

WHEN HUMANITY WAS IN THE HUMANITIES

Peiresc in the 1630s

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Early modern scholars do not usually provide much of an example of tolerance. *Odium Philologicum* is almost a byword for the anti-Socratic disjunction between learning and wisdom that, as much as anything else, has made *erudite* a disreputable adjective. However much “intellectuals” in the modern era have developed their identity dialectically, against the type of the early modern polymath, they have nevertheless inherited this same unhappy disjunction between knowing many things and living wisely *as a result*.

Almost nothing is more common today than the deployment as intellectual argument of claims radically at variance with the way in which the thinker actually lives—as a friend, or spouse, or parent, or child. Isaiah Berlin once remarked on the self-refuting character of moral relativism: in deciding between different life courses, a clear, if implicit, statement of priorities is always being made. By this standard, too many intellectual arguments are simply incoherent.

And yet it does not have to be this way. Indeed it was not always so. The example of Montaigne of course hovers into view. But so too does the less well-known life of another Frenchman, who was born in the year the first edition of

Montaigne's *Essays* was published, and who like him was hailed as a "modern Socrates": Nicolas-Claude Fabri de Peiresc (1580–1637).¹

Peiresc was born into a family of the lower, legal aristocracy, and after early education by the Jesuits, studied law at Padua, Montpellier, and Aix. His travels through the Republic of Letters took him as a young man to Italy, the Low Countries, and England. He inherited his uncle's seat in the local parliament (more court than legislative body), through which he came into contact with the neo-Stoic orator du Vair who, in turn, introduced him into the Parisian circle of the humanist historian Jacques-Auguste de Thou. Although Peiresc lived at the court of Louis XIII for seven years, the bulk of his life was spent in Provence.

That he is known at all today has almost nothing to do with such details of "official" biography. Rather, his small share of fame was earned by an omnivorous intellectual curiosity that brought him into epistolary contact with the far reaches of the globe and with nearly every intelligent European, in pursuit of learning's advancement. He was an astronomer, botanist, classicist, zoologist, and nearly everything else in between. He was also at the very forefront of the very beginning of Oriental studies in Europe. It was this enterprise that brought him into contact with Rabbi Salomon Azubi and Athanasius Kircher.²

We know little of Azubi's life. He was born in Sophia, probably in the 1580s, and is first reported in France in 1619 at the head of the rabbinical court in Carpentras. He came to Peiresc's attention in 1630 and their surviving correspondence dates from the years 1632 to 1635. By 1636 Azubi had already left Provence for Turin and the next year he is found in Livorno. He was still there in 1647 when we lose track of him.

Kircher, by contrast, a Jesuit who fled the sack of Würzburg to Avignon in 1632, whence he came into contact with Peiresc, and then moved on to Rome in 1633, has become one of the best known and celebrated of early modern scholars. Famed in his own time for astounding learning and an astonishing imagination, he was the author of a series of monumental, if not uniformly influential, books on symbolism, language, sound, light, and space travel. He used the Jesuit order as a personal procurement service so that his Museum Kircherianum was soon the talk of Rome. It survived long after him only to be resurrected, in typically Kircherian fashion, in Los Angeles a few years ago, suitably transformed into the Museum of Jurassic Technology.

What Azubi and Kircher had in common was Peiresc. Three letters from

1. See Peter N. Miller, *Peiresc's Europe: Learning and Virtue in the Seventeenth Century* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2000).

2. See Peter N. Miller, "The Mechanics of Christian-Jewish Intellectual Collaboration in Seventeenth-Century Provence: N.-C. Fabri de Peiresc and Salomon Azubi," in *Hebraica Veritas? Christian Hebraists and the Study of Juda-*

ism in Early Modern Europe, ed. Allison Coudert and Jeffrey Shoulson (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004), 71–101; Miller, "Copts and Scholars: Athanasius Kircher in Peiresc's Republic of Letters," in *Athanasius Kircher: The Last Man Who Knew Everything*, ed. Paula Findlen (London: Routledge, 2003), 133–48.

