**Ernest Renan**

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Jump to: [navigation](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ernest_Renan#mw-head), [search](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ernest_Renan#p-search)

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Ernest Renan by [Antoine Samuel Adam-Salomon](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Antoine_Samuel_Adam-Salomon), circa 1870s

**Ernest Renan** (28 February 1823 – 2 October 1892) was a French expert of Middle East ancient languages and civilizations[[1]](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ernest_Renan%22%20%5Cl%20%22cite_note-0), [philosopher](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Philosopher) and writer, devoted to his native province of [Brittany](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Brittany). He is best known for his influential historical works on early Christianity and his [political](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Political_theory) theories, especially concerning nationalism and national identity.

|  |
| --- |
| **Contents**[[hide](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ernest_Renan)]* [1 Life](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ernest_Renan#Life)
	+ [1.1 Birth and family](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ernest_Renan#Birth_and_family)
	+ [1.2 Education](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ernest_Renan#Education)
	+ [1.3 Study at Issy-les Moulineaux](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ernest_Renan#Study_at_Issy-les_Moulineaux)
	+ [1.4 Study at college of St Sulpice](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ernest_Renan#Study_at_college_of_St_Sulpice)
	+ [1.5 Scholarly career](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ernest_Renan#Scholarly_career)
		- [1.5.1 Life of Jesus](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ernest_Renan#Life_of_Jesus)
	+ [1.6 Continuation of scholarly career: social views](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ernest_Renan#Continuation_of_scholarly_career:_social_views)
		- [1.6.1 Definition of nationhood](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ernest_Renan#Definition_of_nationhood)
	+ [1.7 Late scholarly career](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ernest_Renan#Late_scholarly_career)
* [2 Reputation and controversies](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ernest_Renan#Reputation_and_controversies)
	+ [2.1 Statue](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ernest_Renan#Statue)
	+ [2.2 Views on race](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ernest_Renan#Views_on_race)
* [3 Works](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ernest_Renan#Works)
* [4 Honours](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ernest_Renan#Honours)
* [5 References](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ernest_Renan#References)
* [6 Archives and Memorabilia](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ernest_Renan#Archives_and_Memorabilia)
* [7 External links](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ernest_Renan#External_links)
 |

**[**[**edit**](http://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Ernest_Renan&action=edit&section=1)**] Life**

**[**[**edit**](http://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Ernest_Renan&action=edit&section=2)**] Birth and family**

He was born at [Tréguier](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tr%C3%A9guier) in Brittany to a family of fishermen. His grandfather, having made a small fortune with his fishing-shack, bought a house at Tréguier and settled there, and his father, captain of a small cutter and an ardent [republican](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Republicanism), married the daughter of a Royalist tradesman from the neighbouring town of [Lannion](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lannion). All his life, Renan felt a conflict between his father's and his mother's political beliefs.[*[citation needed](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia%3ACitation_needed%22%20%5Co%20%22Wikipedia%3ACitation%20needed)*] He was five years old when his father died, and his sister, Henriette, twelve years his senior, became the moral head of the household. Having in vain attempted to keep a school for girls at Tréguier, she departed and went to [Paris](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Paris%2C_France) as teacher in a young ladies' boarding-school.

**[**[**edit**](http://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Ernest_Renan&action=edit&section=3)**] Education**

Ernest, meanwhile, was educated in the ecclesiastical seminary of his native town. His school reports describe him as "docile, patient, diligent, painstaking, thorough". While the priests taught him [mathematics](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mathematics) and [Latin](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Latin_language), his mother completed his education. Renan's mother was half [Breton](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Breton_people). Her paternal ancestors came from [Bordeaux](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bordeaux), and Renan used to say that in his own nature the [Gascon](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gascony) and the Breton were constantly at odds.[[2]](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ernest_Renan#cite_note-1)

During the summer of 1838, Renan won all the prizes at the college of Tréguier. His sister told the doctor of the school in Paris where she taught about her brother, and he informed [FAP Dupanloup](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/F%C3%A9lix_Dupanloup), who was involved in organizing the ecclesiastical college of St [Nicholas du Chardonnet](http://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Nicholas_du_Chardonnet&action=edit&redlink=1), a school in which the young Catholic nobility and the most talented pupils of the Catholic seminaries were to be educated together, with the idea of creating friendships between the aristocracy and the priesthood. Dupanloup sent for Renan, who was only fifteen years old and had never been outside [Brittany](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Brittany). "I learned with stupor that knowledge was not a privilege of the church ... I awoke to the meaning of the words talent, fame, celebrity." Religion seemed to him wholly different in Tréguier and in Paris. The superficial, brilliant, pseudo-scientific Catholicism[*[citation needed](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia%3ACitation_needed%22%20%5Co%20%22Wikipedia%3ACitation%20needed)*] of the capital did not satisfy Renan, who had accepted the austere faith of his Breton masters.

