

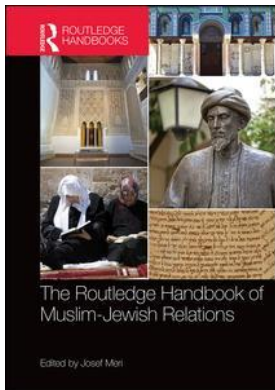
This article was downloaded by: 10.3.97.143

On: 08 Dec 2023

Access details: *subscription number*

Publisher: *Routledge*

Informa Ltd Registered in England and Wales Registered Number: 1072954 Registered office: 5 Howick Place, London SW1P 1WG, UK



The Routledge Handbook of Muslim–Jewish Relations

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Philosophy

Publication details

<https://www.routledgehandbooks.com/doi/10.4324/9781315675787.ch09>

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Published online on: 23 Jun 2016

How to cite :- Oliver Leaman. 23 Jun 2016, *Philosophy from: The Routledge Handbook of Muslim–Jewish Relations* Routledge

Accessed on: 08 Dec 2023

<https://www.routledgehandbooks.com/doi/10.4324/9781315675787.ch09>

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Philosophy

The intersection of Islamic and Jewish thought

Oliver Leaman

Islam, like other religious competitors, had a significant impact on Jewish philosophy. It brought Jewish thinkers into contact with a way of working theoretically that was clearly based on non-Jewish sources. For philosophers, this perhaps represents a contact with the “other,” something different that can be perceived as either hostile or friendly, and often as both at the same time. Jewish thought had very little, if any, impact on Islamic philosophy.

When religion plays a dominating role in society, it is important for philosophers to represent what they do as in line with the current ideology, and Jewish philosophers had a long experience of representing the views of the Greek thinkers as perfectly plausible from a religious point of view. Philo is a good example here, but the writers of the Talmud also used a good deal of Greek philosophy and logic in their thought and in quite an open and unashamed manner.¹ There were some accounts according to which Plato and Aristotle were originally instructed in philosophy by Jewish sources, but it is difficult to believe that this was taken seriously. The Greeks had developed impressive theoretical machinery, and it was just as appropriate for Jews to use it as it was for them to use agricultural machinery that they might come across which had its origin in a foreign culture. In any case, during the Greek and Roman empires, Jews joined in with these cosmopolitan organizations and spoke and wrote in Greek along with the best of them; and, as we know, even before the destruction of Jewish life in Palestine, significant communities throughout the Mediterranean and further east often had quite a distant relationship with the Temple and the homeland from which they or their ancestors had come. Culturally, they were part of the Greek world and, for many Jews, this included Greek philosophy.

Jewish philosophers in the Islamic world

By the first Islamic century and the seventh century CE, Jews were particularly well represented in Egypt, the Middle East, and around the Mediterranean. We know of their existence in Arabia through the stories of their difficult relationship with the Prophet and his followers and their eventual exclusion from Mecca and Medina and subsequent displacement from much of the Arabian Peninsula. The rapid expansion of the Islamic empire took in large and

well-established Jewish communities and, in the early years at least, they remained largely unaffected by the new governments during a period of consolidation. It was advantageous to the new Muslim rulers to have large groups of their new subjects paying the special tax that was not levied on Muslims, and we know there was a steady and sometimes hectic rush into conversion to Islam by Jews and others. Sometimes this was attributable to pressure or even force, but more likely it was just because of a tendency for minorities to align themselves with the leading ideas of the state, similar to learning the local language and wearing the local clothes. Some people were no doubt very resistant to the new religion and others very much attracted to it.

Though a similarly problematic relationship would be expected to arise in philosophy, it did not, since what came to be known as *philosophy* was very much linked with the classical thinkers and their contemporary followers rather than what we call today *Islamic philosophy*. The latter can be divided up into three types of philosophy: Peripatetic (*mashshāʿī*), Sufi (*taṣawwuf*), and Illuminationist (*ishrāqī*). Here the emphasis will be on the first, since this is what came to dominate Jewish philosophy, while the other types of Islamic philosophy were taken up with alacrity by Jewish thinkers interested in mysticism, kabbalah, and theology. Peripatetic philosophy owes its chief allegiance to Aristotle and his Neoplatonic followers. What is important about Aristotle is not so much his doctrines, although they are important, but his method, and this involves a particular interpretation of logical structure. Since the topics on which many thinkers wrote, both Jewish² and Muslim, were religious they also incorporated theological ideas into their work, and here again Islamic theology as the leading ideological construction of the preponderant culture was much used by Jewish thinkers. In both Islamic and Jewish philosophy, it is both important and at the same time very difficult to distinguish precisely between theological and philosophical ideas and methods, and the individuals concerned spent much time and effort in trying to unravel these different ways of working. Often the religious language was the environment in which philosophical ideas were explored.

Islamic philosophy had a rather eclectic beginning, with non-Muslims translating Greek texts often via Syriac into Arabic, and Christian thinkers working with Muslims on ways of understanding such texts. In its early years, Islamic philosophy suffered a good deal of criticism as a foreign import, and Muslims wondered why, if they had the Qur'an and the Islamic sciences, they needed anything else, especially anything from a remote and obscure cultural context. Quite reasonable questions were raised about the need or indeed the acceptability of going to *kāfirūn* (unbelievers), for information on how to reason and debate. Were the references that philosophers made to the Greek language relevant to similar issues in the Arabic language, and how could one tell, since the original context for Greek thought was no longer extant? These are reasonable questions, and in a different version were asked also in the Jewish world, since Jews similarly had their own theological resources to apply to theoretical issues, and the idea of going outside of the community for advice and information shocked some. On the other hand, both Jews and Muslims were impressed by the power of Greek thought and its universalizability, as they saw it, and argued that it represented the principles of rational thought in general and so must be used if one was to be a rational thinker. This line of reasoning was not very difficult for Jews to accept since already in the Talmud a good deal of philosophy had been naturalized in the sense that logic was often referred to with respect. It was a small move from thinking highly of logic to investigating how it could be used to explore important issues in philosophy and, if it was acceptable to use Greek ideas, then why not also use those thinkers from other religious backgrounds who have interesting things to say about them?