Azubi to Kircher, in Hebrew, survive (those to Peiresc are in French). The longest one is undated and is addressed to Kircher at Carpentras. It has been suggested that Kircher might have visited there in 1632, but given its proximity to Avignon, it is possible that he visited there at any time and any number of times.³ The letter takes up a query for information about the calculation of the Jewish calendar. Azubi answered, rhetorically, by identifying himself with the ancient Hillel who was asked (by a gentile) to summarize the entire Torah while standing on one foot. After protesting that everything he was going to say was found in the Talmud, Azubi proceeded to lay down the major rules for establishing the calendar, calculating the leap years, and fixing the new moons. He concluded by suggesting to Kircher that, if he remained uncertain about some of the explanations, they should meet in person: “tell me if you wish to come to my house of study, or if I should go to yours”—though observing that it might be easier if Kircher came to him because he possessed the books whose arguments they would need to study.⁴

A second letter bears the date of 23 Nisan 5393 (April 3, 1633) and responds to a request for an interpretation of the high priest’s breastplate and phylacteries. Azubi answered Kircher’s question with another question, explaining that, since no more specific theme was suggested, he did not know whether Kircher wanted only concrete information or if he was interested in the mystical interpretation, expounding which “would demand a great deal of time because I will have to prepare for you almost a small treatise.” More straightforward information, he noted, was very easy to come by, and he referred Kircher to the appropriate verses in the Pentateuch. The letter’s postscript asked if he could borrow for a short time “that little book” on “science and astronomy” (“chochmah limudit”).⁵

These are arresting images, of Kircher sitting in the *bet midrash* in Carpentras, or of Azubi thumbing through Kircher’s library, and they suggest a reality of learned exchange taking place beyond the testimony of the existing correspondence. But the reality of this relationship was more typical: the Jesuit’s engagement with the “native informant” was part of a strategy that aimed at conversion.

A letter from Peiresc to Kircher of August 3 notes in passing that he ought to have received “the response of poor Rabbi Salomon Azubi to your paper. He is very much your servant.”⁶ What was this “paper,” and what was this “response”?

3. Jules Dukas, “Notice Complémentaire,” in Philippe Tamizey de Larroque and Dukas, “Lettres Inédites écrites à Peiresc par Salomon Azubi Rabbin de Carpentras (1632–33),” *Revue des Etudes Juives* 11 (September 1885), reprinted in *Les Correspondants de Peiresc*, 2 vols. (Geneva: Slotkine, 1972), 1:5–37, at 19.

4. Azubi to Kircher, undated, Rome, Pontifical Gregorian University, APUG 568 fols. 277r–v, 276av. The letters from Azubi to Kircher, and from Peiresc to Kircher, are cited from “The Correspondence of Athanasius

Kircher: The World of a Seventeenth-Century Jesuit,” 150.217.52.68/kircher/index.html/.

5. Azubi to Kircher, 23 Nisan 5393/ April 3, 1633, Rome, Pontifical Gregorian University, APUG 568 fol. 279r.

6. “Cependain vous recevrez la responce du pauvre R. Salomon Azuby à vostre papier. Il est fort vostre serviteur, et s’eau retourné chez luy à Carpentras.” Peiresc to Kircher, August 3, 1633, Rome, Pontifical Gregorian University, APUG 568 fol. 371v.

The answer to these questions is found in a letter from Azubi to Kircher, written on July 21, 1633, while at Peiresc's home in Aix. He had been spending the month with Peiresc, studying the stars by night and Jewish texts by day. Azubi began: "The Lord and Senator, the councillor de Peiresc [*sic*] showed me the arguments that you sent him to show me the true difference between Christians and Jews." Since the letter had not been addressed to him, he would not have replied except "to please the will of the Lord of Peiresc." However, because it was forbidden for Jews, "as we are oppressed under the hand of the gentiles," to debate Christians in matters of theology, Azubi requested that Kircher obtain permission from the lord of the place, or from the inquisitor, for him to respond point by point. And then, he promised, Kircher would hear "things that you have never heard in your life."⁷

So now we know. Kircher was proselytizing his Jewish collaborator and was told off. There is no immediate reply to Azubi's request for an intellectual "safe passage." But in a letter to Peiresc that must have been written almost immediately after receipt of Peiresc's, the same one that included Father Scheiner's account of the trial, condemnation, and abjuration of Galileo, Kircher launched into a tirade against Azubi. Kircher condemned Azubi's "inhumanity, insubordination, and manifest haughtiness—in one word, the sign of a Jewish spirit and stiff-neckedness." This was manifested in translations from the Hebrew he had made that threatened "to pervert our sacred law" and which Kircher was transmitting so that Peiresc could "see the perverse heart of the Jewish genius."⁸

