M. Pachter, *Magic Into Science: The Story of Paracelsus* (New York: Henry Schuman, 1951) (for the title as much as the book).

[6] Such an examination is conducted by Michael Heyd, *"Be Sober and Reasonable": The Critique of Enthusiasm in the Seventeenth and Early Eighteenth Centuries* (Leiden: Brill, 1995). See also Hillel Schwartz, *Knaves, Fools, Madmen and that Subtile Effluvium: A Study of the Opposition to the French Prophets in England,* 1706–1710 (Gainesville, FL: University of Florida Press, 1978). Note the proximity of the French Prophets' activity in London to the polemic of Hakham Nieto discussed below.

tant to note that while radical sceptics such as the deists and Spinozists were certainly critics of enthusiasm (a category in which they might have included all religion), most of the anti-enthusiasm activists came from *within* the churches – they saw unsanctioned individual revelation as a threat to establishment religious authority. These opponents marshaled arguments based on historical perspective, science, textual scholarship, and logic to discredit the enthusiasts. Despite the work of Yates, Fix, and Scholem, then, the opponents of enthusiasm rather than its practitioners seem much more likely antecedents of the Enlightenment

It is odd, then, that in the Jewish context it is the Sabbateans who have been proposed as the eager audience for Haskalah and secularism, while little is said of their opponents in this regard. The more vociferous members of this group have been well studied, but I do not think many people have noticed how different they seem from the opponents of contemporary enthusiastic movements in the Christian world of Europe. At least two of the opponents, in fact – Hakhams Jacob Sasportas and Moses Hagiz – were themselves enthusiasts who believed they experienced direct messages from God.[7] It thus appears that opposition to religious enthusiasm in the Jewish world was not analogous to that in the European Christian world.[8]

There are at least two examples, however, of opponents of the Sabbateans from the second generation who did exhibit more of the rationalist eighteenth-century spirit associated with Christian anti-enthusiasts: Rabbi Jacob Emden and Hakham David Nieto. An outstanding discussion of Emden's relationship with modernizing trends and Haskalah has already been presented by Jacob J. Schacter, laying out the issues involved as well as the positions of Emden.[9] I will not enter the depths of analysis plumbed by Schacter, but I will mention a bit of what I mean by "the eighteenth-century spirit" before discussing Nieto.

The Cambridge scholar Basil Willey opens his famous book, *The Eighteenth Century Background*, with the comment that, "Whereas for the seventeenth century 'Truth' seemed to be the key-word, this time it is 'Nature'."[10]

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[7] See Elisheva Carlebach, *The Pursuit of Heresy: Rabbi Moses Hagiz and the Sabbatian Controversies* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1990), 51–52; Goldish, *Sabbatean Prophets*, 149–151.

[8] In Goldish, *Sabbatean Prophets*, 141–151, I describe some ways in which Hakham Jacob Sasportas's opposition to the Sabbateans was similar to European opposition to enthusiasm, but there are definite limits to this common ground.

[9] Jacob J. Schacter, "Rabbi Jacob Emden: Life and Major Works" (unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, Harvard University, 1988), Chapters 6–7.

[10] Willey, *The Eighteenth Century Background* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1940), v.

Indeed, questions about nature, natural law, natural religion, natural history, the nature of man, and man's place in nature, frame the thought of Western Europe in the late seventeenth- and early eighteenth centuries. Renaissance Humanism had diverted attention away from a focus on man's place in the Church toward man's place in the cosmos and the natural world. The ancients were thought to know a great deal about this topic, so ancient literatures (including the Bible) were assiduously studied. Among the outcomes of this research was the development of an interest in the natural history of texts, and in history more generally. The voyages of discovery brought knowledge of worlds previously unknown in Europe, and the scientific revolution brought news of hidden worlds visible through the telescope and microscope. Scientists, or natural philosophers, also identified the universal laws of nature, and many thinkers sought to understand the spiritual world through similar laws. As the scientific, geographical, political, economic, and religious upheavals of early modern Europe destabilized society, this progress in understanding nature became a new haven of stability for many. (Others, as Richard H. Popkin has shown, sought stability in prophecy and apocalypticism, but these almost always ended up contributing to instability.)[11] Thus, the study of nature and history were key aspects of the eighteenth-century spirit. It is the development of what might be called the Conservative Enlightenment out of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century thought.[12]

For Jews there were additional keys as well. As David Ruderman has pointed out, no institutions existed within the Jewish world to accommodate study of nature or history at that time, so, if a Jew was interested in these

[11] Popkin, *The Third Force in Seventeenth-Century Thought* (Leiden: Brill, 1992). On the tension between communal stability and messianism, see Lionel Kochan, *Jews, Idols and Messiahs: The Challenge from History* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1990).