The early years

Let us look at two linked thinkers, al-Kindī (ca. 873), from the east of the Islamic world in Baghdad, and Isaac Israeli (ca. 955),³ from the west, in al-Andalus. The latter was a significant medical thinker, physician, and philosopher and much of his work seems to be based on that of al-Kindī. “Why not?” one might ask, since after all they were both involved in trying to use the ideas of a Greek source – Aristotle – and Peripatetic thought and they were both using a common language, Arabic. During this early period of Islamic and Jewish thought, many of the leading philosophical terms in Arabic were being constructed and tried out, and they would undergo further development later. Both al-Kindī and Israeli wrote a book on definitions, for example, the basis of what Aristotle thought was science and demonstrative or logical thought of the highest degree, and Israeli’s books seems to be very much based on the *Kitāb al-Ḥudūd* of al-Kindī. The Neoplatonic system that was so popular in Islamic philosophy became part of the official curriculum of Jewish philosophy also and is well represented in Israeli’s work. It is worth pointing out how compatible this system is with monotheistic religion, although it was originally developed in quite different circumstances. Different ontological levels are dependent on one another and, from a common source of maximum reality and power, lesser levels emerge, finally culminating in our world of generation and corruption. The higher one goes metaphysically, the harder it is to describe what exists, and there is also often a vocabulary of light to explain and illustrate the different levels of metaphysical reality. Light gets weaker as one moves progressively down the different levels of reality, and shadow increases, according to Israeli. Living well involves both intellectual and social skills, plus a fairly dismissive attitude to the body and a religious attachment, and results in an eventual reward, although more in the sense of contact with higher and more permanent levels of being than by uniting with those levels of being.

Three aspects of these ideas are challenging to traditional religion, though. One is that they fill out in more detail the accounts we find in scripture, and that might make one think that philosophy is superior to religion. The other is that they proceed by a logical method that has nothing in itself to do with religion and so might give the impression that one does not need religion to be able to think properly. Finally, Neoplatonism produces a view of the world that seems to get on well without an obvious deity. He (a deity) can be introduced and even identified with the source of light or ultimate cause and some such powerful entity, but the system seems to get on quite nicely without him. For both Jewish and Islamic philosophers who came later and who reflected more on the impact of this form of philosophy, this raised some serious issues of how to reconcile philosophy with religion and raised the possibility that they might well go in different directions. While Greek philosophy seems to be broadly compatible with scripture, it does introduce some awkward consequences. The idea of an afterlife in which we reappear very much like ourselves in some sort of eternal life does not really accord with much that Aristotle suggests, for instance. In fact, a long list of difficulties could be compiled quite easily, and much of the literature deals with these problems. That is, after all, how philosophy works: It suggests that we have to accept as valid some conclusion that jars with what we already want to believe, and we have to work out some way of bringing those two ideas together in a rationally acceptable way. This issue was not prevalent at the early stages of Islamic and Jewish philosophy but it gained traction later on. In some ways in the Jewish world, it played a role in the decline of philosophy and its replacement by more mystical forms of intellectual work.

Sa’adya Ga’on (d. 942) also does not really notice much wrong in the fact that scripture and philosophy can go in different directions. What interests him, no doubt as a reflection of the

attack on rabbinic Judaism by the Karaites, is the project of rationally justifying Jewish laws and customs. One of the techniques he uses comes from the proponents of a contemporary theological movement in Islam, the Mu'tazilites, who argued that religious rules have a rational basis. They are often called the rationalists of Islam, but this is an unfortunate expression since their opponents, the Ash'arites, were just as committed to argument and rational thought. It is just that the Mu'tazilites see religion as based on divine accordance with eternal rational principles, while their opponents suggest that it is divine will that in itself establishes the justification for religious law. While Sa'adya is often linked with the Mu'tazilites, some of his arguments employ Ash'arite language also and, like many Jewish and Muslim thinkers of this period, he tends to be eclectic, using whatever technical language seems to fit a particular topic without worrying too much about the overall consistency of the entire system into which it is supposed to fit. What Sa'adya has to offer on the rationality of law is a very interesting distinction between what he calls *rational laws* and *custom*, where the former applies to everyone and the latter to limited groups. So the Jews were given laws that they were to follow because they are Jews, not human beings, while everyone is obliged to obey certain laws of basic human behavior since we are all human. What is important about the religious laws is that they play a role in carrying out what God wants us to do, and we do not need a rational explanation for them, although of course we do need to understand them and why we should follow them, which are both aspects of rationality.

Here Sa'adya tapped into a theory of the relationship between religion and philosophy that most Islamic and Jewish philosophers upheld. Not everyone can comprehend philosophy, either because they have no facility for it or no interest in it, while everyone can understand religion. Religion is written in a clear and easily understood way; it tells us how to behave and employs the sort of language that is designed to encourage action and decent behavior. When we look closely at some of this language from a philosophical perspective, it may appear problematic, but this is not an issue for the majority of the community, who just follow what they take to be clear and comprehensive principles. Religious language has a different function from philosophical language, so it is a mistake to criticize one type of language on the basis of the other, in the same way that it is a mistake to criticize the rules of golf because they are different from the rules of cricket. Religious rules are basically rational but should not be justified in this way, since most people would not understand how this works, are not trained philosophically, and might, as a result, come to misunderstand religion or the motives of philosophers in talking about it. In any case, while religion is rational it is not always expounded rationally but rather in the most effective way available to the lawgiver at the time; yet a rational explanation is available ultimately to those with the skill and patience and training to acquire it.

