

---

H-France Review Vol. 16 (December 2016), No. 288

André Stanguennec. *Ernest Renan: De l'idéalisme au scepticisme*. Coll. Romantisme et Modernités. Paris : Honoré Champion. 2015. 321pp. Notes, bibliography, and index. 55.00 €. (pb). ISBN 978-2-7453-2914-1.

Review by Mary Pickering, San Jose State University.

Ernest Renan (1823-1892) was a dominant scholar in nineteenth-century France, though one who has been somewhat forgotten today except perhaps for being a second-generation positivist because of his promotion of a “religion of science” in his famous *L'avenir de la science* (1890). Little has been written about him in English. Edward Said famously presented Renan as an arrogant Orientalist.[1] Zeev Sternhell found him to be an anti-Enlightenment figure on a par with Edmund Burke and Oswald Spengler.[2] In her recent work, Jan Goldstein concurred with both scholars that he contributed to the anti-Semitism of the day. But she also examines Renan as an intensely introspective man who illustrates in his struggles of the 1840s that post-revolutionary bourgeois men, thanks in part to the influence of Victor Cousin, developed a unified, active sense of self, one that threatened the Catholic Church.[3] Covering his entire life and works, André Stanguennec goes further in presenting a complex picture of Renan as a person torn by inner conflicts.

Stanguennec is a French philosopher who specializes in German idealism, and he situates Renan firmly in the context of his time, discussing what he learned from Kant, Hegel, Fichte, and Schleiermacher, often through the lectures and books of Victor Cousin. He also makes valuable comparisons between Renan and Nietzsche, Mallarmé, and Cassirer. The result is a very rich, multifaceted look at this French philosopher. From his close readings of Renan's many works, Stanguennec argues that he was an idealist, whose “ideals” consisted of syntheses of opposites. Although Stanguennec admires Renan, he is very critical of these syntheses, which he finds lacking in rigor and proof. He suggests that at the end of his life, the ambivalences that marked his philosophy turned Renan into a skeptic.

Stanguennec first explores the contradictions in Renan's upbringing and personality, using the tools of existential psychology. Born in 1823 in Tréguier in Brittany, Renan suffered from losing his alcoholic republican father at age five; such a loss may have incurred a fervent belief in another father, God. Renan's sister, Henriette, had their father's melancholic disposition, while his royalist-leaning, religious mother exuded gaiety, a characteristic that he inherited. Stanguennec suggests that his mother was the origin of the imaginative, aesthetic components of his personality. Stanguennec also argues that Renan early on felt split between a “feminine” type of religious yearning, encapsulated in love—especially his love for his sister and mother—and a “masculine” desire to learn. He hoped to find “collaboration” between both the mind and the heart (p. 28). Devoted to constructing his own self, as Goldstein also points out, Renan often explored this “bipolarité” in his ego (p. 24). Stanguennec wisely takes a skeptical approach to some of Renan's deterministic explanations, such as his pronouncement that his nature was split because he was part Gascon thanks to his mother, who had southern roots, and part Breton/Celtic thanks to his father. But Stanguennec does stress that splits in his personality resulted in a “certain indécision souriante,” which made him suspend his judgment when he considered opposite positions. A

passionate individual, Renan both prized and hated his father, liked constitutional monarchies but appreciated democracies, loved and despised the common people, felt attraction and repulsion for Jews, and could not figure out what he thought about God. “Son art de la construction du sens” was “savamment ambigu,” unlike the dogmatic positivist philosophy of Auguste Comte, which he studied but disliked (p. 21).

The works of various scholars also fed into Renan’s predilection for upholding opposites and his growing skepticism. When he went to the seminary of Saint-Sulpice in 1843, he learned philology, German, and Hebrew from Father Le Hir. After the latter introduced him to contradictions in the Bible, Renan had a religious crisis and stopped believing in Christ’s divinity and the supernatural. Eager as always to find his authentic self, he felt the need for liberty. In 1845, he abandoned his plan to become a priest, a decision that occasioned an intense drama within him because he felt he was betraying his mother and his substitute fathers, especially Father Le Hir. Rather than completely abandoning religion per se, he devoted himself with religious fervor to becoming a scholar. Renan grew closer to his educated sister, who taught him the importance of German and the sciences, became a second mother to him, and understood that his “*libido religiosa*” was the “sublimation de la *libido sexualis*” and would now become a “*libido sciendi*” (“*lust for knowledge*”) (p. 42). Using Freudian references to oedipal conflicts, Stanguennec points out that Renan wished above all to surpass his “fathers”—the priests and the scholars (Etienne Quatremère, Eugène Burnouf, and Augustin Thierry) who influenced him—in his love of knowledge and of Mother Nature–History. His goal was the “union de l’infini romantique et du fini rationnel, de la celtitude judéo-chrétienne et de la science gréco-latine” (p. 73).