**[**[**edit**](http://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Ernest_Renan&action=edit&section=4)**] Study at Issy-les Moulineaux**





Ernest Renan

During 1840, Renan left St Nicholas to study philosophy at the seminary of [Issy-les-Moulineaux](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Issy-les-Moulineaux). He entered with a passion for Catholic [scholasticism](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Scholasticism). The rhetoric of St Nicholas had wearied him, and his serious intelligence hoped to satisfy itself with the vast and solid material of Catholic [theology](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Theology). [Thomas Reid](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Thomas_Reid) and [Nicolas Malebranche](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nicolas_Malebranche) first attracted him among the philosophers, and, after these, he turned to [GWF Hegel](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Georg_Wilhelm_Friedrich_Hegel), [Immanuel Kant](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Immanuel_Kant) and [JG Herder](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Johann_Gottfried_von_Herder). Renan began to see an essential contradiction between the [metaphysics](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Metaphysics) which he studied and the faith he professed, but an appetite for truths that can be verified restrained his scepticism. "Philosophy excites and only half satisfies the appetite for truth; I am eager for mathematics", he wrote to Henriette. Henriette had accepted in the family of Count [Zamoyski](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Zamoyski) an engagement more lucrative than her former job. She exercised the strongest influence over her brother.

**[**[**edit**](http://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Ernest_Renan&action=edit&section=5)**] Study at college of St Sulpice**

It was not mathematics but [philology](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Philology) which was to settle Renan's gathering doubts. His course completed at Issy, he entered the college of St Sulpice in order to take his degree in philology prior to entering the church, and, here, he began the study of [Hebrew](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hebrew_language). He realized that the second part of [*Isaiah*](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Book_of_Isaiah) differs from the first not only in style but in date, that the grammar and the history of the [*Pentateuch*](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pentateuch) are later than the time of [Moses](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Moses), and that the [*Book of Daniel*](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Book_of_Daniel) is clearly written centuries after the time in which it is set. Secretly, Renan felt himself denied the [communion of saints](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Communion_of_saints), yet desired to live the life of a Catholic priest. The struggle between vocation and conviction was won by conviction. During October 1845, Renan left St Sulpice for Stanislas, a lay college of the [Oratorians](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Oratorians). Still feeling too much under the domination of the church, he reluctantly ended the last of his associations with religious life and entered M. Crouzet's school for boys as a teacher.

**[**[**edit**](http://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Ernest_Renan&action=edit&section=6)**] Scholarly career**





Ernest Renan by [René de Saint-Marceaux](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ren%C3%A9_de_Saint-Marceaux)

Renan, educated by priests, was to accept the scientific ideal with an extraordinary expansion of all his faculties. He became ravished by the splendour of the cosmos. At the end of his life, he wrote of [Amiel](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Henri-Fr%C3%A9d%C3%A9ric_Amiel), "The man who has time to keep a private diary has never understood the immensity of the universe." The certitudes of physical and natural science were revealed to Renan during 1846 by the chemist [Marcellin Berthelot](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Marcellin_Berthelot), then a boy of eighteen, his pupil at M. Crouzet's school. To the day of Renan's death, their friendship continued. Renan was occupied as usher only during evenings. During the daytime, he continued his researches in [Semitic philology](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Semitic_languages). During 1847, he obtained the [Volney prize](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Volney_prize), one of the principal distinctions awarded by the [Academy of Inscriptions](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Academy_of_Inscriptions), for the manuscript of his "General History of Semitic Languages." During 1847, he took his degree as *Agrégé de Philosophie* – that is to say, fellow of the university – and was offered a job as master in the *lycée* [Vendôme](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Vend%C3%B4me).