The al-Farābī effect in Jewish and Islamic philosophy

Over time, both Islamic and Jewish philosophy became progressively more sophisticated. For one thing, the Arabic conceptual machinery came to be more refined as centuries of philosophical work developed, and the same was true for Hebrew, but most work went on in Arabic so the problems of replicating philosophical concepts in Hebrew were not a major issue until a much later date. The Jewish community in the Islamic world had no problem working in the local languages, in particular Arabic and Persian; if they were to be part of the common realm of inquiry, they had to use Arabic. It was the lingua franca of intellectual work, and Jews certainly had no problems in using it for the expression of their ideas. Writing in Arabic also opened up their work to a wider audience than just their own community. We

know very little about how far Jews and Muslims cooperated academically during even the so-called Golden Age of life in al-Andalus, but we do know that they read each other's books provided they were written in a common language. That language was generally Arabic, and it became flexible enough to enable sophisticated philosophy to expand into more and more complex theory.

An excellent example of perhaps the greatest heights achieved is Moses Maimonides (d. 1204), who was thoroughly disgusted by the work of his own coreligionists and far more complimentary of that of his predecessors, such as al-Farābī, and his contemporary Ibn Rushd (Averroes) (d. 1198). One of the features of Jewish philosophy of which Maimonides disapproved was its tendency to confuse philosophy with theology, especially common in the work of Sa'adya Ga'on. The term *eclectic* is often used for those earlier thinkers, in both the Jewish and Islamic communities, but this is a little unfair since, in the earlier years, philosophy simply was eclectic; there was little alternative. It had not yet defined a clear role for itself in the Islamic and then Jewish world. Thus, thinkers such as Ibn Gabirol (d. 1058) would use a good deal of the methodology of the *Ikhwān al-Safā'* (Brethren of Sincerity) in his philosophy without perhaps wondering how appropriate the thought of Ismā'īlī Muslims was to what he was doing. On the other hand, Ibn Sīnā (Avicenna) and al-Farābī demonstrated that one could avoid this sort of loose approach by establishing a stricter approach to what was philosophy and what were other forms of inquiry, and the source of differentiation was logic. One uses logic to determine what is precisely going on when language is used, what sorts of rules are being used and why, and what their scope for truth is. It was only with the advent of Maimonides that this more rigorous approach to how to work philosophically came to predominate in Jewish thought, and it came about largely through the use of al-Farābī as the most significant guide to how to do philosophy.⁴

According to al-Farābī (d. ca. 950), all prophets are politicians. Prophecy is a matter of using imaginative and vivid language to make theoretical truths available to the widest possible audience. Their product is religion, and it informs everyone about how they ought to live, both those who are capable of working it out for themselves, and the majority, those who cannot. There are two significant aspects to the account of religion here. One is its connection with the truth, and that is basic to its being a genuine religion and not merely a persuasive piece of imagery. The other is the ability to make sense of the world and our performance in it with the conceptual tools it makes available to us. That is, we have to be able to use the religion to work out how to behave, how to live with others, and how to make sense of our lives. This very different view of the role of religion is often promulgated today, as it was in the past, by those seeking to identify their political aims with religion, in particular Islam and Judaism, and this often leads to incoherence. According to Maimonides, this is where Sa'adya went wrong. He took some rational principles and linked them with some scriptural rules without fully working out how they are connected.

The impact of thought from al-Andalus

By the twelfth century, both Islamic and Jewish philosophy were becoming more refined in their methods and outlook. A few centuries had passed during which the discipline had become embedded in local cultures, and for the next few centuries in the Jewish world, at least, the major thinkers were translated many times into Hebrew and Judeo-Arabic in order to reach a wider audience. The fact that Ibn Rushd wrote so many commentaries of different lengths and degrees of complexity⁵ implies that there was a market for short and relatively easily understood explanations of the basic works of Aristotle then available. His works,

together with those of Maimonides, played a major role in the growth of Jewish philosophy after the death of the latter, and they were often combined by those explaining their thought, as though they represented a common Córdoba school of philosophy. It is worth noting that we know very little about how far philosophers from different communities actually cooperated with one another.⁶ We do know that periods of great hostility to Jews by Muslim governments did not diminish the enthusiasm of Jews for philosophy. For example, Maimonides and his family had to leave al-Andalus due to anti-Jewish persecution and ended up in Fustāt, Egypt, living under a different Muslim regime, but this in no way diminished Maimonides's attachment to his original homeland and its philosophical traditions, even though those traditions stemmed from a hostile environment. We should not be surprised by this: Jewish intellectuals have often managed to distinguish between the individual prejudices of particular thinkers in contrast with the universal value of their views. Hence, we have today the Jewish enthusiasts for the music of Wagner and the philosophy of Heidegger and, in the twelfth century, the occasional hostilities of particular Muslim regimes did not diminish Jewish allegiance to Islamic philosophy.

Maimonides and Ibn Rushd in many ways do represent the acme of Andalusī philosophy, since they both tried to systematize the principles that had been developed over the previous centuries. One might say that in some ways they managed to organize what had up to then been Islamic and Jewish philosophy and put it on what they undoubtedly considered a fresh and rigorous Aristotelian footing. The idea was to do without the accretions of varieties of Neoplatonism and traditional religion that tended to build up around philosophy and obscured its central thrust. In his *Guide of the Perplexed*, Maimonides seeks to show the scientist, the person who understands the scope of natural laws, how his work is linked with the principles of religion, since the scientist might quite naturally think that religion has nothing to do with science. Here the role of al-Farābī is crucial, since he argued that science and religion are linked, but also that there has to be a systematic and logical way to get from one to the other. The method here is logic, understanding the different roles of the variety of logical argument that are available to us and how they are linked with one another.