[12] Readers of recent literature on the Enlightenment might think it was all radical; see, e.g., Margaret C. Jacob, *The Radical Enlightenment: Pantheists, Freemasons and Republicans* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1981); Jonathan I. Israel, *Radical Enlightenment: Philosophy and the Making of Modernity,* 1650–1750 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001). This impression is misleading, though this was surely not the intention of those authors. The term "Conservative Enlightenment" is used by Bernard Cotrett to describe the attitude of Lord Bolingbroke; see *Bolingbroke's Political Writings* ed. B. Cotrett (New York: St. Martin's, 1997). The atmosphere of physico-theology and conservative Anglicanism in Margaret Jacob, *The Newtonians and the English Revolution,* 1689–1720 (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1976), while not described as such there, characterizes a conservative early Enlightenment strand. While the conditions and background are quite different, a conservative Catholic Enlightenment might be the effect of Jansenism in France for a period, as described in Dale Van Kley, *The Religious Origins of the French Revolution, from Calvin to the Civil Constitution,* 1560–1791 (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1996).

areas, it necessarily meant deeper contact with non-Jews, their ideas, and their languages.[13] Now, there was no novelty in a Jew having close contacts with the non-Jewish world. It may have been more the norm than the exception throughout much of history. A rabbi's deep intellectual engagement with the latest developments in that world, however, might signal a change in attitudes, especially after the thirteenth century in Europe.[14] While I would hesitate to suggest that Hakham Nieto was a precursor of the Haskalah, some of the ideas and attitudes reflected in his anti-Sabbatean polemics indicate that his thought had much more of the eighteenth-century Conservative Enlightenment spirit than that of most earlier and contemporary rabbis.

### *Hakham David Nieto and the London Community*

Hakham David Nieto (1654–1728) had a distinguished career before arriving in London. He was born in Livorno, Italy, to a Sephardic family with *converso* background and was thoroughly trained in traditional rabbinic studies. He also earned a degree in medicine at the University of Padua, one of the few European schools which would accept Jewish students. It was certainly there that he was inculcated with his lifelong love of science and mathematics. In Livorno Hakham Nieto worked as both a rabbi and a physician. In 1701 he was invited to fill the position of Hakham of the Spanish and Portuguese Jews' congregation in London, where he replaced Hakham Solomon Aailion, who had left for the more prestigious rabbinate of Amsterdam. Apparently the position of Hakham in London was a full time job, because a proviso in Hakham Nieto's contract forbade him from practicing medicine in London.

The Sephardic community of London, like that of Livorno, was made up largely of *conversos* and their descendants. These were people whose Jewish ancestors had apostatized to Catholicism, either in Spain during the heavy conversionary pressure of 1391 to 1492, or in Portugal during the forced baptism of 1497. These families lived as Catholics, often for many generations, before fleeing the Iberian Peninsula for the freer lands of Western Europe. Some of the London congregants had grown up as Jews because their parents or grandparents had already returned to the Judaism of their forebears; others were first generation "new Jews". The community was heavily focused on commerce and most people had little interest in theological matters, though there were some who did.

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[13] Ruderman, *Jewish Thought and Scientific Discovery in Early Modern Europe* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1995), Epilogue.

[14] See Schacter's detailed discussion of these issues, n. 9 above.

