

NATIONAL SECULAR SOCIETY

BRUNO

AND

SPINOZA.

BY

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## BRUNO AND SPINOZA.

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FREETHOUGHT has had no more ardent lovers, philosophy no more diligent students, persecution no more fearless victims, than Bruno and Spinoza. Living in an age when religious heresy was considered the most horrible of crimes, these philosophers proved themselves of such sterling metal that they were prepared to face any persecution and undergo any punishment in their zealous pursuit of truth. The first a hot-blooded Italian, with a passionate love for the study of science and philosophy, which difficulties intensified rather than diminished; the other, a quiet, inoffensive Dutch Jew, with the highest order of mind—these men confronted, single-handed, the insidious monster, Superstition, and, by their teaching and living, dealt such a tremendous blow at the creature's head that it has lain writhing in agony ever since. The Church answered Bruno by imprisonment and the stake; but the martyred Italian's name is now for ever destined to live in the memory of all true lovers of intellectual freedom. Spinoza was anathematised and cast out of the Jewish community, to work no longer for a sect, but for mankind.

Giordano Bruno was born at Nola, near Naples, midway between Vesuvius and the Mediterranean, in the year 1548. Of his parents we know nothing; all we know is that Giordano, or Filippo—for that was his baptismal name—was put to an excellent training college, and at an early age gave promise of turning out a brilliant scholar. "He was a true Neapolitan child," says Lewes, "as ardent as its volcanic soul, burning atmosphere, and dark thick wine; as capricious as its varied climate." Filled with the ardour of an apostle, he had that restless vigorous nature peculiarly fitting a teacher of doctrines that were to revolutionise the world of thought. He was

born in stirring times. Copernicus had only been dead a few years; the printing press was in use; discoveries in science of a very important character had agitated the minds of thoughtful persons throughout the civilised world. Possessed of a rich fancy, a polished eloquence, a varied humour, and chivalrous bearing, Bruno at once made a good impression upon all with whom he came in contact. Young and handsome, with all the phrenzied style of the poet, he was the beau ideal of a preacher; and it is as a young priest that we first get a glimpse of him in the Convent of San Domenico Maggiore, where he lectured on his system of religious philosophy. So strikingly original were his views that an accusation of heresy was soon drawn up against him, but set aside on account of his youth. A second accusation of a similar character was made eight years subsequently, and was also withdrawn. Doubtless the Dominicans thought that in time the heretical tendencies of Bruno's mind would tone down, and he would become a shining light among their order. But not so. Bruno's restless spirit of inquiry could not be subdued; ever and anon it broke forth in different directions. First, the young priest's mind was filled with doubts concerning the mysterious doctrine of Transubstantiation; the doctrines of the Trinity and the Atonement were next called in question, and, worse than all, he was bold enough to attack the great pillar of all faith, the chief authority of the age—Aristotle. Discarding altogether the Aristotelian theory of the relation of the sun to the earth, Bruno openly declared his belief in the Copernican theory of astronomy, the plurality of worlds, and his complete rejection of the Scripture teaching respecting the origin of mankind. The natural consequence of this avowed heresy was that he was feared, and, as he could not be answered by arguments, was replied to by that most forcible weapon of the priesthood, persecution. Unable to withstand his opponents, he fled; and we next find him in a convent at Rome. Here he stayed but a brief while, for, finding that his persecutors were at his heels, he left the Holy City, and continued his journey to Noli, at which place he found employment as a schoolmaster for a few months.

At the age of thirty he began his adventurous course

through Europe, staying at Geneva, Lyons, Toulouse, Paris, London, and the Oxford University itself, where he taught successfully for some time. At Toulouse Bruno remained about two years, during which time he filled the office of Public Lecturer. Often he held disputations on his favourite subjects, and while there found time to compose several works.

In 1583, after having held the position of Lecturer Extraordinary at the Sorbonne, in Paris, appointed thereto by Henry III., for more than two years, Bruno came to England with a letter of introduction to the French Ambassador in London. Here he was received at the Court of Elizabeth, and met with a cordial welcome from all save his own countrymen. While in London he had the great happiness of Sir Philip Sydney's friendship—a friendship that lasted to the day of his death. Bruno spoke in flattering terms of English freedom, and of the beauty and grace of English women generally, and expressed great admiration for the character of Elizabeth. Not long after his arrival in England he was invited to a splendid *fête* given by the Chancellor of Oxford in honour of the Count Palatine Albert de Lasco. At this *fête* it was customary to have public discussions, at which all comers were challenged. Oxford, on this occasion, put forth her dialectical giants to defend Aristotle and Ptolemy. Bruno stepped into the arena, and, in the debate, shone to great advantage, ignominiously defeating his adversaries, whom he said could only reply by abuse. After this Bruno asked permission to lecture at the University, which request was granted. He discoursed on cosmology and on the immortality of the soul, his lectures producing a great sensation. His admiration for the learned Professors of Oxford was apparently not great, for we find him describing them as "a constellation of pedants, whose ignorance, presumption, and rustic rudeness would have exhausted the patience of Job."