The Jewish philosophical enlightenment

What made it natural for Maimonides and Ibn Rushd to combine their thought is the shared thesis that difficult theological problems can be solved only philosophically. Both believed that there were severe problems in the theological resources available to their communities. For Ibn Rushd, this is because theology uses forms of reasoning that are relatively weak and fail to resolve the theoretical difficulties that arise in scripture, especially when it is compared with the findings of contemporary science. Maimonides was more careful in his approach to the topic, but he clearly had little time for Jewish theology and sought to have it replaced by something much more perspicuous – hence the writing of the *Mishneh Torah* and his other halakhic works, never mind his philosophy. Both thought that theology was not only not up to the task of resolving many issues but that it was also dangerous in that its very inadequacy was potentially harmful: It may convince the public that religion can resolve its difficulties and so cast doubt on religion. Or it might make the public suspicious of theoretical approaches to religion and encourage a know-nothing approach, a bit like the *bi-la kayfa* doctrine of some *mutakallimūn*, the idea that you just have to shrug and say that we know something to be true, since the Qur'an says it is, but what it means is mysterious. The sorts of logical approaches that we find in philosophy are far sharper tools for dealing with these sorts of issues, and both Ibn Rushd and Maimonides make a sharp distinction

between theology and philosophy that came perhaps to have a significant cultural impact on the Jewish and Christian worlds but without any apparent impact on the contemporary Islamic world.

Samuel ibn Tibbon (d. ca. 1232) and many of the philosophers who followed Maimonides may have been reflecting on the local theological discussions in al-Andalus under the rule of the Almohads⁷ when they argued that public discussion of the nature of the divine attributes was widespread. He set off what Carlos Fraenkel calls the “medieval Jewish enlightenment”⁸. The Jewish Averroists came to have a significant influence on the ways in which Jews regarded philosophy. They tended to combine Ibn Rushd with Maimonides, although the amount of attachment they had to one often varied with respect to the other.

Isaac Albalag from the Pyrenees region, during the second half of the thirteenth century, seems to have preferred Ibn Rushd over Maimonides. He embraces the thesis that certain doctrines must be accepted by religion. These are the existence of reward and punishment for our actions, the existence of the soul after the death of the body, and the fact of providence whereby God is aware of all our actions. In his *Sefer Tikkun ha-De’ot* (*Setting Doctrines Right*), he recognizes that philosophy in the style of Ibn Rushd does not accept the literal truth of such ideas and argues that they should be accepted by ordinary people who are not capable of philosophy. Accepting these ideas will enable them to achieve the highest level of happiness of which they are capable, albeit not to the level of what philosophers can achieve, since philosophers can understand far more about the nature of reality than can ordinary believers. Only philosophers know how to use demonstrative argument properly, so only they can truly understand what the nature of reality is.

There are, of course, religious texts that we tend to accept through faith but which cannot be proved logically. Albalag argues that these can be known but not necessarily demonstratively, and that this is not a problem. Here Albalag deviates from Ibn Rushd, since the latter rejected the claims of the *kalām* theologians to understand religious texts, especially when they appear to contrast with the conclusions of demonstration. Theology cannot help us with such texts, according to Ibn Rushd, since it possesses no methodology that can derive a valid conclusion from premises. Albalag categorizes the interpretations of those in the Jewish mystical tradition of the Kabbalah along with the *kalām* theologians. They are capable of providing only shaky approaches to scripture. He tries to separate philosophical and religious explanations more radically than Ibn Rushd would. Such a sharp dichotomy is something of a theme with both Christian and Jewish Averroists. For Albalag, when the literal sense of a text cannot be reconciled with a philosophical understanding, both the literal sense and the philosophical understanding have to be accepted but in different ways. The literal sense is something that one would understand completely if one were in the position of the prophets who had originally transmitted the text. We today are not in that position, but have to assume, even though we do not know how, that this meaning is compatible with the philosophical meaning.

According to the philosophers, on Albalag’s account, the creation of the world doctrine must be understood to cohere with the eternity of the world. It has to be possible to think of the world as something that God created. Albalag criticizes Maimonides as being disingenuous when he claims that Aristotle did not claim to know with certainty whether the world is eternal or otherwise. In fact, Albalag claims, Aristotle had no doubts about the eternity of the world. Maimonides agreed with Aristotle but did not wish to threaten the faith of ordinary believers in Judaism, we are told by Albalag. That is the reason for what Albalag interprets as Maimonides’s ambivalence about the demonstrability of the origins of the world. Maimonides should not have suggested that the eternity of the world cannot

be established by reason. It can, and philosophers have no choice but to acknowledge that eternity, although they need not broadcast their views widely if they think it would upset the beliefs and practices of the less sophisticated members of the community. We can accept the eternity of the world through reason and its createdness through faith, and there is no need to reconcile these two diverse positions. Albalag does not say why not, but he seems to go beyond Ibn Rushd, who argues that there is one truth representable in two different ways, whereas Albalag appears to argue that there are two truths. This takes him closer to the doctrine of double truth often ascribed to the Christian Averroists in their more radical attempt at establishing a rigid dichotomy between reason and religion.

