

Kabbalah and Progress

The present is movement, and movement is progress.

—Elijah Benamozegh, *Teologia*

In the nineteenth century, the “century of progress,” various philosophers in France and Italy attempted to reconcile religious dogma with an ideology so dominant in the *Zeitgeist* that it could be referred to as “the true faith of our times.”¹

They all faced the same problems, namely: how to reconcile truths that were deemed to be eternal with the continuous improvement in man, both intellectually and morally; how to justify the coexistence of unique, determining events—creation, revelation, and redemption—with the idea of an uninterrupted continuum; finally, at a more specifically philosophical level, the question of the origins, causes, and ends of progress itself was raised.

If they were marginal in comparison with the overwhelming mainstream majority, who saw religion as being at most a stage in human development to be overcome, such thinkers continue to be of particular interest, both at a historical and a theoretical level. Their temporizing, difficult balancing act and radical criticism can all help us develop our understanding of what lay at the center of this ideology of progress: an inherently secularizing ideology, destined—in a variety of forms—to enjoy rapid and almost universal success.

These intellectuals are generally grouped together under the term *neo-Catholics*. They included in their number a writer—Pierre-Simon Ballanche (1776–1847)—who started out with legitimist sympathies, and “dramatic” characters such as Hugues de Lamennais (1782–1854), whose path led from the extolling of the pope’s absolute infallibility to a final position verging on the democratic. Another of them was the Piedmontese philosopher Vincenzo Gioberti (1801–1852), the man who inspired the “neo-Guelf” movement that saw the pope as the ideal person to initiate Italy’s political—and liberal—

unification. Gioberti too, it should be pointed out, moved, in the aftermath of an unhappy foray into politics, toward the democratic, relinquishing the idea of a central institutional role for the Church.

These voices were joined some years later by another. In this case, the concept of progress contrasted not with the Christian but the Jewish tradition. This was not, however, the salient aspect of Elijah Benamozegh's work: after all, the Christian and Jewish thinkers of the time shared the same concern to defend the religious viewpoint against the attacks of all-conquering secularization. His singularity lay rather in the conceptual instrument he employed: Kabbalah, forged in the Jewish esoteric tradition. At first glance, nothing would seem less suitable to a "modernizing" discourse, all the more so as Kabbalah was in those years going through one of the most critical periods in its extremely controversial history, in which it was considered in "enlightened" Jewish circles as a tissue of superstition and falsehood unworthy of being called a doctrine.²

The most obvious difficulty lay with the theoretical issues involved: How could a secret, esoteric—not to say mystical—tradition be made to harmonize with a current of thought extensively based on progressive transparency and an inevitable use of reason?

What arose was a historically interesting phenomenon: the translation and reworking of ideas and terms formed no later than the thirteenth century into the philosophical context of nineteenth-century Europe. Given that Benamozegh's early training was in the Judeo-Moroccan tradition, we can see how arduous and risky such a cultural transferal must have been. It was a tortuous exercise, nonetheless original, even at times fascinating in its methods.³

Benamozegh's avowed, and ambitious intent was to reconstruct a comprehensive Jewish philosophical system that—according to him—would "reestablish with the most advanced human sciences the harmony that has been broken."⁴ The task, he wrote, seemed so hard that he would have been happy to draft just the beginning, Maimonides himself having been unequal to the undertaking. The ambitious parallel was pushed to the extent of stating a series of credos, after the example of the Spanish philosopher's articles of faith.

In reality, the outcome was a philosophical system similar to that of some of the Catholic thinkers mentioned above.⁵ In short, the Italian rabbi's theology seems to fit entirely into a certain European cultural setting, while his conceptual sources—including some of his definitions—are almost always identifiably from Kabbalistic texts. Some striking examples will be analyzed here.