In England Bruno spent the quietest part of his life, and it was in this country that the greater part of his Italian works was composed. In time, however, his audacious opinions, and the eloquence with which he advanced them, roused such opposition that he found it necessary to quit the country. He returned to Paris

for awhile, and afterwards to Germany, where, in 1586, he matriculated as *Theologic Doctor Romanensis*, in the University of Marburg, in Hesse. Shortly after this we find him at Würtemberg, lecturing to large and admiring audiences. So pleased was Bruno with the intellectual liberty manifested at this place that he afterwards called it the "Athens of Germany." There seems every reason to believe that Bruno might have won high honours here, and have gained a position that would have enabled him to live in ease and comfort; but his restive spirit would not admit of it. He was allured on from place to place to preach, in the true spirit of a reformer, his unpopular views.

At last we find him ensnared, by one Mocenigo, into visiting Venice. Wishing to gain what knowledge he could from Bruno, and being desirous, no doubt, of patronising a man of great genius, Mocenigo induced the Italian philosopher to be his guest. Bruno, with inexplicable haste, accepted. Disappointment on both sides soon followed; for, instead of fawning to his patron, Bruno treated him with conspicuous coolness, and sought the company of others, which so exasperated Mocenigo that he denounced him to the Inquisition as a reprobate and a heretic. On this charge Bruno was tried, transferred to Rome, and cast into prison, where, for seven weary years, he languished without books to read and without the companionship of one human being. At intervals he was subjected to torture, with a view of extorting from him a retraction of his heresy; but in vain. Finding that he would not retract, he was brought, on February 9th, to the Palace of San Severino, and received the sentence of excommunication, after which he was handed over by the Cardinals to the secular authorities with the recommendation of a "punishment as merciful as possible and without effusion of blood," which was the usual formula for burning alive. When Bruno heard the sentence he turned haughtily upon his persecutors and said: "I suspect you pronounce this sentence with more fear than I receive it." A week's delay was accorded him, in the expectation that he would recant; but the expiration of this time found him as firm as ever.

On February 17th, 1600, Bruno was led to an open

space in Rome, and there, in the presence of fifty Cardinals and a crowd of pilgrims from many nations, was burnt to death. The faggots were lighted, the flames leapt about him and consumed his flesh, and, in a little while, a few ashes were all that remained of the brave thinker. Bruno perished—the idle wind scattered his ashes; but the martyred Freethinker's name and work live to-day, and will be remembered with admiration and gratitude in every land where the sons of Freedom dwell.

As a system of philosophy, Lewes thinks that "Bruno's has only a historical, and not an intrinsic, value." Bruno was a Pantheist, and, in his writings, anticipates some of the theories that were afterwards formulated with greater skill by Spinoza. The Italian philosopher was an ardent lover of nature, considering that her wonders formed the proper study for mankind—in fact, nature Bruno regarded as the "garment of God, the incarnation of the divine activity." Unlike the poet, Pope, he did not "look through nature up to Nature's God." Nature, to him, was everywhere present, and the divine essence permeated nature through and through. The important scientific truth of the indestructibility of matter and force Bruno appears to have thoroughly appreciated. Writing on this subject, he says: "What first was seed becomes grass, then an ear, then bread, chyle, blood, semen, embryo, man, a corpse, then again earth, stone, or some other mass, and so forth. Here we perceive something, which changes in all these things, and ever remains the same. Thus there really seems nothing constant, eternal, and worthy of the name of a principle, but matter alone. Matter, considered absolutely, comprises all forms and dimensions. But the variety of forms which it assumes is not received from without, but is produced and engendered from within. When we say that something dies, it is merely a transition to a new life, a dissolution of one combination and the commencement of another." Or, to quote Professor Tyndall's Belfast address, referring to Bruno, the learned Professor said that the Italian philosopher's opinion was that "matter is not the mere naked, empty capacity which philosophers have pictured her to be, but the universal mother, who brings forth all things as the fruit

of her own womb." And yet, despite the fact that he looked upon Nature as containing within herself the power of producing all phenomena, he nevertheless believed that "God was the infinite intelligence, the cause of causes, the principle of all life and mind, the great activity, whose action we name the universe."