Hakham Nieto had apparently published nothing before arriving in London. Soon after his arrival his book *Pascologia* (1703, in Italian) appeared, explaining the relationship between the dates of Easter and Passover. His next major work, *De la divina Providencia* (On Divine Providence, 1704) has a complex background. Hakham Nieto was accused by a congregant of making the heretical pantheistic claim that nature and God are the same thing. Nieto explained that he made the statement in response to a student who had spoken to others at the yeshivah about deistic opinions he had heard. His purpose was to prove precisely that the term *teva*' (nature) in Hebrew is relatively new to the language, and means nothing other than God's providence in the physical world. The congregant would not accept this, a great dispute ensued, and Hakham Nieto wrote the book to articulate his position more fully. His next great work was *Matteh Da"n ve-Kuzari Sheni* (The Staff of Dan and Second Kuzari; 1714), which appeared in both Hebrew and Spanish. This was a polemic against the strong *converso* tendency to dismiss the rabbinic tradition of oral law and claim that only the written Bible has authority. Soon thereafter, in 1715, he published *Esh Dat* (The Fire of Law), his remonstration against the Sabbatean adventurer Nehemiah Hiyya Hayyun, which will be discussed below. A polemic against the Inquisition and Catholic theology appeared in 1723–1724. Hakham Nieto published some small sermons and eulogies as well, but these five books were his major intellectual legacy.[15]

The Hayyun controversy unfolded on the background of the continued adherence of many Jews to their faith in the messianic mission of Sabbatai Zevi. Although Sabbatai had converted to Islam in 1666 and died in 1676, the movement surrounding him did not disappear. One group of believers in Greece and Turkey converted to Islam in imitation of Sabbatai in the 1680s, and continued their faith in secret. Another group in Italy hosted various prophets who foretold Sabbatai's triumphant return. A third group were students of the Sabbatean theologian and *converso* physician Abraham Miguel Cardoso (d. 1706). A fourth group moved en masse to Palestine under the direction of one Rabbi Judah Hasid in 1700, hoping to force God's hand to

[15] See Jakob J. Petuchowski, *The Theology of Hakham David Nieto: An Eighteenth-Century Defense of the Jewish Tradition* (New York: Ktav, 1954; revised edition, 1970); Israel Solomons, *David Nieto, Haham of the Spanish & Portuguese Jews' Congregation Kahal Kados Sahar Asamaim London (*1701–1728*)* (London: Spottiswoode, Ballantyne & Co., 1931; reprinted from "David Nieto and Some of His Contemporaries" in *Transactions of the Jewish Historical Society of England*, 12 [1931]).

return the messiah.[16] No disappointment was so great that it could crush the faith of the believers.

It is hard to say how much Nehemiah Hiyya Hayyun (1655–1730)[17] was a believer in the messianic mission of Sabbatai Zevi, how much he was a believer in his own spiritual calling, and how much he was simply a charlatan. Hayyun was a very learned rabbinic scholar who was raised and served as a rabbi in the Balkans, Palestine, and Egypt before openly presenting himself as a Sabbatean visionary around 1711. Thereafter he wandered all around Europe, publishing a book under his own name which had long circulated as the work of Sabbatai Zevi, and forging or falsifying approbations to this and his own books. He promulgated a theology which, though full of learned citations from classical Kabbalah, contained not only older heretical Sabbatean aspects, but also doctrines of a dual or tripartite God who can be measured physically. What had to be particularly troubling for Hakham Nieto was that his predecessor in the London rabbinate, Hakham Aailion (who, as it turns out, was a secret Sabbatean believer) welcomed Hayyun to Amsterdam amidst the outrage of the anti-Sabbatean forces. *Esh Dat* is Nieto's response to Hayyun, but its contents fit a much larger pattern in Nieto's thought.[18]

## *Nieto's Polemics Against Hayyun*

The *Esh Dat*, like most of Nieto's major works, is presented in the form of a dialogue. In the first day's discussion between the questioner, Naphtali, and the sage, Dan (an acronym for David Nieto), Nieto rails against Hayyun's forgeries and cites letters of colleagues complaining about Hayyun's underhandedness. He moves on to quote extensively from Hayyun's works and point out the outrageous heresies in them. Embedded in this discussion is a great deal of Nieto's theology, some of it quite novel. Dan also explains to Naphtali why the Kabbalah should be seen as an integral and holy part of the Jewish tradition, despite the gross misuses of it perpetrated by Hayyun. The second day is spent on more defenses of the Kabbalah and Jewish oral tradition. While Hayyun and his errors are the launching point for these discussions, Nieto always

