

Religion in the perspective of Ernest Renan

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Abstract:

The research deals with the idea of religion among the French thinker and orientalist Ernest Renan, how he approached it, and what are the intellectual and religious influences that contributed to shaping his vision of religion. Renan is considered a representative of the nineteenth-century thinkers who led a fierce campaign against inherited religion, the priesthood, and ecclesiastical control over Europe throughout the Middle Ages. Their vision was a mixture of historical criticism and a feverish enthusiasm for science in exchange for religion, to the point that some of them, like Renan, declared modern science the religion of the modern era.

During the research, I tried to answer several important questions: What are the origins of Renan's idea of religion?

How did the German philosophical school known as the Hegelian Left, whose most famous representatives were Feuerbach, Marx and Engels, influence the vision of French thinkers towards what is known as the humanization of religion?

I presented a critical chapter on Renan's view of religion and his position on religion in general and on Islam in particular.

Keywords: religion; Islam; historical criticism; philosophy; Semitic people; Aryan people; secularism.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Renan gave great importance to religion, as most of his research and studies revolved around religion, as indicated by the titles of his most famous books, such as: *Studies of Religious History and Criticism*, *History of the People of Israel*, *The Gospels*, *The Life of Jesus*, *The Apostles*, *Saint Paul*, *The Book of Job*, *Islam and Science*.

We find Renan saying in his book *Studies in the History of Religions*: "Religion is the most sublime and attractive manifestation of human nature".¹

In his vision of the history of religions, Renan was greatly influenced by the French evolutionary school, both Saint-Simon and Auguste Comte. Henri Pierre says: "Renan graduated from the clerical school with more faith in Saint-Simon and positivism."²

This effect appears clear in Renan's evolutionary vision of the history of religion. He said:

"At the beginning of his evolutionary life, man lived in a state of complete ignorance. He remained a fool for thousands of years, after spending thousands of years as an animal, and had barely emerged from childhood. It was difficult for human minds at this stage to

The reality of things is discovered. Primitive man imagined that space was inhabited by powerful, powerful forces that were quick to anger, but that they could be appeased and persuaded by supplication to them. Thus, out of his ignorance and fear, the primitive mind created a heavenly, divine world, and treated the Representatives of this world exactly as it was treated by those of a lower rank."³

In this research I will shed light on Renan's hypothesis regarding the history of religions and then follow it by presenting a critical vision of his hypothesis, in three main chapters and a conclusion containing the research results:

Chapter One: Ernest Renan and his intellectual formation.

Chapter Two: Renan's view of religion.

Chapter Three: A critical vision of Renan's approach to the religion and to Islam.

The conclusion: contains the most important results.

2. Ernest Renan and his intellectual formation

Ernest Renan, the historian, philosopher, and critic of religions, was

born in the ancient city of Trier, France, on February 28, 1823, to a very poor family.

He first studied at the "Saint-Nicolas de Chardonnay" school, and from there he moved to the famous "Saint-Slipes" religious institute, where he received lessons in German philosophy, especially the philosophy of Kant and Hegel.

During that period, he also began learning the Hebrew language, and this led him to doubt the texts of the Old Testament, their historicity, and the reliability of the prophecies of the New Testament. This took place between the years (1843–1845), which prompted him to leave the priestly profession.⁴

In this regard André Cresson said: "Renan felt the need to abandon the priesthood, not for sexual or metaphysical considerations, but for purely linguistic and jurisprudential reasons, and he expressed this in a letter to his sister. He could not hide from himself the contradiction of the texts that appear to be sacred, and the error of its traditional interpretation...that is what destroyed his faith."⁵

In the year 1845, Renan stopped believing in the immortality of the soul, and perhaps he stopped believing in the

existence of God, and in the divinity of Christ as well. Then he decided leaving the religious institute, seeking to obtain the academic degrees that would qualify him to teach at the university.

Renan was particularly interested in philology, so we can notice that Edward Said quoted some of Renan's phrases that indicate his reverence for this field, such as his saying: "The founders of the human mind are the philologists," and his saying: "Every progress that humanity has made since the fifteenth century can be traced to minds that we should call philology."⁶

As for Renan's political interests, he was greatly influenced by the French Revolution, and he considered the first socialist wave to be the beginning of the dawn of a new Christianity, which reminded him of the Hebrew prophets and the great Christian hopes related to changing the world. During this period, Renan wrote his great masterpiece, "The Future of Science" (*l'avenir de la science*), which He did not publish it until the end of his life in 1890.