Thus Bruno's creed was Pantheistic. It is quite true, as modern theologians say, that Bruno was not an Atheist, though he was burned as one; but assuredly he died the death of a martyr to vindicate the great principle of Freethought. His writings soon may be forgotten, his philosophy regarded only with curiosity; but the memory of his honest, brave life and noble death will live till the last syllable of recorded time.

#### SPINOZA.

Spinoza was not only a great thinker who deserved to rank high among the most eminent of the world's philosophers, but he was something more than this: he was a great man, in the true sense of the word. His life was a poem in itself. Honest, independent, modest, and virtuous, he walked quietly through the earth, almost friendless and alone—censured only by those who knew not the purity of his life, and who were mentally incapable of understanding the depth and truth of his philosophy. But, though he was condemned and calumniated by the ignorant of his own day, Spinoza has since been transformed by some into a Saint; and those who once were disposed to look upon him with feelings akin to horror and detestation now speak of him with respect and admiration.

The fact is, Spinoza's life will bear the severest criticism. Tested by the strictest principles of morality, it was a life of such purity, goodness, generosity, and unselfishness that even "our friend the enemy" is constrained to admit that it was altogether blameless.

Baruch Despinoza, or Benedictus de Spinoza, was born on November 24th, 1632, at Amsterdam, and was the eldest and only son of a wealthy merchant, a descendant from Portuguese Jews, who had sought refuge in Holland from the terrible cruelties of the Inquisition. There were two other children in the family besides young Benedict—Miriam and Rebecca.



Of the early life of Spinoza we know very little. Our attention is first drawn to him while he is studying at a Jewish Academy, at which establishment he is endeavouring to qualify himself for a theological career. He is a very promising pupil, and the Rabbi, Saul Levi Morteira, predicts for him a prosperous career. At the age of fifteen so well read was Spinoza that, in the extent and accuracy of his Biblical knowledge, he was a match for any Rabbi. He put puzzling questions to his teacher, to which answers of a satisfactory character were seldom forthcoming.

At length his Sceptical spirit became so manifest that his teacher was bewildered and alarmed. At first Morteira tried to check Spinoza's disposition of inquiry; but, of course, the attempt proved fruitless. His Scepticism showed more alarming symptoms. He actually gave expression to a doubt concerning the truth of Scripture, and suggested that Biblical statements were hopelessly at variance with common sense. This was too much for some of the Jewish students, to whom Spinoza confided some of his opinions. Rumours regarding his heresy having reached the ears of the heads of the Jewish Synagogue, Spinoza was called upon to make submission and acknowledge his sin. This he resolutely refused to do. Finding that he could no longer conscientiously remain a member of the Synagogue, he withdrew. This was not enough. An interval was allowed, in which Spinoza was to reconsider his opinions, and, in the event of his not submitting, a threat of excommunication was made. All this, however, so far from bridging the difficulty, had the effect of widening the gulf between them. No doubt Spinoza's parents implored their son to give up his opinions, and believe what they believed. No doubt his sisters urged him, with many a tear, not to be so headstrong. But not even their persuasive eloquence—which, doubtless, was allowed to have its full weight—could alter his resolution. His was a strong conviction, which no appeal to the emotions could alter. The arguments of Spinoza's teacher having failed, threats followed; then a bribe was tried, and a pension of one thousand florins annually proposed to him; but all without avail. His determination was unalterable. The Rabbis were en-

raged at this refusal, and, it is believed, instigated some scoundrel to attempt the assassination of Spinoza. The attempt, however, was not successful. The ruffian waylaid the young heretic, and smote him from the rear; but the dagger penetrated the coat collar, and inflicted but a slight wound in the neck. Spinoza kept the coat for some years as an evidence of the sort of deeds religious fanaticism will lead men to perpetrate.