[16] On these movements and developments see Gershom Scholem, *Sabbatai Sevi: The Mystical Messiah* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1973); idem, *Messianic Idea; Sefunot* 3–4 (1960) and *Sefunot* 14 (1971–1977); *Abraham Miguel Cardozo: Selected Writings* ed., trans., and intro. David J. Halperin (New York: Paulist, 2001); R.H. Popkin and Stephanie Chasin, "The Sabbatean Movement in Turkey (1703–1708) and Reverberations in Northern Europe," *Jewish Quarterly Review* 94:2 (2004), 300–317.

[17] Note that Hayyun was an almost exact contemporary of Hakham Nieto.

[18] On Hayyun see Gershom Scholem, *Kabbalah* (Jerusalem: Keter, 1988), 412–416. On the controversies surrounding him see Carlebach, *Pursuit of Heresy*, Chapters 4–6.

seems more interested in his overweening pedagogical mission: to teach Jews – especially his undereducated former-*converso* congregants – the tenets of Jewish faith through examples from medicine, science, and modern discoveries as well as logic and tradition. Aspects of this dialogue betray a specifically eighteenth-century spirit.[19]

One important component in the *Esh Dat* is Nieto's very unusual use of arguments for God's existence and providence *ex consensu gentium*. As Petuchowski points out, this was an extraordinary approach among Jewish scholars, whose arguments had always come from logic and tradition.[20] The role of Indians and Africans, who are sometimes in agreement with Jewish tenets of faith and sometimes at odds with them, is especially striking in these passages.

Concerning the existence and power of God, Dan (Nieto) says,

> Dan: I call heaven and earth to witness that I have never heard greater heresy than this in my life. For behold, even the men of the East Indies, who are pagans, agree and say that there is a God, the creator of heaven and earth, Who has no beginning; and that it was He who created the minor deities which are appointed over mankind. They are His servants and under his sovereignty. The inhabitants of the Kingdom of China say the same thing. In fact, there is no person in the world laying claim to human intelligence who does not believe that there is a God, the creator of heaven and earth, Who is unique and infinite in His power and ability.[21]

And again,

> I call heaven and earth to witness that I have investigated and studied all the religions and practices of the world; and I have found that it is not only the Christians and Turks [Muslims] who believe in our three central principles — the existence of God, Torah from heaven, and reward and punishment (though

[19] Petuchowski and Ruderman have noted this point and do a fine job of presenting and explaining Nieto's relationship with contemporary ideas, but there are more aspects of the historical context to be explored. See Petuchowski, *Theology*, especially Chapter 8; Ruderman, *Jewish Thought*, 325–331.

[20] Petuchowski, ibid, 110–112. While Petuchowski claims that the argument *de consensu gentium* is unique to Nieto, I would argue that the twelfth-century Jewish philosophical classic *Kuzari* of Rabbi Judah ha-Levi (the model for Nieto's *Kuzari Sheni*) also uses a form this argument. In Part I, the king of the Khazars decides to invite a Jewish rabbi to present his religion because the Christian, Muslim, and Aristotelian scholars have made so much reference to the origins of their philosophies in the Bible of the Jews.

[21] Nieto, *Esh Dat*, 9r, translated in Petuchowski, ibid, with my minor modifications.

> they differ from us in the interpretation)—but even most of the inhabitants of the East Indies and most people of the West Indies. So too do most of the residents of Africa, who are black and barbarians and worship the sun, moon, all hosts of heaven, cattle, wild animals of the field, snakes, crocodiles, creeping vermin, and everything man makes with the craft of his hand out of wood and stone—they believe and announce that after death it will be well for the righteous, but evildoers will be tortured and punished with awful, evil tortures for endless generations.[22]