Joseph ibn Caspi was born in 1279 in Provence and wrote a variety of theological and philosophical works. He built very much on the thought of Maimonides, Ibn Rushd, and Abraham ibn Ezra, especially the latter's project of producing a philosophical grammar of the Hebrew language. Caspi defended the literal sense of many passages in the Bible as factually accurate accounts of past events and criticized Maimonides's attempts at converting them into prophetic allegories. On the other hand, he shares Ibn Rushd's naturalistic approach towards miracles, suggesting that there is a physical explanation for miracles that we could, in principle, understand if we could grasp all aspects of the relevant events. To understand a report of a miracle we need to understand the attitude and mentality of the people before which it took place. Prophecy also has to be interpreted in terms of the audience it is designed to move, and if there are aspects of the event that we do not now truly understand, we should put this down to our distance from its original occurrence and our relative lack of knowledge of how the event was perceived at that time. Prophets are able to tell what is going to happen in the future because they are able to understand how the things they observe in the present are connected with what is to come. This is clearly an account that leaves God out of the action, whereby He retains little except a titular role. Caspi concentrates on the role of religious statements as being more about helping people work out how to behave and what to think rather than as actually being true or false. It is hardly surprising that philosophy and prophecy should diverge, as they are distinct activities. If we really knew why prophets said what they did and why miracles have the structure that they do, then we would understand how they might be reconciled. In that case, we would grasp how prophecy really represents accessible expressions of philosophical truth. Since we are limited in our understanding of religious statements by our distance from their original formulation, we have to accept them by faith. This faith is nonetheless founded on the truth and, although we may not know how, we should relax in the knowledge that there is such a connection. Even the more intelligent members of the community might never find out. Caspi did not accept the popular thesis that the secrets of exegesis should be restricted to the intellectual elite. He argued that they are likely to remain secret, since there is no way now of finding out precisely what the ancient scriptural passages originally meant, given the differences in audience, language, and context.

Moses Narboni was born in Perpignan around 1300 and died approximately 62 years later. He produced many commentaries on theological and religious texts, together with some original works and several commentaries on the works of Ibn Rushd.⁹ He also commented extensively on Maimonides and tended to criticize Maimonides's use of arguments drawn from Ibn Rushd, as he was one of the few philosophers of the time to recognize that Ibn Rushd was seeking to challenge the Neoplatonic metaphysics of Ibn Sīnā, which Maimonides often accepted, although he was also quite critical of Ibn Sina himself.¹⁰ One of the most potent philosophical contributions Narboni made at the time

was developing Ibn Rushd's concept of the active intellect until it became a really powerful instrument for theoretical work.

Narboni, in his account of philosophical psychology, posits that as human thinking becomes progressively more perfected, it moves from being imaginative to becoming intellectual. Ultimately, it fuses with the active intellect itself, which is the very principle of intellectual thought. As a result, the material part of us comes under the control of our rational thought. Narboni is in a position with this theory to explain miracles and prophecy as resulting from a way of thinking that produces appropriate material effects. These effects illustrate the ideas in the consciousness of the prophets and also adapt those ideas to the level of understanding of the audience the prophet is targeting. Here a kind of Neoplatonism is still in operation: Narboni seems to use the idea of a hierarchy of intellects where each intellect is connected with an existent that it produces and that then goes on to produce something else lower down in the chain of reality.

The creative relationship between intellects and existents is a reflection of a similar relationship between doctrines and acts. The idea of what is to be done results in the creation of an action that brings it about, and similarly a religious doctrine has as its material aspect a particular form of practice. All of this fits in nicely with the integrated approach that Ibn Rushd takes to the relationship between such diverse phenomena as body and mind, the material and the spiritual, and the theoretical and the practical. The Torah, which is of course taken to be perfect, is made up of doctrines that are all true and create practices designed to bring about a desirable effect that reflects those truths. For Narboni, only Moses really understands what is going on in the Torah, among human beings, playing rather the sort of role that the Prophet Muhammad represents in Islam.

Narboni and Ibn Rushd follow almost all the Islamic philosophers by accepting the truth of the principle of plenitude, according to which something is possible only if it is (at some time) actual. He uses this principle to argue that in an eternal universe, if there can be a most perfect created being, then (at some time) it will occur. Moses is the example he has in mind. The rest of humanity will not be able to understand the reasons for all the doctrines in the Torah and will have to accept these doctrines on the basis of faith alone. Narboni thinks it is unwise to encourage ordinary believers to trouble themselves with finding out the reasons for the commandments. Most people would not understand these reasons even if they were presented with them, and a fruitless search would only frustrate and might undermine the faith of the seekers. The prophets are there for such people, since they are capable of representing philosophical truths in imaginative language that will impress the masses and keep them on the right path without their having to understand exactly how what is true is in fact true. Only those capable of philosophy will understand precisely what the point of the whole enterprise is, and they will be in a position to understand the underlying logic of religion and its law. This is clearly the approach of Ibn Rushd, that there is one truth that is expressed in at least two different ways, one with its logic open to all who can see to appreciate it, and the other practical and effective.

There were many other thinkers whose work is largely based upon Ibn Rushd, such as Joseph ibn Waqar and Moses ibn Crispin, and this provides evidence of an extended debate on Averroistic themes within the Jewish community. It is only with the Renaissance and the last major Averroist thinker in the community, Elijah Delmedigo (d. ca. 1493) that the commitment to Ibn Rushd began to decline. The latter was regarded as the major commentator on Aristotle, and the relative decline in interest in Aristotle owing to the Renaissance was matched with a similar reduction in enthusiasm for his commentator. Delmedigo cemented the idea of a two-pronged approach to theological language, one for philosophers and one for

everyone else. He is much more wary than is Maimonides in revealing the secrets of religion to everyone and even chides Maimonides for not clearly distinguishing between theology and philosophy. It is true that Maimonides does speak philosophically using religious language and ideas, but this criticism is misleading since that is just the language that he used to explore philosophical ideas. When, for example, Maimonides talks about the nature of God and how we can attribute properties to him, he is not so much making a theological point as indicating a particular theory of meaning. The theory applies not only to divine attributes but to all language, using the idea of speaking about God as an extreme example of what happens when language is pushed to its limits, and shows us a great deal about how language ordinarily works.