In 1852, he obtained a doctorate in literature for a very profound thesis (*Averroes et l'averroïsme: essai historique*) and in 1860 he was commissioned to carry out a mission to Lebanon. In this year, Renan had edited

the first draft of the book “La vie de Jesus.”, “the life of Jesus”.

In 1862, Renan became (professor of Hebrew, Eastern and Semitic languages) at the Collège de France, and gave his inaugural lesson on “The Life of Jesus,” describing Jesus as “a man like no other.” As a result, he lost his chair and did not return to it until after Declaration of the Republic.⁷

As for Islamic and Arabic studies, despite his lack of proficiency in Arabic language – as he admitted himself – this did not diminish his interest in Islamic culture. He relied on the help of his fellow orientalists, and on some translations, and he issued several studies in this field, such as:

- A study on the book “Maqamat Al-Hariri” in 1853, (collected his works, vol. 2, pp. 199–208).

“Islamic Spain,” a study on Dozi’s book on the history of Andalusia (collected works, vol. 2, pp. 520–529).

- “Ibn Battuta,” a study he wrote on the occasion of the appearance of the first part of the investigation of the Arabic text, along with the French translation of Ibn Battuta’s Journey by C. Defrémery and San Guinetti. (Collected Works, Vol. 2, 530–539).

- A study on “Muruj al-Dhahab” by Al-Masoudi in 1873, (Collected his works, vol. 2, pp. 502–519).

- A study on “The Shahnameh” in 1877 (collected works, vol. 2, pp. 416–423).

In addition to other studies, Dr. Abdul Rahman Badawi points out that this large number of studies reveals a broad knowledge of the Arab heritage translated into modern European languages.⁸

In 1848, he obtained a professor’s degree in philosophy from the Faculty of Arts, from the University of Paris, and was ranked first.⁹

As for his writings, they are very diverse, and therefore we can divide them into:

1.1 Linguistic and philological works:

History of the general Semitic languages. which is divided into five sections:

The first: It relates to the origin of languages, and talks about the general characteristics of the Semitic peoples and their languages.

The second: It relates to the first stage of the development of the Semitic languages, the Hebrew stage.

Third: The second stage of the development of Semitic languages, the Aramaic stage.

Fourth: The third stage of the development of Semitic languages, the Arabic stage.

1.2 Writings on religions and the history of religions:

1- The Origins of Christianity, in six volumes, from 1863 to 1881.

" Les origins de Christianity", which includes: the life of Jesus, the Apostles, the Christian Church and the Gospels, Saint Paul and the Antichrist, and Marcus Aurelius.

2- The history of the people of Israel, from the year (1887) to the year (1892). Histoire de peuple d'Israël, which includes five volumes dealing with: the first life of the Semitic Bedouins, then the children of Israel in Canaan from the beginning until the establishment of the kingdom of David. Then the history of the kingdom. The unified era (the era of David and Solomon), then the history of each kingdom separately after their division, the Babylonian captivity, then the Jews during the Persian era, during

the Greek era, and finally in the Roman era.

It included a description of historical events and the social conditions of the people of Israel throughout those decades, in addition to the development of the Jewish religion. It devoted many chapters to its critical view of the Old Testament and other Hebrew writings.

3- Studies in the History of Religions. "Études d'histoire religion" 1857.

4- New studies in the history of religions 1884.

" Nouvelles etudes d'histoire religieuse", It covers the following topics:

Applying the experimental method to religion, pagan religions, comparative mythology, Bible translations, and an article about Spinoza that he delivered in The Hague in 1877.

5 - Translation and commentary on the Song of Songs.

6 - Translation and commentary on the Book of Ecclesiastes.

7 - Translation and commentary on the Book of Job.

1.3 Special philosophical works:

1- Ibn Rushd and Averroism in the year (1852 AD). *L'averroés et l'averroisme*, which is his doctoral thesis.

2- A treatise on ethics and criticism.

3 - Miscellaneous articles on history and travel." *Mélanges d'histoire et de voyage*" . It includes various articles about: Ancient Egypt 1865, Twenty Days in Sicily 1875, the Discovery of Nineveh 1853, French Language Sources 1853, Spanish Muslims 1853, and other articles.¹⁰

Renan has held many positions, including:

Position of professor at the Collège de France, 1862 AD.

He was a member of the French Academy in 1879.