According to Stanguennec, Renan worked toward this goal in part by borrowing from German idealists, learning about them from many sources. Madame de Staël’s *De l’Allemagne* taught him Kant’s principle that a person’s goal on earth should not be happiness but self-improvement—a goal that was a constant in Renan’s life. In that book, he also discovered Schleiermacher’s notion that religion is an intuition and feeling for the infinite—an infinite, according to Renan, that is at the heart of this universe and is not a transcendent entity apart from it. Renan learned much about German idealists from Cousin. Seeking to revive metaphysics, especially the notion of the “ideal” after it was discredited by the Enlightenment, Cousin tried to synthesize what he found to be true in different philosophical approaches. Renan embraced one key idea of Cousin, who, inspired by Hegel, argued that there was an intuition or feeling of truth that preceded the rational conceptualization of truth. Renan looked forward to the day when there would be a religion of reason, uniting religious feeling and scientific truth in a new synthesis.

The most famous synthesis that Renan attempted was indeed that of religion and science. A “romantic” who pushed back against Auguste Comte’s positivism, which saw truth only in science, Renan believed science and religion reflected, enriched, and reaffirmed each other as contraries often do. The unity of science and religion was “autant un idéal du sentiment et de l’imagination que de la raison” (p. 8). Their reconciliation was possible once one realized that “Dieu” was “le Tout de la Nature elle-même” (p. 140). The world was a divinity in the process of becoming; it grew conscious of itself in the human mind by means of the sciences, which revealed the beauty and sublimity of infinity, whether the infinite expressed itself in large or small ways. Science helped the human community improve this thoughtful consciousness; its religiosity consisted of realizing “*le divin immanent au monde*” (p. 125) by increasing “la connaissance d’un réel naturel et *humain*” (p. 88). As a feeling for the infinite, sublime, and beautiful, religion was the passion that stimulated scholarship, the love for and interest in finite things. Stanguennec points out correctly that Renan’s notion of God and religion was somewhat unclear. Renan believed that people’s best moments were religious ones and that each individual had the right to create his or her own feelings of the infinite. Such an ambiguous position alienated both atheists and Christians.

Renan made further enemies with his best-selling *Vie de Jésus* of 1863. Again it was marked by ambiguity. Renan’s main thesis was that Jesus was a man, not a god. Nevertheless, Renan held him up as

a moral hero who exhibited compassion and love for everything and everyone, including the oppressed. Renan found in Jesus the “sentiment esthétique-moral de la totalité” that he himself felt (p. 117). Showing Christ as on the one hand empathetic and on the other hand ironic and skeptical because of his attitude toward the dogmas of his day, the *Vie de Jésus* can be even considered an idealistic portrayal of Renan himself. Stanguennec again puts Renan in the context of his time. Important contemporaries tended to humanize Jesus; Manet’s *Christ nu* appeared in 1863, the same year as Renan’s book. Renan’s association of goodness, truth, and beauty in the person of Jesus and his eagerness to depict him as a hero also show the romantic side of his idealism. In addition, Stanguennec astutely compares his work on Jesus to the books of Schleiermacher and David Strauss, finding Renan closer to the former than the latter, who reduced Christianity to a myth and was far more critical of the faith. Renan not only embraced Schleiermacher’s stress on religion as a feeling of dependence on the universe in the process of becoming but preferred to think about Christ as a moralist maintaining for the first time the importance of universal love rather than as a sacrificial victim of a crucifixion required for the salvation of humanity. Complementing Stanguennec’s work, Richard D. Priest’s recent book looks at the wider public’s reception of the *Vie de Jésus* and the controversies it provoked throughout the century.[4]

Preoccupied by “becoming,” that is, history, Renan was a noted comparative philologist interested in the evolution of language, especially Semitic languages. Due to his work in this field, he was given a chair at the Collège de France in 1862. As for whether Renan was a racist, Stanguennec argues that he was not as extreme as J. A. Gobineau, with whom he corresponded, because he did not think linguistic exchanges between different people necessarily caused decadence. In addition, Renan did not uphold the twentieth-century racist views that grouped people according to genetics and physiology. Renan focused on races as linguistic and religious entities. Nevertheless, Stanguennec concedes that Renan was prejudiced and did criticize the Semitic languages for being inferior to the Indo-European languages because they were simpler and ossified. Renan believed Jews could not realize their identity in a modern independent nation but should instead seek assimilation in European states where they would serve progress because of their talents in business and scholarship.

One important indication that he did not support ethnic racism was his famous essay, *Qu’est-ce qu’une nation?* (1882). Renan argued that a nation did not rest on “natural” geographic borders or a common language, religion, or ethnic group, especially because there was no such thing as a pure race. Everywhere, races had mixed. A nation rested on the will of the people who deliberately and voluntarily chose to create a political community. They had to want to believe that they worked together in the past and that they would do great deeds in the future with the same solidarity. Having a common history and making the additional commitment to stay together were crucial.