There are aspects of Jewish Averroism that are quite distinct from the thought of Ibn Rushd himself and even from Christian Averroism. Ibn Rushd was often seen as sharing a platform with Maimonides and even with Abraham ibn Ezra. Some thinkers such as Narboni even tried to combine Ibn Rushd with Kabbalistic ideas, an unlikely combination if there ever was one. Narboni's discussion of providence in terms of astrological causation would have surprised Ibn Rushd and shocked Maimonides, but there is no reason why the Jewish Averroists should have stuck to the letter of Ibn Rushd himself. Like many Jewish thinkers, they combined a variety of ideas into what they took to be a general and powerful argument that enabled them to make sense theoretically of a large number of significant issues. They were undoubtedly creative in their use of their sources, and this period of thought was important since whatever the detail of their arguments, the general thrust was to distinguish sharply between religion on the one hand and philosophy and science on the other. In some ways this seemed to establish a kind of enlightenment consensus a long time before the European Enlightenment or even its Jewish version, the *Haskalah* of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

Jewish Averroism has a determined approach to dealing with the distinction between religious and philosophical truths. The argument that the pursuit of philosophy is not only permitted by religion but is even necessary for those capable of undertaking it comes straight from Ibn Rushd in his *Faṣl al-Maḳāl* (*Decisive Treatise*). The warning against trying to prove the truth of religion through philosophy was taken very much to heart by the Jewish Averroists. It is a serious error to try to explain through philosophy what is capable only of religious explanation, like using a spanner where a screwdriver is required. Saying that the principles of religion cannot be proved theoretically might make some in the community skeptical about their faith and throw suspicion on the integrity of the philosophers as well. On the other hand, Jewish thinkers often went out of their way to defend the rationality of the principles of Judaism, in just the same way that their Muslim peers described Islam. They argued that not only was the system of Judaism coherent and rational; it was superior to its competitors, an important argument to produce at a time when Jews were under considerable pressure, often material as well as intellectual, to convert and become Muslims and Christians. Jewish thinkers argued that the problem with Christianity in particular was that many of the ideas that Christians are supposed to believe are, in fact, impossible.

Jewish philosophers distinguished between those ideas that are in themselves possible and can be brought into existence through the miraculous intervention of the deity and those ideas that even God could not bring about, since they are impossible and only an imperfect deity who did not understand the nature of logic could wish to bring them about. This was the criticism that Jewish philosophers brought against the notion of God becoming man, the Incarnation, which they regarded as obviously an imperfection, along with a whole range of other crucial Christian doctrines such as the Trinity, transubstantiation, and the Virgin

Birth. These were all taken to be rationally highly problematic and contrasted with the major principles of Judaism that make up an acceptably rational faith. They did have problems with some of the biblical miracles, since Aristotelians tend to think that anything that goes against the laws of nature is impossible, and not only scientifically impossible. Even God could not bring about such phenomena. Here the use of Maimonides and Abraham ibn Ezra was quite helpful, however. According to the former, we might want to reinterpret the miracles and see them as allegorical and, according to the latter, we are in real doubt about the exact meaning of the Hebrew text since we are so far from it in time. The miracles turn out to be less of a rational stumbling block than might otherwise have been the case, because one can easily conclude that what precisely was supposed to have happened is unclear.

Modern Jewish philosophy looking at Islam

Islam was not much noticed by Jewish philosophers in Europe over the last few hundred years. It is clear that in the work of Spinoza, much Islamic philosophy comes to the fore, while in the *Haskalah*, or Jewish Enlightenment, references were made to relatively good relations between Jews and their Muslim rulers in parts of the earlier Islamic world. This is exemplified in the play *Nathan the Wise* by Lessing, who was not himself Jewish but who included in the drama the ideas of many Jewish thinkers of the time in the view that men of reason can come together and discuss things calmly despite their individual religions. Muslims were often regarded as exotic creatures, but the idea that at one time they lived amicably with Jews in al-Andalus has played a large role in earlier Jewish attitudes to Islam, by contrast with the more recent difficulties that Jews often had with Christian rulers and citizens. As Jews became accepted into civil society, they returned the compliment by often abandoning their religion or altering it so that it fitted better into their new environment. The putative Golden Age recalled a time when faiths coexisted at least for a bit, and in the Ottoman Empire Jews had a range of possibilities for religious independence and economic advance, albeit within the context of a culture in which they were not formally equal to Muslim subjects. By the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, this rosy view became increasingly unrealistic, but many Jewish thinkers were fascinated by the phenomenon of Islam and devoted their lives to its study or even embraced the religion.

In modern times there has been almost no reflection on Islam among Jewish thinkers, while a lot of attention has been paid to Christianity. This is probably because of the environment in which most Jewish philosophy took place: Only Derrida, among major thinkers, grew up in an Islamic environment and he did make some interesting comments on Islam that we shall consider.

One of the interesting Jewish thinkers who wrote about Islam was Franz Rosenzweig, and he was very critical of it. He respected Christianity, which he saw as sharing with Judaism the idea of divine self-revelation through love. The God of Islam is pagan, he argues, since it is so transcendent and basically hidden. He did not have to create the world, and he has complete autonomy in his dealings with it, and the basic constituents of the world themselves have no solidity. Rosenzweig is thinking about the Ash'arism and atomism of al-Ghazālī here and is obviously unaware of those many Muslim thinkers who emphasize love when they describe God, as indeed al-Ghazālī himself did. Rosenzweig sees jihad and sacrifice as essential to Islam since it is a pagan religion and sees no way of advancing except through prioritizing the group, often through a dissolution of individuality into it. He also sees the Islamic world as always in a state of conflict with the Christian and Jewish worlds, given their alternative views on just about everything.

This critical attitude to Islam is turned on its head by Ignaz Maybaum, who is very nearly the only major Jewish theologian to spend considerable time and space discussing Islam. He points to the similarity between traditional Judaism, with its emphasis on law and its stability, and Islamic law, by which he means attitudes to Shari'a by traditional Muslims. Maybaum points out that Rosenzweig defends traditional Judaism by employing an Islamic notion of law, using the medieval against the modern, in his words, of which Maybaum himself is critical, being on the nontraditional side of the divide. He quite rightly is critical of the Rosenzweig approach, and it is worth wondering what the point is in trying to make general claims about religions that encompass their "essences" but have little relevance to the differing ways in which believers actually experience those religions. Rosenzweig finds a place for Islam that in some ways is uncannily similar to Hegel's account of Judaism. What is problematic about all these attempts is that they abstract over the various ways of being a Jew and a Muslim, which results in a definition that makes little sense. Religions are not neat and cannot be encapsulated in definitions.