Finally, Renan's intellectual and scientific journey ended with his death, he died in October 1892.¹¹

3. Renan's view of religion

Renan's vision of religion was a confused and ambiguous vision, as he placed pagan religion and revealed religion in the same place and rejected them completely, claiming that they were mythical.

Renan points out that "the set of beliefs that relate to the origins of the world, to fate, and to the supernatural forces that we must satisfy, are deeply mythical and ridiculous, whether they are those that believe in idolatry or polytheism, or even those that believe in the monotheism of God".¹²

He adds, saying: "Accumulated experience supported by accurate science has proven to us the invalidity of this primitive hypothesis that holds that there are other active causes in existence that are separate from human wills. There is nothing in nature that indicates the existence of a higher will above man. Nature is strict and its laws are blind, so there is no prayer." Neither supplication can heal a sick person nor bring victory in a battle".¹³

Thus, Renan believes that the idea of the existence of a God is nothing but a perception produced by primitive man to confront a frightening reality, and that this idea graduated from pluralism and paganism – with the growth of human consciousness – until it reached the belief in one God.

In this position, he adopts the evolutionary vision of Auguste Comte, He argued that the mind passes through three successive states in its knowledge of things: the theological state, in which

phenomena are explained by divine forces, and the metaphysical state, in which abstract and impersonal forces replace the gods. Finally, the positive state, in which he abandons all search for causes, and is content with determining laws, or fixed relationships between phenomena.

Concerning the history of religions, Comte argued that man's religious starting point was idolatry, as man in that period believed that the world was inhabited by countless wills controlling him. From idolatry he moved to polytheism, where he attributed it to every natural phenomenon, such as the sea or the air, to a distinct God with specific characteristics, and from polytheism he moved to monotheism, where one God replaced multiple gods, and became one God with complete power, and external to the world.

The final stage after the theological state, which is the stage to which the thinkers of the nineteenth century devoted themselves, consists of obliterating the idea of one God, and replacing this idea with impersonal forces whose necessary action allows for the prediction of facts. Through a new effort, man investigates the means of prediction in laws or established relationships.

This last stage is the positive stage in which man stops populating nature with imagination, as in the two previous cases, and the mental system envisioned by science becomes a representative of the real system.¹⁴

we should say that the theorists of evolutionary theory have relied on an assumption for which there is no evidence, which is to measure spiritual faculties and sensations based on physical powers and mental and experiential acquisitions.

Just as a person moves in his physical development from weakness to strength, and in his mental development from ignorance to knowledge, it may also appear that he began his life with absurdity and superstition, and did not reach this belief except after effort and struggle. But in reality, what happened may be the opposite, which is That his lack of preoccupations and material ambitions had left in him a deep void for contemplations that developed his religious and spiritual senses and feelings.¹⁵

Renan himself admits that it was the simple nomadic life of the Semitic nomads in the desert that led them to monotheism, and that, on the contrary, the complex nature of the Aryan race

led them to deify the elements of nature and to pluralism.¹⁶

It is possible that the ancient pagan religions were the result of the decomposition and distortion of a previous true religion, and many researchers have confirmed that a vague and unclear idea of monotheism prevailed in early humanity, and then there was a transition to paganism and polytheism.¹⁷

So I can say that Renan developed a secular idea of religion that made it closer to social reform than a religion.

We find Renan following Simon in his belief that religion cannot disappear from the world, but rather it can transform from one form to another, and therefore, he believes that if religion is the belief that is accompanied by enthusiasm that culminates in the conviction of sincerity and belief in sacrifice. Science is what we must devote all our religiosity to, and what is meant by religiosity is that enthusiasm and faith.¹⁸

"Science is the religion of the future, because the function of religion is the fulfillment the needs of society, and only science is capable of solving human problems that have always remained unsolved."¹⁹

3.1 What is the meaning of science in Renan's perspective?

In this context, we must clarify what Renan means by the word "science," because it has a special meaning for him.

He believes that history is the necessary form of science, and of everything that is subject to becoming. In his view, history includes (the history of nature and the history of humanity).