A greater exhibition of fanaticism soon followed; for on July 6th, 1656, a large crowd was gathered in the Jewish Synagogue at Amsterdam to witness the excommunication of the heretical Spinoza. We can imagine the pious horror expressed on the faces of the enraged assembly. Amid the wailing note of a great horn and the solemn lamentations of a fanatical crowd, the chanter rose and delivered the following anathema:—

With the judgment of the angels and the sentence of the saints we anathematise, execrate, curse, and cast out Baruch de Spinoza, the whole of the sacred community assembling in presence of the sacred books, with the six hundred and thirteen precepts written therein, pronouncing against him the anathema wherewith Joshua anathematised Jerico, the malediction wherewith Elisha cursed the children, and all the maledictions written in the book of the law. Let him be accursed by day and accursed by night; let him be accursed in his lying down and accursed in his rising up, accursed in going out and accursed in coming in. May the Lord never pardon or acknowledge him; may the wrath and displeasure of the Lord burn henceforth against this man, load him with all the curses written in the book of the law, raze out his name from under the sky; may the Lord sever him for ever from all the tribes of Israel, weigh him with all the maledictions of the firmament contained in the book of the law; and may all ye who are obedient to your God be saved this day. Hereby, then, are all admonished that none hold converse with him by word of mouth; none hold communication with him by writing; that no one do him any service, no one abide under the same roof with him, and no one approach within four cubits' length of him; and no one read any document dictated by him or written by his hand.

This reads very like the terrible curse in "The Jackdaw of Rheims":—

"But, what gave rise to no little surprise,  
No one seemed one penny the worse."

Spinoza seems to have treated the anathema and excommunication with the contempt they deserved. The world was wide, and, for a young man with his talents and classical knowledge, there were many opportunities of getting a good living. He soon found an engagement in the educational establishment of Dr. Francis Van den Ende, a man of exceptional attainments and of very liberal views. Van den Ende had a charming daughter, and Spinoza appears to have formed a deep attachment for her; but, when the young lady had grown to womanhood, Spinoza found that there was a wealthy rival in the field. The allurements of wealth and position presented so many charms as to quite fascinate Miss Van den Ende, and she accepted her wealthy suitor in preference to Spinoza. Young Spinoza bore his fate with becoming fortitude: hereafter he devoted himself to another mistress—to Philosophy, whom he served with all the ardour of his nature.

"Experience having taught me," he says, "that all the ordinary affairs of life are vain and futile, and that those things which I dreaded were only in themselves good or bad according as they moved my soul, I finally resolved on inquiring if there was anything truly good in itself, and capable of being communicated to man, a good which, everything else being rejected, could fill the soul entirely—whether, in short, that good existed which, if possessed, could give supreme and eternal happiness." And he came to the conclusion that the "supreme good" was only to be attained by "the union of the mind with all nature"—in other words, by the study of philosophy.

The rest of Spinoza's life may be told in a few lines. By acquiring the art of grinding and polishing lenses for optical purposes, he was enabled to earn a fair livelihood—at all events, sufficient for his small wants. His daily bread he earned by the labour of his hands. In the evenings he devoted himself to study and to writing.

In 1658 he left Amsterdam, after his services had again been solicited by the chief of the Synagogue, and we next find him residing at the house of a Christian friend, at Rhynsburg. Here he formed many happy friendships, among them being that of Dr. Meyer, Simon de Vries, and, above all, Henry Oldenburg.

In 1664 we find Spinoza at Voorburg, and two years subsequently he occupied the same rooms at Hague as Dr. Colerus, his biographer, afterwards lived in. Among Spinoza's best friends here was Jean de Witt, an enthusiastic Republican. The friendship of these two grew into a brotherly affection, and lasted till death parted them.

From De Witt Spinoza accepted a small pension; but many handsome gifts from other sources he modestly declined, saying that he had enough to satisfy his wants. For some years he suffered uncomplainingly from a chronic form of consumption. One day in the winter he was seized with a sudden difficulty in breathing; unhappily the attack lasted several hours, and terminated fatally, Spinoza passing peacefully away on Sunday, February 21st, 1679, at the age of forty.

Like Bruno, Spinoza was a Pantheist. He believed in God; but his God was not a person, but an essence. He believed in the one existence, "the one substance beneath all appearances, the cause of all things"—in fact, there was very little difference between Spinoza's Pantheism and modern Atheism, which makes the universe the one existence. Spinoza's chief works—those by which he has won general recognition, and, among the cultured, great favour—are his "Tractatus Theologico Politicus," which demonstrates the comparatively late origin and unreliability of the Pentateuch; and his profound work on "Ethics."

That Spinoza was a great logician is acknowledged on all hands. Every problem with which he dealt was subjected to a most searching analysis. And, though modern Freethinkers may not be able to accept his conclusions, for him they cannot but have the profoundest admiration, not alone on account of his greatness as a philosopher, but on account of the nobility of his life, its simplicity, its purity, its courage, its earnest devotion to truth, and, above all, its unpretentious heroism.