In Jean Bodin’s *Démonomanie* there is a fascinating description of a strange sort of possession: a possession by doubt. Bodin talks of this possession as something which happened to a friend of his. A daemon often came to him in the early morning and somehow planted the seeds of doubt, forcing him to ‘open the Bible to find which, of all the debated religions, is the true one’. This account took place in France in around 1567, as the country was being ripped apart by religious warfare. Bodin, as one of the foremost theorists of absolutism, would eventually put forward an external and strictly political solution to this conflict, allowing the daemon of doubt to roam free only within his conscience. Slightly later, at the opposite end of the country, from his retirement in Bordeaux, Michel de Montaigne would, reflecting on war and religious pluralism, propose a path to relativism very close to that suggested by the champion of religious tolerance Sébastien Castellion.

We are used to seeing in Montaigne, in the reflections of Sébastien Castellion or in the drastic solution put into practice by Bodin, the roots of the history of doubt and tolerance, of the path to modernity taken by a West that is faced for the first time with a divided Christianity and a multi-confessional society. Here, nation no longer equals religion, and the idea of political and religious unity within a Christian universalism has been tragically torn asunder by the Reformation’s spread across Europe. Luther’s confessional fracture, with its hundreds of scattered shards, and the bloody religious wars in France, pave the
way for doubt and comparative thought in the Western tradition. This in turn leads to the advent of an inner space for an untouchable conscience that is independent of the political or civic ties that bind the citizen on the exclusively external plane. Thus were the teachings of religious Nicodemism, as well as one of the strongest and most convincing theorizations of absolutism at the hands of Jean Bodin. But the daemon of doubt, or rather the anxiety to compare the truth of faith, which possessed Bodin’s friend – or perhaps Jean Bodin himself – had for quite some time been possessing a great many Spaniards.

The paths of doubt – and with it of modernity – however, rarely wind their way through the Spanish world. The main thoroughfares carved out by European philosophy do not appear to cross through Spain and the Hispanic Empire, and neither do the paths charted by the history of tolerance, or the routes of the radical thought which culminates in Baruch Spinoza and in a long tradition of radical Enlightenment.3

Whether we turn to Paul Hazard’s classic account of the crisis of European conscience and the birth of a new critical conscience unhampered by dogmas and confessionalisms,4 or to the great master-narratives of European tolerance, from Richard Popkin’s crucial history of European skepticism,5 to Guy Stroumsa’s recent effort to spotlight the birth of religious comparativism, it is always France, Holland and England that take up center stage in historical speculation on this subject.6 Spain, at the most, may figure in these narratives as the place from whence the pathways of doubt and the routes of modernity hurriedly depart or flee, as with Yirmiyahu Yovel’s Marranos, with their ‘split identities’ and their modernity, biological defined, as it were, by their ‘Converso DNA’.7

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7 Much has been written in recent years on the Marranos, and the Iberian cultural background of the Dutch diaspora has been increasingly viewed as a fertile land for radical cultural tolerance. This may be seen in the pioneering works of Richard Popkin, who was surprised to discover the Iberian Jewish, or rather Marrano, origins, of many of the ‘skeptics’ he studied, adding new insight, also present in Révah’s work, on the Jewish-Marrano circles revolving around Spinoza. More recently, Yosef Kaplan and Yovel’s work have opened up a perspective in which the Marranos, together with the much-debated concept of tolerance, appear as a