Stanguennec also covers Renan’s complex political views. Again preoccupied with fusing feeling and reason, Renan associated feeling with the lower classes and reason with the bourgeoisie. However, he could not completely embrace feeling because he was not a fan of populist democracy. To him, the common people were ignorant. He thus supported indirect, not direct, universal suffrage and a republic dominated by the educated elite. A center-left moderate, Renan tried to synthesize “deux orientations, libéralisme gréco-romain et socialisme judéo-chrétien” (p. 222). His ambiguous positions were responsible for his losing elections when he tried to run for office. He finally came to respect the Third Republic, especially because of its anti-clericalism and educational reforms, but his elitism made him a problematic figure in leftist circles.

Stanguennec offers interesting interpretations of Renan, using his knowledge of hermeneutics and Husserl’s phenomenology. In chapter three, he notes Renan’s frequent references to “*collations*.” As a child, he liked *collations* as a source of physical strength. Later he cared about a more mystical *collation*, Holy Communion, which was a way of nourishing oneself on the body and the Word of God. Stanguennec then investigates Renan’s use of the word “collation” to refer to ecclesiastical appointments, which worried him in the seminary, and to the collection of manuscripts in a certain

order, which he did while studying Hebrew texts. Stanguennec concludes that Renan saw his work as a philologist as being religious in nature. Collating to him was a form of nourishment because “la motivation de l’amour de la science [e.g. philology], c’est l’amour en absorption de Dieu” (p. 65). Tasting a snack as a child becomes tasting God as a scholar. From this study of Renan’s frequent use of the word “*collation*,” Stanguennec asserts that he sought to project himself as “un savant vivant religieusement l’idéal scientifique à travers lequel, le réalisant, il se réalisera lui-même” (p. 69). Stanguennec’s interpretation may not be completely convincing, but it is original.

Stanguennec presents a balanced view of Renan. Though he admires him, he suggests he was egotistical, partly responsible for his sister’s death from malaria, and harsh in his treatment of his alcoholic son whom he accused of threatening his life as a work of art. Stanguennec also criticizes the way in which Renan brought together different philosophies. Though he did a better job than Cousin, whose eclecticism was “plat” (p. 283), Renan could not really bring opposing forces like religion and science together because he was not a “penseur dialectique” and “jamais il n’a réfléchi profondément aux relations logiques des contraires avec les contradictoires” (p. 281). He simply juxtaposed extremes without making a coherent, positive synthesis and prided himself on the synthesis for representing at the very least his own individuality. He was thus frequently accused of dilettantism. However, Stanguennec states that Renan recognized this problem, deliberately kept his distance from the neo-Hegelian school at the time (i.e. Feuerbach), which he found too materialistic, and ended his life as a skeptic, who enjoyed his intellectual independence and the richness of different perspectives; he did not try to make a rational synthesis because he did not think that reason and common sense were sufficient for understanding the world. He became a “penseur poète” who appreciated vagueness and was happy thinking about human possibilities (p. 294). Renan’s interest in reconciling “intuition sympathique et la distance analytique, l’interiorité et l’exteriorité” reflected ultimately the tensions in his own period between “le positivisme et le romantisme, la résignation à la science et la nostalgie de la pure foi” (p. 121). Despite a few Freudian and hermeneutic interpretations that seem a bit forced, Stanguennec does the academic community a great service in reviving interest in this fascinating individual.

## NOTES

[1] Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Random House/Vintage, 1979), pp. 130-51.

[2] Zeev Sternhell, *The Anti-Enlightenment Tradition*, trans. David Maisel (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2010), pp. 39, 73-75, 136-40, 240-52.

[3] Jan Goldstein, *The Post-Revolutionary Self: Politics and Psyche in France, 1750-1850* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2005), pp. 254-68; Goldstein, “Toward an Empirical History of Moral Thinking: The Case of Racial Theory in Mid-Nineteenth-Century France,” Presidential Address, American Historical Association, January 3, 2014, <https://www.historians.org/about-aha-and-membership/aha-history-and-archives/presidential-addresses/jan-e-goldstein>

[4] Robert W. Priest, *Gospel According to Renan: Reading, Writing & Religion in Nineteenth-Century France* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015).

Mary Pickering  
San Jose State University  
[Mary.Pickering@sjsu.edu](mailto:Mary.Pickering@sjsu.edu)

Copyright © 2016 by the Society for French Historical Studies, all rights reserved. The Society for French Historical Studies permits the electronic distribution of individual reviews for nonprofit educational purposes, provided that full and accurate credit is given to the author, the date of publication, and the location of the review on the H-France website. The Society for French Historical

---

Studies reserves the right to withdraw the license for redistribution/republication of individual reviews at any time and for any specific case. Neither bulk redistribution/ republication in electronic form of more than five percent of the contents of H-France Review nor re-publication of any amount in print form will be permitted without permission. For any other proposed uses, contact the Editor-in-Chief of H-France. The views posted on H-France Review are not necessarily the views of the Society for French Historical Studies.

ISSN 1553-9172