Jewish thinkers tend to use Islam as a foil, and Jewish philosophers do not really engage with the religion or the philosophical ideas that go along with it. This can be most clearly seen in the case of Jacques Derrida, the self-proclaimed Arab Jew (he came originally from Algeria). Although in later life he became quite intrigued by the fact that he had been raised in a largely Muslim society, this does not seem to have given him much of an idea of Islam itself. On the contrary, he takes Islam to represent the other for Western civilization and, of course, he is quite right in thinking that; but this does not in any way help us to understand either the religion or its effect on other religions and theoretical ideas about them. He goes on to argue that Islam should not be seen as being in opposition to Christianity or other basic Western ideologies, but it is far from clear why.

Judaism and Islam as basically philosophical

To what extent, if at all, religions are philosophical has been a significant issue for millennia. Some early Jewish and Muslim thinkers were intent on radically separating faith from philosophy, in the sense that faith does not require philosophy but is self-sufficient. We saw something of the parameters of this discussion in the previous sections about Jewish Averroists, but the topic arose much earlier and much later also. It is a natural question for a religion to raise, in terms of what else the religion requires for someone to understand it. If a religion is basically philosophical, then one really has to be a philosopher to understand it fully, or perhaps philosophers have a different route to understanding the religion as compared with ordinary believers and it often seems to be a superior route. Yet this thesis seems to contravene what al-Farābī called the point of religion, which is to present to everyone the truth in ways that they can understand and that do not demand much in the way of learning or preparation and especially not the acquiring of knowledge from outside the religion. Goitein argues that Judaism is so fiercely monotheistic that it avoids being linked too closely with philosophy, whereas other religions do not share this anti-philosophical character. It is difficult to know what to make of such a claim: It is obviously misguided, since there is no incompatibility at all between monotheism and philosophy. Neoplatonism in particular fits in very nicely with monotheism, and indeed its contrary is true, since it starts with just one thing (monotheism) out of which everything else emerges and a hierarchy of beings is then established (polytheism). Perhaps the adaptability of Neoplatonism to a variety of religious doctrines played a role in its long ascendance in the philosophical world, which looked to classical Greece for its rules and regulations.

Both Judaism and Islam have their critics of philosophy: Yehuda Halevi and Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī in particular come to mind, critics who nonetheless had to use philosophy in order to criticize it, thus providing yet another argument for the idea that religions are, in the end, philosophical.¹¹ The attempt to distinguish sharply between philosophy and theology, so enthusiastically taken up by the Aristotelians, is impressive in its aims but difficult to carry out. Much theology is better philosophy than much philosophy, and there is no reason that a religious text and the concepts it uses should not be part of the subject matter of philosophy. After all, much theology is not a matter of saying what the religion represents but is more about what it means, and understanding that takes rational machinery. Religious claims have to be interpreted and this involves theory, and theory brings in argument. It would be misleading to argue that any application of theory is equivalent to philosophy, but most of it is. There was a longstanding dispute in Islamic philosophy as to whether logic is a part of philosophy, or merely something that philosophy uses. If the former is the case, then argument is always philosophical; if the latter, the case is less clear. Perhaps in the case of the latter, argument can simply be something that is used and then abandoned, rather like getting off a bus once it gets to your stop.

Carlos Fraenkel¹² has argued for the existence of a long tradition in philosophy, including not only Jews and Muslims but Christians also, of the search for a philosophical religion. This is taken to be an intellectually acceptable form of religion that can be adopted by those capable of understanding the real nature of religious truth, those who are rationally sophisticated. Such a view of religion involves a theory of how it is then to be made available to the public at large, who have to work without the logical resources of the more philosophically able. Religions came to be regarded as a form of philosophy, and this often is taken to be equivalent to God being identical with reason in some sense. Plato's ideas on this topic are taken up by Aristotle, we are told, and the issue of how far life can be happy and complete without philosophy (not very far, apparently) is a topic taken up by early Christian thinkers, Islamic philosophers, and their Jewish admirers, leading up to Spinoza.

The crucial issue here is to consider whether the meaning of religion from Plato onward is really the same for all these religious traditions. Does Plato mean by the divine what the later Christian, Jewish, and Muslim thinkers take to be the divine? This issue arises again when we get to Spinoza, who according to Fraenkel is not as opposed to traditional religion as is often thought. Spinoza is a defender of seeing traditional religion as philosophical religion, Christianity in particular, we are told. What is behind the thesis is the idea that, for Spinoza, reason is equivalent to the divine, so a religion based on reason, like anything based on reason, is in that sense acceptable and indeed desirable. However, surely Spinoza makes some challenging comments on religion that suggest that much of what believers take to be true is false, and not only false but could never be true. Certainly behind the allegory lies something rational, and reason is linked by Spinoza and many philosophers with the divine, but that does not itself establish that Spinoza is defending traditional religion.

Plato seems far more similar to Spinoza here than the philosophers of the three monotheistic religions who come in between them. Neither Plato nor Spinoza have much time for the idea of a personal god, and for them the divine has a far more abstract and etiolated function. For Spinoza, it is famously dissolved into nature. It is certainly true that Spinoza uses much of the language of Maimonides and also al-Farābī, but it is not true that he follows on from them on this issue in any except a chronological sense. This brings us up against the problem of the entire neo-Hegelian project of historically linking thinkers on this topic as though they are always connected and are always on the same subject. Philo and Clement have views on Moses that are certainly based on Plato, and Maimonides and Ibn

Rushd are obviously dependent on al-Farābī,¹³ but the idea that many of the most significant thinkers in philosophy were all engaged in the same project stands in the way of much history of philosophy. Islamic and Jewish philosophers were frequently engaged in the critique of religion. We are told right at the start of Maimonides's *Guide of the Perplexed* that the basic issue is how an intellectual can be a believer. Answering this question was for many Muslim and Jewish philosophers both a theoretical and a personal issue. If they were successful in establishing a philosophical religion, then they managed to solve the problem. The fact that the debate continues suggests that they did not solve it. As we have seen in this chapter, this is not the only issue that interested them but it clearly does go to the core of the whole rationale of religious philosophy itself.