Petuchowski suggests that this argument is related to the contemporary idea of natural religion, and that the reference to China is typical of deist arguments.[23] This is too narrow a view, for the appeal to examples from China and other distant lands, and indeed the idea of natural religion, were by no means the sole province of deists – Latitudinarian divines, physico-theologists, anti-enthusiasts, and authors of all types made use of these tropes. Malebranche wrote an essay on the differences between between Christian and Chinese philosophy, while the Marquis d'Argens produced a fictional set of *Lettres chinoises, ou, Correspondance philosophique, historique et critique, entre un chinois voyageur à Paris & ses correspondans à la Chine, en Moscovie, en Perse & au Japon* (1739–1740) as a way to comment on European society. In his *Historical and Critical Dictionary*, Pierre Bayle (1634–1706) dedicated extensive discussions to Japan, India, and China. Amazingly, and perhaps not coincidentally, a large excursus on the Chinese and the Fo sect is located in a footnote to Bayle's article about the Jewish philosopher Spinoza![24] References to Asians, Africans, and American natives were ubiquitous in the writing and thought of Christian thinkers of the period – but not among Jews.[25]

Writing further on about belief in an afterlife, whose tenets he thinks Hayyun denies, Nieto makes even more arguments based on beliefs of other peoples. Here he begins to separate the beliefs of Jews, Christians, and Muslims from

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[22] Nieto, *Esh Dat*, 15v; adapted with many changes from the translation by Petuchowski, *Theology*, 24.

[23] Petuchowski, ibid, 112.

[24] Pierre Bayle, *Historical and Critical Dictionary: Selections*, trans. and ed. Richard H. Popkin (Indianapolis, IN: Bobbs-Merrill, 1965), 288–293. See also J.G.A. Pocock, "Gibbon and the Idol Fo: Chinese and Christian History in the Enlightenment," in *Sceptics, Millenarians and Jews*, eds. D.S. Katz and J.I. Israel (Leiden: Brill, 1990), 15–34.

[25] Figures like Abraham Farissol and Abraham Yagel Gallico, about whom David Ruderman writes, were exceptional, though certainly not unique. See Ruderman, *The World of a Renaissance Jew: The Life and Thought of Abraham ben Mordecai Farissol* (Cincinnati, OH: Hebrew Union College Press, 1981), Chapter 11; idem, *Kabbalah, Magic, and Science: The Cultural Universe of a Sixteenth-Century Jewish Physician* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1988).

those of "pagans" like the Indians. Naphtali quotes Hayyun saying that if the Jews worship the completely transcendent infinite Godhead (*En Soph*) rather than the God of Israel (which he understands to be a separate entity), they are no better than other peoples. Dan replies that "The Christians and Turks [Muslims] admit that before the masters of their practice [*ba'alei nimusam*; i.e. Christianity and Islam] arrived they were idolaters. But when they did come they taught them to worship the First Cause…"[26] The implication is that Christians and Muslims learned correct worship from the founders of their religions, and now they are in agreement with the Jews on this. He is clearly distinguishing between the errors of pagans and the shared truth of the three monotheistic faiths.

Dan turns the tables of Hayyun's reasoning back on him at this point. Hayyun's argument had been that if the Jews worship the same deity as other peoples then they must be doing something wrong. By the same logic, says Dan, maybe Hayyun thinks Jews should not believe anything that other nations believe:

> Should we not celebrate the holidays of the Lord because they [Christians and Muslims] also have holidays and festivals, each one it its own manner? Should we have no synagogues because they too have houses of worship? Should we not believe in an afterlife of the soul because they believe in it? Should we also not believe in providence or reward and punishment? Is there any stupidity, stubbornness, or evil greater than this?[27]

> Dan: I will further answer you with a question. Why [does Hayyun] believe in metempsychosis [*gilgul*]? For, look—Pythagoras and Plato believed in it, as can be seen in their books! So, too, do many kingdoms in the East Indies, which is why they do not eat any living creature—lest the soul of his father, brothers, or other relatives be found in it. Rather, it is clear that this deceiver [Hayyun] is nothing but a fool, a boor, an evildoer and a heretic, for he does not want us to believe in a deity in the manner of the Christians and Muslims, whose faith in this matter [worship of the one Infinite God] is similar to ours. He would prefer us to believe as do the idolatrous Indians, who say that the Infinite [*En Sof*] neither relates to the lower creatures nor knows of them. He created smaller deities who would make man, for it was beneath His dignity to deal with man, who comes into being and leaves it; and all the more so other creatures….I have heard people say that [Hayyun] was glorified among the Christians because he taught the doctrine of the Trinity among the Jews. But by the life of my head [I say] he has lies and deceit under his tongue, for the approach of the Christians is closer to ours than to his. They believe as we do that God is the Infinite

[26] Nieto, *Esh Dat*, 16v–17r.
[27] Ibid, 17v.