The history of humanity is only one chapter of a history of infinite dimensions. The history of human and plant species, and the geological history of the Earth, which leads us to the history of the solar world, which is inseparable from the history of astronomy, as well as the history of the first elements of atoms and molecules, of which the universe appears to be composed. Therefore, science will not be science unless it succeeds in Establish a general history for everything.²⁰

There is an important issue that Renan pointed out about history of humanity that the most of history that reliance on the Old Testament as a historical source was prompted by the lack of the basic elements on which the critic relies in his work, Like coins and inscriptions. We only have two large manuscripts dating back to the period

before the captivity. It is true that Egyptology and Assyriology clarify some aspects of the Hebrew documents, but they add very little direct information to the historical texts in the Bible.

As for the history of Josephus, Renan considers it not an argument and does not rely on it about ancient historical stages.

But concerning the Achaemenid period, the Herodian period (relative to Herod), and the revolutions of the first century the writings of Josephus are of great value as an original, synchronized document of events.²¹

But what about Renan's view of principles of religion?

As for the basic principles of religion; It is the existence of God, the immortality of the soul, and the afterlife. Renan thought that the best he could think about these matters was: It is to consider them as hypotheses that have not yet been proven, just like ether and electrical, optical, and thermal fluids, which we fully realize are nothing but symbols and appropriate means for explaining phenomena, and therefore the thinker must act as if God and the soul exist.

3.2 What Renan's think about Islam?

As for his position on the Islamic religion, he accused it of being hostile to science and that it was an obstruction to human progress. He considered that monotheism led the Semitic peoples towards ignorance and stagnation.

Unlike the Aryan peoples, who were led by the idea of polytheism to intellectual pluralism and mental richness, while the Semitic peoples were peoples of barren thought.

However, he could not deny the aesthetics of this religion until the end. He says in his lectures entitled Islam and Science, which he delivered at the Sorbonne in 1883, and which were published among the complete works: "Islam has beautiful aspects as a religion, and I have never entered a mosque without being overcome by a warm feeling. Shall I declare it? It is the feeling of a kind of regret for being not a Muslim."²²

He also showed a kind of fairness towards the Prophet of Islam, and he was one of the first orientalists to express their dissatisfaction with the distorted view of the Holy Prophet, which prevailed for many centuries in Europe, and therefore he said about him, may

God bless him and grant him peace: "Muhammad appears to us as a generous, kind, sensitive, and sincere human being. He is devoid of hatred, has good intentions and is a kind and generous personality. When he extends his hand to shake someone's hand, he immediately hugs him and never withdraws his hand first. He celebrates children, shows great compassion for women and the weak, and says that heaven is under the feet of mothers".²³

4. A critical vision of Renan's approach to the religion and to Islam

As we mentioned, Renan was influenced in his view of religion by the German Hegelian school, especially the left wing.

"Hegel is considered the foundation of the "humanizing" trend of God that began with the Hegelian left and Feuerbach in particular. However, Hegel unfortunately lacked the courage to push him to the inevitable conclusion, which consists of returning everything that is above man to man, and everything that is supernatural to nature "²⁴.

In this context, Franklin L. Baumer says: "Although Hegel himself did not

participate in the creation of the religion of human, he laid its foundations.

He subjected God to the flow of time, thus mixing the divine mind with the human mind. God, after Hegel stripped him of his personality as an absolute or latent spirit, rose or became Aware of himself, this was achieved step by step in history and based on human thought, then Hegel's followers took the step that Hegel refrained from taking: they transformed God into man."²⁵

Collins states that the Hegelian conception of God, which in reality is an attempt to restore the Christian faith under a philosophical guise, the real error is that it depicts the relationship between God and man in a dialectical manner between the absolute (God) and the relative (man), making the relationship a dialectical rivalry, a relationship of rivalry and dissonance. It is also identifiable, as the Hegelian left movement is based on a false premise, which is the identification between Hegel's absolute spirit and God.

The dialectical relationship – with which Hegel described the relationship of the absolute and the relative – led this direction to believe that "for God to be enriched, man must be poor, and for

God to be everything, man must be nothing.²⁶

Hegel's doctrine of divinity cannot connect the infinite and the finite except by way of mutual opposition or antagonism, that is, in a way in which the divine nature is glorified only at the expense of human nature, which is the necessary result of Hegel's dialectic. In addition, the theory of religious alienation to which Hegel was also devoted was It is a contributing factor in this school's belief that in order for human values and other natural values to flourish, belief in a transcendent God must be effectively excluded, except for the correct conception of the relationship between God and man in a way that is supreme, creator and created, rather than the dialectical bond between the absolute and the relative.²⁷

Which makes the relationship between them one of different ways to achieve the act of existence.²⁸

The relationship between them is not a relationship of positive versus negative, but rather a relationship of existence and causality between the cause of existence and existing things.