In 1856, Ernest Renan married in Paris Cornélie Scheffer, daughter of [Henry Scheffer](http://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Henry_Scheffer&action=edit&redlink=1) and niece of [Ary Scheffer](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ary_Scheffer), both French painters from Dutch descent. They had two children, [Ary Renan](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ary_Renan), b. in 1858, who became a painter, and Noémi, b. in 1862, who eventually married [Jean Psichari](http://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Jean_Psichari&action=edit&redlink=1).

**[**[**edit**](http://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Ernest_Renan&action=edit&section=7)**] Life of Jesus**

Within his lifetime, Renan was best known as the author of the enormously popular *Life of Jesus* (*Vie de Jésus*).[[3]](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ernest_Renan#cite_note-2) This book was first translated into English during 1863 by [Charles E. Wilbour](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Charles_E._Wilbour) and has remained in print for the past 145 years.[[4]](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ernest_Renan#cite_note-3) Renan's *Life of Jesus* was lavished with ironic praise and criticism by [Albert Schweitzer](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Albert_Schweitzer) in his book [*Quest of the Historical Jesus*](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Quest_of_the_Historical_Jesus).

The book's controversial assertions that the [life of Jesus](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Life_of_Jesus) should be written like the life of any historic person, and that the Bible could and should be subject to the same critical scrutiny as other historical documents caused some controversy, and enraged many Christians.[[5]](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ernest_Renan#cite_note-4)[[6]](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ernest_Renan#cite_note-5)[[7]](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ernest_Renan#cite_note-6)[[8]](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ernest_Renan#cite_note-7)

**[**[**edit**](http://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Ernest_Renan&action=edit&section=8)**] Continuation of scholarly career: social views**

Renan was not only a scholar. In his book on [St. Paul](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Paul_of_Tarsus), as in the [Apostles](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Apostles), he shows his concern with the larger social life, his sense of fraternity, and a revival of the democratic sentiment which had inspired *L'Avenir de la science*. During 1869, he presented himself as the candidate of the liberal opposition at the parliamentary election for [Meaux](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Meaux). While his temper had become less aristocratic, his liberalism had grown more tolerant. On the eve of its dissolution, Renan was half prepared to accept the Empire, and, had he been elected to the Chamber of Deputies, he would have joined the group of *l'Empire liberal*, but he was not elected. A year later, war was declared with Germany; the Empire was abolished, and [Napoleon III](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Napoleon_III_of_France) became an exile. The [Franco-Prussian War](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Franco-Prussian_War) was a turning-point in Renan's history. Germany had always been to him the asylum of thought and disinterested science. Now, he saw the land of his ideal destroy and ruin the land of his birth; he beheld the German no longer as a priest, but as an invader.





Ernest Renan in his study by [Anders Zorn](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Anders_Zorn)

In *La Réforme intellectuelle et morale* (1871), Renan tried to safeguard France's future. Yet, he was still influenced by Germany. The ideal and the discipline which he proposed to his defeated country were those of her conqueror—a feudal society, a monarchical government, an élite which the rest of the nation exists merely to support and nourish; an ideal of honour and duty imposed by a chosen few on the recalcitrant and subject multitude. The errors of the *Commune* confirmed Renan in this reaction. At the same time, the irony always perceptible in his work grows more bitter. His *Dialogues philosophiques*, written in 1871, his [*Ecclesiastes*](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ecclesiastes) (1882) and his *Antichrist* (1876) (the fourth volume of the *Origins of Christianity*, dealing with the reign of [Nero](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nero)) are incomparable in their literary genius, but they are examples of a disenchanted and sceptical temper. He had vainly tried to make his country obey his precepts. The progress of events showed him, on the contrary, a France which, every day, left a little stronger, and he roused himself from his disbelieving, disillusioned mood and observed with interest the struggle for justice and liberty of a democratic society. The fifth and sixth volumes of the *Origins of Christianity* (the Christian Church and [Marcus Aurelius](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Marcus_Aurelius)) show him reconciled with democracy, confident in the gradual ascent of man, aware that the greatest catastrophes do not really interrupt the sure if imperceptible progress of the world and reconciled, also, if not with the truths, at least with the moral beauties of Catholicism and with the remembrance of his pious youth.