7. Azubi to Kircher, Rome, Pontifical Gregorian University, APUG 568 fol. 298r: "[To] the precious spirit and man of wisdom. Learning and science is his portion. The wise and learned Father Athanasius: The Lord and Senator, the councillor de Peiresc, showed me the arguments that you sent to him to show to me on the true difference that is between the Christians and the Jews. And since you did not write to me it was not expected that I should write you, except to satisfy the will of the Lord de Peiresc and to fulfill his commandment have I written to you this letter. In short: and I say that you know already that we are oppressed beneath the hand of the Christians and we do not have the right to speak on the matter of faith what is in our hearts, and that our words are built on the foundation of truth and justice. Therefore, my Lord, this I ask of you, that you ask permission for me from the Lord of the place, the vice-legate, or from the Lord inquirer, that is, the Inquisitor, that we be given the permission to answer your words. And then you will see that you were not right. I will answer you and show you the many errors in your words in what you relate to us and our faith. And I have already shown some of them to the Lord de Peiresc. And without this permission I cannot answer you in writing on your arguments even if all or most of them are far from the

truth. Therefore, try to obtain the permission mentioned above, and you will hear a thorough answer to your words—things that you never heard in your life. Things good and sweet. And with this I will bring my words to an end with a prayer to God to raise you up on the wings of heavenly victories as you desire and as desire those who love you. Solomon Azubi the Sepharadi. Written in Aix, the day 21 Juillet in the year 1633 to their way of counting."

8. "Ad literas porro Rabbi Salomonis quod attinet, nescio quid in iis inhumanitatis, contumaciae, & manifestae superbae, uno verbo Signa Judaici ingenii, & durae Cerviris deprehenderim. Verum omittere non potui quin eas ex hebraeo in Latinum translatas vobis transmitterem, ut D.V. aspiciat coram perversitatem ingenii Judaici, ut dum ad corum bonum laboramus, ut convertantur et vivam. Uti magis, ex insita quadam virulentia, in sactam legem nostram pervertantur. plura non scribo. D.V. facile ex literis eius superbiam deprehendet" (Kircher to Peiresc, August 9, 1633, M.S. F.fr. 9531, fol.214v). Underlining is Peiresc's. This letter was for filing purposes labelled by Peiresc "de GALIILEI ABIURATIONE" and, below, "de SALMONE AZUBIO." Note that the original of Kircher's letter (B.N. F.fr. 9538 f.228) omits any mention of Azubi in its filing titles, nor are these passages underlined.

Kircher was, in this instance, the typical early modern scholar: bilious, always ready to quarrel and quick to seize on differences of personality as a reflection of different—and diminished—intellectual attainment. Peiresc was the opposite. Not only did Kircher's attack not damage Peiresc's close relations with Azubi, it actually compelled Peiresc to defend him. In his reply to Kircher of August 17, Peiresc tried to explain away the disagreement between his two friends as a consequence of stylistic "rudeness," which testified to the "barbarousness and rusticity of his birthplace." Azubi's flowery Hebrew sounded exalted, but it did not take into consideration the nature of the recipient and possible misinterpretation—presumably accentuated by the gap between high rhetorical Hebrew and Kircher's more basic knowledge. "Since I have found him of such good nature in every other thing and so modest," Peiresc concluded, "I would have a hard time believing that he had the slightest bad intention." In fact, Peiresc indicated that Azubi had conveyed his sense of their disagreement, arguing that Kircher and the Christians were ascribing to Jews beliefs that they did not actually have and then trying to persuade the Jews to give these up. Peiresc nowhere conceded Kircher's main claim.

Azubi remained one of Peiresc's correspondents and part of his web of local assistants. Peiresc's defense of the rabbi is an extraordinary example of religious toleration in early-seventeenth-century Europe. Still, one is hard pressed to say whether it is more extraordinary than the simple fact of Peiresc's treatment of Azubi as an intellectual interlocutor and informant no different from the many Catholics and Protestants who filled similar roles in his network.

Later in that same summer of 1633, Kircher fled from Provence to Rome, without telling Peiresc or even soliciting a letter of recommendation to any of Peiresc's colleagues in Rome, into whose midst he now came as a celebrated immigrant. Why did Kircher behave so strangely? Because, it seems, his "key" to Egyptian hieroglyphs was exposed by Peiresc as a fraud in a meeting that Kircher had deferred for five months but that ended as badly as he probably anticipated. In Rome, at least, Kircher would not have to endure that sort of scrutiny.

Yet, despite being disappointed intellectually and humiliated socially—Kircher's circle in Rome included Peiresc's closest allies, Cardinal Francesco Barberini and Cassiano dal Pozzo—Peiresc kept in touch with the Jesuit. And, in the years that followed, even as Kircher's plans grew more grandiose and his commitment to "science" ever more tenuous, Peiresc remained an erstwhile correspondent and guide: encouraging, counseling, cajoling. Even as he found so much of what Kircher was now thinking about outlandish, he never dropped him, always hoping that some worthwhile intellectual by-product might emerge.