> and the First Cause; they differ from us in their claim that He is unified in identity but tripartite in aspects. We say He is absolute and simple unity in every way. But according to him [Hayyun], God is the Second Cause, with which he makes a trinity. If they [Christians] knew that this is his view they would burn him in a perpetual consuming fire, for it is entirely contradictory to their faith.
> Naphtali: So, he agrees neither with us nor with them!
> Dan: It is indeed so. His faith is neither like ours, nor that of the Christians, nor that of the Muslims, but rather like the faith of the East Indians who are idolaters, or like the Philosopher of Rabbi Judah Ha-Levi who neither knew nor worshiped God.[28]

When we compare these various passages, Nieto's view of the Indians appears paradoxical. In the earlier sections he represented their theology as sound: they believe in one supreme God and an afterlife with rewards and punishments. In this later passage we learn that they believe not simply in an afterlife, but in metempsychosis – as does Hayyun, and presumably anyone who accepts the Kabbalah, for this is a standard kabbalistic doctrine. But Nieto excoriates Hayyun for his belief in the idolatrous ideas of the Indians, among which he seems to include metempsychosis. Meanwhile, he blames Hayyun for *not* believing doctrines held in common by Jews, Christians, and Muslims.

Two implications can be derived from this. The first is that, just as Nieto rejects the ancient provenance of the Zohar, he also repudiates the standard kabbalistic doctrine of metempsychosis. Thus, despite his long defense of Kabbalah in *Esh Dat*, his attitude toward it looks distinctly sceptical. Nieto would want to avoid expressing doubt about the veracity and provenance of the Zohar because it had become canonical almost in the way that Talmud and Midrash were. It thus had a status something like the Oral Law tradition, and impugning its legitimacy might lead to a domino effect which would turn the same arguments against the Talmud.

The second implication of this passage is that Nieto believes that the central tenets of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam are in agreement; even the Trinity is not far removed from Jewish monotheism. This is distinctly *not* a medieval Jewish attitude, nor even a Renaissance attitude.[29] It has more in common with some early eighteenth-century Christian views – and not conservative ones this time. A book by the deist John Toland comes to mind, whose title is *Nazarenus: or, Jewish, Gentile, and Mahometan Christianity…* (London, 1718).

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[28] Ibid, 17r; my translation. The identification of Jewish views with those of Christians and Muslims continues on 17v.

[29] There may be a certain affinity with the *Colloquium Heptaplomeres* of Jean Bodin (ca. 1590s) or some ideas of the radical French millenarians Guillaume Postel and Isaac de la Peyrère.

In other places he points out that Hayyun's doctrine of a dual or tripartite God has been rejected by the greatest Jewish heretics of all time: Sadducees, Boethusians, and Karaites.[30] While this may seem like supporting evidence as unconvincing as that derived from the Christians, Muslims and Hindus, it does have a certain historical logic. Nieto was aware that among the Iberian *converso* sceptics in his community were many who doubted the veracity of the Oral Law tradition, which was precisely the heresy of the Sadducees, Boethusians, and Karaites. He may be arguing that even these sceptics should reject Hayyun. This suggestion may be supported by another appeal Nieto makes to the universal Jewish acceptance of the uniqueness of God throughout all of history, "…and in all the regions of Asia, Africa, and Europe, *especially in Spain and Portugal*."[31] Here again Nieto ties the anti-Hayyun campaign to his larger project of educating his congregants, this time with a subtle emotional appeal to their heritage. It is a theme that continues in that part of the dialogue.