If Hegel generated a distorted and wrong idea about God and his relationship with man, and that this was

one of the factors that contributed to the emergence of the Hegelian left movement with an atheistic character.

It is possible to say that the distortion of the Jewish and Christian religions, which remained present in Western consciousness, was the main reason behind the philosophical current that sought to completely deny the existence of God. This is why we find both Nikolai Berdyaev and Martin Buber declaring – as Collins tells us – that "the historical emergence For natural atheism from the Hegelian absolute...is the punishment of divine providence for the distortion of the Judeo-Christian concept of God".²⁹

The assumption that monotheism emerged from the womb of paganism due to evolution is a claim for which there is no evidence. We can say that a large number of orientalist have misinterpreted the ancient inscriptions of the civilizations of the ancient East. The doctrine of monotheism has always been present in the depths of the religions of the ancient east, where profoundly significant monotheistic expressions appeared, adjacent to expressions that talk about multiple gods.

The human being of ancient times looked at natural phenomena in a

diagnostic manner, that is, as spirits. If the modern human being uses expressions such as the set of laws responsible for the fall of rain to explain what happens in the cycle of life.

Ancient man saw gods behind these phenomena, but he believed that they were all created, just as everything in the universe was created by God.

This is what is understood from ancient texts. Given that the divine presence is not directly perceived, the class of priests who benefit from vows contributed to the disintegration of divine monotheism in the minds of those peoples and their confinement to the sanctification of the gods. Thus, the idea of monotheism began to gradually disappear from the minds of those peoples, and they began to worship the means through which they approached the One God.

Modern archaeological excavations, such as the excavations of Mari on the banks of the Euphrates and ancient Ras Shamra (Ogarid) in Syria, confirm the existence of traces of the worship of the one god El since before the fourth millennium BC.³⁰

In short, monotheism, which is the religion of nature, was subjected to distortion, and then pluralism and

paganism appeared, after the distortion of this concept.

As for Renan's claim that monotheism led the Semitic peoples towards ignorance and stagnation, the historical reality of the Islamic religion as a pure monotheistic religion refutes this claim, as the peoples who believed in it advanced at a time when the Aryan civilization – whose progress and civilization Renan keeps praising – was falling into a deep slumber.

Honke says: "The Greek successors to the throne of civilization did not come from Byzantium or Syria, nor did they come from Persia. Rather, the new masters of civilization came from the heart of the barren desert to suddenly assume the undisputed leadership position among the world's civilizations for eight centuries."³¹

Conclusion

At the end of this research, which was primarily concerned with shedding light on the vision of religion of one of the most important philosophers of religion in France in the modern era, Ernest Renan, the following becomes clear:

1 – Renan was interested in applying the historical critical approach in his study of religions.

2 -Renan was influenced by German philosophy, especially the Hegelian school, in his vision of religion.

3 -The evolutionary idea of religion that Renan devoted to in his works on religions came as a result of the distortion to which religious texts in Christianity and Judaism were subjected.

4 - Hegel's dialectic and the relationship of the absolute to the relative, which he devoted to, is not a mental image of the Christian vision of the God-man.

5 - On the other hand, Renan's portrayal of religion as hostile to science and progress was a natural result of the intellectual and religious climate that prevailed in Europe throughout the 16 and 17 th era. The religious doctrine dominating Europe was behind its crisis with religion, and the paradox of its sayings and doctrines to reason and sense.

also the Holy Books - Which is considered its basic foundation - were full of contradictions and fallacies, and its extreme disagreement with the data of modern science, as well as the corruption of the morals of the church fathers and their hostility to science, leading to a massive revolution against

religion, led by most of the thinkers of that era, and many of them ended up denying religion and revelation. Totally and in detail.

6 - The evolutionary view of the origin of religion, which Renan promoted in his works on religions, does not stand up to modern archaeological explorations that confirm the primitiveness of the monotheism hypothesis in early humans.

Modern archaeological excavations, such as the excavations of Mari on the banks of the Euphrates and ancient Ras Shamra (Ogarid) in Syria, confirm the existence of traces of the worship of the one god El since before the fourth millennium BC.

Therefore, Therefore, there is no real and clear justification for making the beginning of religions, the pluralism and paganism and then developing in their final stage into monotheistic religion. It is very likely - that the first beginning was primarily monotheistic.

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FOOTNOTES:

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