**[**[**edit**](http://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Ernest_Renan&action=edit&section=9)**] Definition of nationhood**

Renan's definition of a [nation](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nation-state) has been extremely influential. This was given in his 1882 discourse [*Qu'est-ce qu'une nation?*](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/What_is_a_Nation%3F) ("What is a Nation?"). Whereas German writers like [Fichte](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fichte) had defined the nation by [objective](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Objectivity_%28philosophy%29) criteria such as a [race](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Race_%28classification_of_human_beings%29) or an [ethnic group](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ethnic_group) "sharing common characteristics" (language, etc.), Renan defined it by the desire of a people to live together, which he summarized by a famous phrase, "avoir fait de grandes choses ensemble, vouloir en faire encore" (having done great things together and wishing to do more). Writing in the midst of the dispute concerning the [Alsace-Lorraine](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Alsace-Lorraine) region, he declared that the existence of a nation was based on a "daily plebiscite."

[Karl Deutsch](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Karl_Deutsch) (in "Nationalism and its alternatives") suggested that a nation is "a group of people united by a mistaken view about the past and a hatred of their neighbours." This phrase is frequently, but mistakenly, attributed to Renan himself. He did indeed write that if "the essential element of a nation is that all its individuals must have many things in common", they "must also have forgotten many things. Every French citizen must have forgotten the [night of St. Bartholomew](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/St._Bartholomew%27s_Day_massacre) and the [massacres in the 13th century in the South](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Albigensian_Crusade)." Renan's work has especially influenced famed 20th century historian of nationalism, [Benedict Anderson](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Benedict_Anderson).

**[**[**edit**](http://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Ernest_Renan&action=edit&section=10)**] Late scholarly career**





Ernest Renan birthplace museum in [Tréguier](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tr%C3%A9guier).

During old age, the philosopher contemplated his childhood. He was nearly sixty when, in 1883, he published the autobiographical *Souvenirs d'enfance et de jeunesse*, the work by which he is now best known in France. They showed the blasé modern reader that a world no less poetic, no less primitive than that of the *Origins of Christianity* exists or still existed within living memory on the northwestern coast of France. They have the [Celtic](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Celt) magic of ancient romance and the simplicity, the naturalness, and the veracity which the 19th century prized so highly. But his *Ecclesiastes*, published a few months earlier, his *Drames philosophiques*, collected in 1888, give a more adequate image of his fastidious critical, disenchanted, yet optimistic spirit. They show the attitude towards uncultured Socialism of a philosopher liberal by conviction, by temperament an aristocrat. We learn in them how [Caliban](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Caliban_%28character%29) (democracy), the mindless brute, educated to his own responsibility, makes after all an adequate ruler; how [Prospero](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Prospero) (the aristocratic principle, or, if we will, the mind) accepts his dethronement for the sake of greater liberty in the intellectual world, since Caliban proves an effective policeman and leaves his superiors a free hand in the laboratory; how [Ariel](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ariel_%28Shakespeare%29) (the religious principle) acquires a firmer hold on life and no longer gives up the ghost at the faintest hint of change. Indeed, Ariel flourishes in the service of Prospero under the external government of the many-headed brute. Religion and knowledge are as imperishable as the world they dignify. Thus, out of the depths rises unvanquished the essential [idealism](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Idealism) of Renan.

Renan was a great worker. At sixty years of age, having finished the *Origins of Christianity*, he began his *History of* [*Israel*](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Israel), based on a lifelong study of the [*Old Testament*](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Old_Testament) and on the *Corpus Inscriptionum Semiticarum*, published by the [Académie des Inscriptions](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Acad%C3%A9mie_des_Inscriptions) under Renan's direction from the year 1881 till the end of his life. The first volume of the *History of Israel* appeared in 1887; the third, in 1891; the last two posthumously. As a history of facts and theories, the book has many faults; as an essay on the evolution of the religious idea, it is (despite some passages of frivolity, irony, or incoherence) of extraordinary importance; as a reflection of the mind of Renan, it is the most lifelike of images. In a volume of collected essays, *Feuilles détachées*, published also in 1891, we find the same mental attitude, an affirmation of the necessity of [piety](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Piety) independent of [dogma](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dogma). During his last years, he received many honours, and was made an administrator of the [Collège de France](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Coll%C3%A8ge_de_France) and grand officer of the [Legion of Honour](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Legion_of_Honour). Two volumes of the *History of Israel*, his correspondence with his sister Henriette, his *Letters to M. Berthelot*, and the *History of the Religious Policy of* [*Philippe-le-Bel*](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Philip_IV_of_France), which he wrote in the years immediately before his marriage, all appeared during the last eight years of the 19th century.