Nieto's decision to argue *ex consensu gentium* and with examples from Greek philosophy, Christianity, Islam, longstanding Jewish heresies, and "newly discovered" people, is a reflection of the eighteenth-century conservative Enlightenment spirit. It would hardly have occurred to his predecessors or most contemporary rabbis to make such arguments, let alone to believe that they would be meaningful or convincing to a Jewish audience.

Nieto argues throughout the book using examples from medicine and science. Some of these arguments are redolent of the eighteenth century spirit; taken as a group, and combined with the prevalence of scientific examples throughout his oeuvre, they are a sure sign of that spirit. Since David Ruderman has commented on this matter,[32] I will confine myself to some examples demonstrating Nieto's keen sense of historical perspective, another key indicator of early Enlightenment sensibilities.

In his book, *Zakhor*, Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi points out that a short-lived flowering of Jewish historical writing in the wake of the Spanish expulsion does not signal the birth of modern Jewish historical consciousness.[33] Such consciousness is a critical part of the European Enlightenment, but Yerushalmi and others who have considered it in Jewish thought have not usually found it before the German Haskalah of late eighteenth-century Germany.[34] I will suggest that Nieto possessed at least a modicum of critical historical perspective.

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[30] Ibid, 21v.

[31] Ibid, 21r; my emphasis.

[32] Ruderman, *Jewish Thought*, Chapter 11.

[33] Yerushalmi, *Zakhor* (Seattle and London: University of Washington Press, 1982), 73.

[34] See Yerushalmi, *Zakhor*; also Reuven Michael, *Jewish Historiography: From the Renaissance to the Modern Period* (in Hebrew) (Jerusalem: Bialik Institute, 1993);

Petuchowski makes a cogent and subtly argued case that Nieto, despite his extended defense of the Zohar, did not believe the generally accepted view among Jews that it was written in the second century CE. The argument is that Nieto claims the use of the word "*teva*" to denote nature is a recent invention of about the past 400 years (that is, since the late thirteenth century or so). The Zohar appeared in Spain just at that time, and it uses the word "*teva*" to denote nature. Thus, while Nieto never openly disputes the second century authorship of the Zohar, he exposes his true view in this way.[35]

Now, while Jews participated along with Christians in various aspects of Renaissance culture, they never fostered the Humanists' skill in text criticism. Very few Jews openly questioned the authority or provenance of the Zohar from the time it appeared until the Haskalah. Elijah del Medigo, Leon Modena, the Frances brothers, and a few others, almost all Italians, had done it. Though Modena used some textual proofs, it is the anti-Sabbatean Emden whom many credit as the first Jew to dispute the ancient dating on the basis of deep textual evidence. Thus, Nieto joins an elite club of early modern Jewish scholars with the historical consciousness and tools to place the Zohar's authorship in the thirteenth to fourteenth centuries. The fact that he shares this distinction with Emden again suggests a Conservative Enlightenment spirit among one group of opponents of Sabbateanism.[36]

Nieto's historical sense comes out in other ways in the *Esh Dat* as well. When Hayyun implies that maybe the correct belief in God – that is, the one he proposes – was forgotten during the exigencies of exile at the end of the Second Jewish Commonwealth, Nieto counters with proofs both from the Talmud

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Shmuel Feiner, *Haskalah and History: The Emergence of a Modern Jewish Historical Consiousness* (Oxford: Littman Library, 2002). Note that none of these authors has anything much to say about Jewish historical thiniking between the late sixteenth- and the late eighteenth centuries. Bezalel Safran has addressed historical consciousness in the writings of one figure; see Safran, "Leone da Modena's Historical Consciousness," in *Jewish Thought in the Seventeenth Century*, eds. I. Twersky and B. Septimus (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1987), 381–398; and Schacter, "Rabbi Jacob Emden," Chapters 6–7, mentions the issue in Emden's case. Naturally Spinoza was a major influence on historical consciousness, mainly in Christian thought. There is a great deal to consider about historical consciousness among Jews in this period that has not been explored.

[35] Petuchowski, *Theology*, 26–27.