Kircher did eventually publish his book on Coptic studies—the very subject matter that had first drawn Peiresc to him years before. Yet, the appearance

of *Prodromus Coptus* in 1636 did not elicit from Peiresc any sense of satisfaction at a project brought to successful completion. He sent a selection to friends in Paris with the disclaimer that “I hardly have the courage to send you his interpretation which seems to me scarcely supported, nor scarcely like nor appropriate to the place where it is.” He urged them not to circulate it “so as not to detract too much from the reputation that this good man had acquired.”⁹ Otherwise, in his vast network of correspondence, the book’s appearance made scarcely a ripple. To Kircher himself, Peiresc offered congratulation but also admonition. “Judging from the work you are doing now,” Peiresc wrote, “you can improve a lot.” “You understand well what I am telling you.”¹⁰

It was in his letters to Claude Saumaise, the other great expert in Europe on Coptic, who was based at the Protestant University of Leiden, that Peiresc spoke freely. Neither man liked what he read. We ought to listen carefully to what they said. In a long letter of November 29, 1636, Peiresc described *Prodromus* as “this poor book” whose reading must have provided Saumaise with some “exercise and escape from a few hours’ boredom.” He was sorry that he was unable to furnish “a pasture more worthy of your rare spirit.”

At this point, Peiresc’s humanity took over. He insisted that Saumaise’s own work

will certainly be well received by everyone and even more praiseworthy and glorious if you spare that poor man, as you promised me and which I accept with all my heart and take as a particular favor. Not that this poor man did not merit being rapped on the knuckles, since he has dispensed so many things that were not permissible to him, and presumed for himself more than he was owed. But if you will pardon him, you will not fail to do something meritorious, since it is not from malice that he failed but rather from the habit of letting himself be persuaded by all things at the slightest appearance without knowing to deepen them and excavate the unknown truth.

If we stopped here, the contrast posed would be between an intolerant Jesuit and a tolerant antiquarian. But the dual portrait could be fleshed out in different ways, and Peiresc offered a second reason for going easy on Kircher—one that reminds us of the difference between learning well and living well; reminds us, moreover, of the need to make the former serve the latter.

Kircher was, Peiresc continued in his letter to Saumaise, a good-natured man. In Provence, for example, Kircher advocated

9. Peiresc to Dupuy, May 13, 1636, *Lettres de Peiresc*, ed. Philippe Tamizey de Larroque, 7 vols. (Paris, 1888–98), 3:484.

10. Peiresc to Kircher, October 30, 1636, Rome, APUG 568, fol. 216r.

innocently, among his friends, all sorts of things however incompatible with the spirit of the Company with which he was engaged, such as concerning the movement of the earth according to the suppositions of Copernicus, with the infinity of consequences that follow, as well as concerning other maxims right conforming to those of the liberties of the Gallican Church. [All] which merits respecting and caring for him, totally differently from what one would have done otherwise.¹¹

This attitude of Peiresc's is, I think, even more extraordinary than his religious tolerance. For it shows us the sort of thinking that made it possible for him to transcend obvious differences that—elsewhere in the Republic of Letters, not to mention the republics of Europe—provoked disagreement and violence. Peiresc recognized that scholarship not only does not occur in a vacuum but that it cannot occur in a vacuum. Rule of law, in states ruled by law, enabled individual inquiry, and only this freedom made scholarship possible. Scholars had the “luxury” to disagree only because they had the prior “luxury” to think. Kircher had once acknowledged this principle and so, according to Peiresc, deserved gentle handling in public—the implication being that those who opposed rule of law in the political world might not be as worthy of the benefit of the doubt in the realm of scholarship.

How many scholars, at the time or since, have been so able to keep their sense of priorities? Peiresc in 1633 defended the Jew Azubi because his personal identity was a fact that bore no relation to his intellectual integrity. In 1636 Peiresc defended Kircher because his failings as a scholar paled in significance to his being an influential Jesuit who, once upon a time, had defended the civil state and freedom of expression. In neither case did Peiresc ignore the superficial facts so much as look beyond them to what mattered more. In the seventeenth-century clash between a civil order that facilitated free inquiry, and a fundamentalism that denounced both, Peiresc took his measure of people as people. In this, as in many other ways, the antiquarian from Provence is of anything but antiquarian interest.¹²

11. Peiresc to Saumaise, November 29, 1636, Peiresc, *Lettres à Claude Saumaise et à son entourage: 1620–37*, ed. Agnès Bresson (Florence: L. S. Olschki, 1992), 319–21.

12. I tried to think more broadly about how Peiresc would look today in “Peiresc’s Europe: Then and Now,” *Nexus* 42 (2005): 161–71 [in Dutch].