Renan died after a few days' illness in 1892, and was buried in the [Cimetière de Montmartre](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cimeti%C3%A8re_de_Montmartre) in the [Montmartre Quarter](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Montmartre_Quarter) of Paris.

**[**[**edit**](http://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Ernest_Renan&action=edit&section=11)**] Reputation and controversies**

Hugely influential in his lifetime, Renan was eulogised after his death as the embodiment of the progressive spirit in western culture. [Anatole France](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Anatole_France) wrote that Renan was the incarnation of modernity. One of his greatest admirers was [Manuel González Prada](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Manuel_Gonz%C3%A1lez_Prada) in Peru who took the *Life of Jesus* as a basis for his anticlericalism.

**[**[**edit**](http://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Ernest_Renan&action=edit&section=12)**] Statue**





Statue of Ernest Renan in Tréguier town square

In 1903 a major controversy accompanied the installation of a monument in Tréguier designed by [Jean Boucher](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jean_Boucher_%28artist%29). Placed in the local cathedral square, it was interpreted as a challenge to Catholicism, and led to widespread protests, especially because the site was normally used for the temporary pulpit erected at the traditional Catholic festival of the [Pardon of St Yves](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pardon_%28ceremony%29). It also included the Greek goddess [Athena](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Athena) raising her arm to crown Renan gesturing in apparent challenge towards to cathedral.[[9]](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ernest_Renan#cite_note-8)[[10]](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ernest_Renan#cite_note-9) The local clergy organised a protest [Calvary sculpture](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Calvary_%28sculpture%29) designed by [Yves Hernot](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Yves_Hernot) as "a symbol of the triumphant ultramontaine church."[[11]](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ernest_Renan#cite_note-10)

**[**[**edit**](http://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Ernest_Renan&action=edit&section=13)**] Views on race**

Renan has been criticised by some for [antisemitism](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Antisemitism) because of his comments on the alleged limitations of the Semitic mentality. Renan claimed that the Semitic mind was limited by dogmatism and lacked a cosmopolitan conception of civilisation.[[12]](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ernest_Renan#cite_note-11) For Renan, Semites were "an incomplete race."[[13]](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ernest_Renan#cite_note-12) However, in his 1883 essay *Le Judaïsme comme race et religion* he disputed the concept that Jewish people constitute a unified racial entity in a *biological* sense, which made his views unpalatable within racialized antisemitism. Renan was also known for being a strong critic of German ethnic nationalism, with its antisemitic undertones. His notions of race and ethnicity were completely at odds with the European antisemitism of the 19th and 20th centuries.

Other comments on race, however, have also proven controversial, especially his belief that political policy should take into account supposed racial differences:

Nature has made a race of workers, the Chinese race, who have wonderful manual dexterity and almost no sense of honor...A race of tillers of the soil, the Negro; treat him with kindness and humanity, and all will be as it should; a race of masters and soldiers, the European race. Reduce this noble race to working in the ergastulum like Negros and Chinese, and they rebel... But the life at which our workers rebel would make a Chinese or a fellah happy, as they are not military creatures in the least. Let each one do what he is made for, and all will be well.[[14]](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ernest_Renan#cite_note-13)

This passage, among others, was cited by [Aimé Césaire](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Aim%C3%A9_C%C3%A9saire) in his *Discourse on Colonialism*, as evidence of the alleged hypocrisy of Western humanism and its "sordidly racist" conception of the rights of man.[[15]](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ernest_Renan#cite_note-14)

**[**[**edit**](http://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Ernest_Renan&action=edit&section=14)**] Works**

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* *Averroès et l'averroïsme* (1852)
* *Histoire générale et système comparé des langues sémitiques* (1855)
* [*Études d'histoire religieuse*](http://www.archive.org/details/a605978800renauoft) (1857)
* *De l'origine du langage* (1858)
* *Essais de morale et de critique* (1859)
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**[**[**edit**](http://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Ernest_Renan&action=edit&section=15)**] Honours**

* The armoured cruiser [*Ernest Renan*](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/French_cruiser_Ernest_Renan) was named in his honour.
* The community of [Renan, Virginia](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Renan%2C_Virginia) was named after him.

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