[36] On Zohar criticism see "Boaz Huss, 'Sefer ha-Zohar' as a Canonical, Sacred and Holy Text: Changing Perspectives of the Book of Splendor between the Thirteenth and Eighteenth Centuries," *Journal of Jewish Thought and Philosophy* 7:2 (1997): 257–307. On Nieto's sceptical attitude toward Kabbalah see Petuchowski, ibid.

and from two first-century sources: Josephus Flavius and Philo of Alexandria. A medieval Hebrew bowdlerization of Josephus called *Yosippon*, whose author has been curiously transformed from Joseph ben Mattityahu the Priest (the actual Josephus) to Joseph ben Gurion, was used by Jews extensively through the Middle Ages. Josephus himself seems to have been widely known among Christians but not among Jews. Nieto clearly knew the *Josippon* but used the actual works of Josephus, especially his polemic *Against Apion*. This was unusual and fairly new for a Jewish author.

The use of Philo of Alexandria is even more noteworthy. Philo was almost completely expunged from Jewish thought because of his deep Neoplatonic bent and allegorization of biblical tales, though (like Josephus) he remained an important figure in Christian thought. He was brought back into Jewish consciousness by the most humanistic Jewish thinker of the Renaissance, Azariah de' Rossi (d. 1577). De' Rossi used Philo (whom he calls Yedidyah the Jew) extensively as a source on ancient Jewish history and views, and was severely upbraided for it by contemporary rabbis. Nieto's choice to use both the actual writings of Josephus and the writings of Philo for information on first century Jewish beliefs indicates both a strong historical consciousness and a certain iconoclastic spirit with regard to the traditional Jewish polemical canon.[37]

The historical argument Nieto constructs with these sources and others is also very unusual for a Jewish thinker. He adduces evidence from his authorities to prove generation by generation that the belief in a single, indivisible God never changed from the time of the Second Temple until the Middle Ages. He introduces these proofs with this statement:

> I am astounded at how he dares to say that after the days of the later talmudic sages [*amora'im*] the true faith was lost from Israel. For, if we turn our eyes to the chain of generations from top to bottom, up to and including the days of the earlier talmudic sages [*tana'im*], all of them believed with complete faith in the unity of God just as we do today, with no change or difference. Now from 600 years ago until our day, which is 5475 [1715] from the Creation, all authors, from straightforward exegetes to kabbalists, wrote of God's unity…[38]

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[37] Petuchowski has pointed out much of this in *Theology*, 28–29. On de' Rossi see Salo W. Baron, *History and Jewish Historians: Essays and Addresses* (Philadelphia, PA: Jewish Publication Society, 1964); Lester A. Segal, *Historical Consciousness and Religious Tradition in Azariah de' Rossi's Me'or 'Einayim* (Philadelphia, PA: Jewish Publication Society, 1989); Azariah de' Rossi, *The Light of the Eyes* trans. and ed. Joanna Weinberg (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2001).

[38] Nieto, *Esh Dat*, 18r. The detailed historical argument continues until 21v.

While there is a long tradition of tracing Jewish chronology and the history of Jewish belief, going back to the *Chapters of the Fathers* in the Mishnah, Nieto's project still stands out for its historical consciousness. The sources are one aspect of this, but another is the awareness he expresses of how different Jewish thinkers and movements have differed from each other in substantial ways, while maintaining their essential belief in the unity of God.

## *Conclusion*

While most of what I have done here expands and contextualizes aspects of Nieto's anti-Sabbabean polemic already noted by Petuchowski, I want to emphasize how my conclusions differ from his. Petuchowski saw Nieto's thought on an essentially binary matrix between tradition and Haskalah. He points out when something Nieto says fits with the Deists or other radical sceptics of the early Enlightenment. The extensive recent research on more religiously conservative but equally important changes in European thought during the late seventeenth- and early eighteenth centuries wrought by people like the Latitudinarians and Jansenists presents a more nuanced context for Nieto. He was a staunch defender of the Written and Oral traditions of Judaism, and a strong anti-enthusiast, but he participated in the conservative Enlightenment spirit of the eighteenth century. His strong interests in science and history, his view of a shared theological core uniting Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, and his complex attempts to defend Kabbalah but undermine some of its tenets – all these make him look a great deal more like his Christian anti-Enthusiasm counterparts than like either a completely traditional rabbi or a radical Enlightenment sceptic.