
OROBIO DE CASTRO'S ANTI-CHRISTIAN POLEMIC

OROBIO DE CASTRO, Isaac: *Prevenções divinas contra la vana idolatría de las gentes*, Vol. I, ed. Myriam Silvera, introducción Gianni Paganini, Florencia, Olschki, 2013, LXXVIII + 220 pp.

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This volume is a magnificent scholarly edition of the first volume of a manuscript first written in Spanish in Amsterdam about 1670 that was circulated in the clandestine underground of the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. It is an intriguing case of the genre of anti-Christian polemics written by pious Jews in order to persuade the conversos to return to the fold that were hijacked by atheistic anti-Christian philosophes for their own impious purposes. It is also an interesting case of the genre of seventeenth-century writings in Spanish that were written in hostile foreign countries. It shows how authors and countries can lose control of the reception of their own cultural products.

Isaac Orobio de Castro was born in a converso family in Bragança in Portugal and raised in Sevilla. He studied philosophy at Alcalá de Henares and taught metaphysics at Salamanca. He then became a physician, serving the Duke of Medinaceli. A servant he had punished for theft denounced him to the Inquisition and he was thrown into a dungeon for three years and subjected to torture. Upon being released, he went to Toulouse, where he became professor of medicine but then moved on to Amsterdam, where he made a public confession of Judaism. The standard work on him is Yosef Kaplan, *From Christianity to Judaism: The Life and Works of Isaac Orobio de Castro* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989).

Orobio was most famous in wider European cultural circles for two published works. *Certamen Philosophicum Propugnatae Veritatis Divinae ac Naturalis Adversus J. Bredenburg Principia* (Amsterdam: 1684, reprinted 1703, 1731) included criticism of Spinoza's ethics, even though he maintained a friendly correspondence with that philosopher. A debate with Philip Van Limborch was published by Van Limborch as *De Veritate Religionis Christianae amica collation cum Erudito Judaeo* (Gouda: Justum ab Hoeve, 1687). John Locke

was present at the debate, and commented on it at length in several letters. The book was translated into Dutch in 1723 and reprinted in 1735, and the Latin edition was reprinted in Basel in 1740. The present manuscript would have been harder for pious Christians like Locke to handle. Orobio also wrote several other manuscripts, including one against Juan de Prado.

The manuscript of *Prevençiones divinas* survived in slightly differing versions (all explained in the apparatus) that are now in libraries in London, The Hague, Paris, Munich, Amsterdam, Oxford, Hamburg, New York, Bordeaux, Manchester, and Madrid. There is a second volume, which will appear soon edited by Silvera. A compilation of selections from the manuscripts in loose French translation was published under the title *Israel vengé* in 1770, under d'Holbach's auspices. This selection/translation/revision carried out the task of converting the text from an apology for Judaism to an anti-Christian polemic of the philosophes.

Professor Silvera introduces each chapter with a summary of its content in Italian. This is very helpful to the reader (especially the fluent Italian-speaking reader) because it enables the reader to get a general idea of each chapter with less effort than reading the whole chapter. Of course, if it is a scholar's summary, that scholar may not see and report on something that a reader may be looking for as important, so careful readers will have to read Orobio's text.

To Orobio, Christianity was a "sect", not to be dignified with the name of a religion (15). He was particularly indignant that it was an invention of a Jew, not even an imposition from outside (17). The conversos converted for the sake of their appetites, greed, or temporal goods (18). Christianity is nothing but an "execrable idolatría" (18). Orobio supplies a critique of the Trinity and of the Incarnation (21-27), and proof of the falsity of the miracles performed by Jesus (52-56). Other materials include rejection of "lo que llaman Testamento Nuevo" as fabulous (152) and criticism of Calvin's doctrine of grace and works (190-191).

So far, of course, we can see why the atheist anti-Christians would find this valuable. The arguments in favor of Judaism, such as a demonstration of the eternal truth of the laws of Moses (57-76), that the trials of the Jews will cease (95-98), and explanations of the long captivity of the Jews (106-110, 123-127) would have been less useful. Chapters on the material and spiritual redemption of Israel also must have been hard to appreciate, except the part that accuses the Christians of hypocrisy in affecting

to reject material goods (142-146). Orobio's claim that Plato and Aristotle got their ideas from Jewish Cabalists must have seemed like obscurantism (186).

The volume contains extensive notes that identify references and relevant secondary work, and draw attention to related arguments in Orobio's other works. Careful study of it will introduce the reader to a whole world of Spanish-language Jewish intellectual life which shared the intellectual and philosophical space of the second half of the seventeenth century with the likes of Descartes, Spinoza, John Locke, Pierre Bayle, and many other philosophers. It was carried down through the eighteenth century by those who saw other uses for it than those for which it was intended. But that makes it only one of many examples of the use of philosophical arguments for other purposes than those for which they were invented. Thinkers cannot control how their works will be used. We are all subject to the law of unintended consequences.