The idea that religions are in themselves either attuned or antagonistic to philosophy is difficult to accept. Philosophy in the Sunni world of Islam did not really recover from the pressures it felt from such thinkers as al-Ghazālī, who criticized it as *kufī*, or unbelief, and theologians who argued, often using philosophy, that it was irrelevant. On the other hand, philosophy continued to flourish in the Shi'i world, becoming part of the *madrassa* curriculum in many places and an inevitable aspect of an educated person. In Judaism, there were also pressures against the pursuit of philosophy, and Maimonides was often challenged by Jews who thought that he overemphasized the significance of reason. There was, after his death, a move to emphasize certain aspects of Jewish thought such as kabbalah, which were taken to represent an alternative way of proceeding theoretically as compared with philosophy. Yet philosophy did become part of the official curriculum of most of the Jewish legal and commentarial schools: In the view of most of the Jewish authoritative thinkers, it was too useful a way of proceeding not to be employed and combined with more traditional sources of knowledge. Yet it would be problematic to argue that Sunni Islam was less rational than Judaism or than Shi'i Islam or that one form of religion is more basically attuned to philosophy than any other. Why religions veer off in different directions on this issue is no doubt an interesting issue but is not itself a philosophical one.

Notes

- 1 H. Maccoby, *Philosophy of the Talmud* (London: Routledge, 2002).
- 2 G. Tamani and M. Zonta, *Aristoteles Hebraicus* (Venezia: Supernova, 1997).
- 3 A. Altmann and S. M. Stern, *Isaac Israeli. A Neoplatonic Philosopher of the Early Tenth Century* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1958).
- 4 I. Efros, "Palquera's Reshit Hokmah and Alfarabi's Iḥṣā' al-'Ulūm," *The Jewish Quarterly Review* (n.s.), 25 (1935): 227–235.
- 5 E. I. J. Rosenthal, *Averroes' Commentary on Plato's Republic*, second rev. ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1966).
- 6 Or even how much they knew of each other, since often they did not mention other thinkers whom they had obviously read.
- 7 J. Robinson, "Samuel Ibn Tibbon's Perush ha-Millot ha-Zarot and al-Farābī's Eisagoge and categories," *Aleph*, 9 (2009): 41–76.
- 8 C. Fraenkel, *Philosophical Religions from Plato to Spinoza: Reason, Religion, and Autonomy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), pp. 202–205.
- 9 Ibn Rushd, *The Epistle on the Possibility of Conjunction with the Active Intellect, with the Commentary of Moses Narboni*, ed. K. P. Bland (New York: Ktav, 1982); also M.-R. Hayoun, "Moses of Narbonne and Ibn Bajja: the edition of the Hebrew translation of the Regimen of the Solitary Man," *Daat*, 18 (1987): 27–44.
- 10 I. Dobbs-Weinstein, "Maimonides' Reticence Towards Ibn Sina," in *Avicenna and His Heritage*, eds. J. Janssens and D. De Smet (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 2002), pp. 281–296; S. Harvey, "Did Maimonides' letter to Samuel Ibn Tibbon determine which philosophers would

- be studied by later Jewish thinkers?" *The Jewish Quarterly Review* (n.s.), 83 (1992): 51–70; S. Harvey, "Why did Fourteenth-Century Jews turn to Alghazali's account of natural science?" *The Jewish Quarterly Review* (n.s.), 91 (2001): 359–376; S. Harvey, "Falaquera's Alfarabi. An example of the Judaization of the Islamic Falasifah," *Trumah* 12 (2002): 97–112; and S. Harvey, "Avicenna's Influence on Jewish Thought: Some Reflections," in *Avicenna and His Legacy: A Golden Age of Science and Philosophy*, ed. Y. T. Langermann (Turnhout: Brepols, 2009), pp. 327–340.
- 11 Eran, "Al-Ghazālī and Maimonides on the world to come and spiritual pleasures," *Jewish Studies Quarterly*, 8 (2001): 137–166.
 - 12 C. Fraenkel, *Philosophical Religions from Plato to Spinoza: Reason, Religion, and Autonomy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012).
 - 13 L. V. Berman, "Maimonides, the disciple of Alfarabi," *Israel Oriental Studies*, 4 (1974): 54–78.

Further reading

- Davidson, H., *Moses Maimonides. The Man and His Works* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005). The best book on the thinker and his links with Islamic thought.
- Frank, D., and Leaman, O. (eds.), *History of Jewish Philosophy* (London: Routledge, 1997). A range of essays on the interaction of Jewish philosophy with Islam.
- Frank, D., Leaman, O., and Manekin, C. (eds.), *A Reader in Jewish Philosophy* (London: Routledge, 2000). Significant material here on Jewish/Islamic philosophical links.
- Leaman, O., *Evil and Suffering in Jewish Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995). Many of the chapters deal with Jewish thinkers who worked within an Islamic environment.
- Leaman, O., *Moses Maimonides* (London: Routledge, 1997). The thinker is treated very much as part of the Islamic cultural world.
- Leaman, O., *Averroes and His Philosophy* (London: Routledge, 1997). An account of the thinker primarily as a philosopher.
- Leaman, O., *Islamic Philosophy: An Introduction* (Cambridge: Polity, 2009). General discussion of the most significant topics in Islamic philosophy.
- Maybaum, I., *Dialogue between Jew, Christian and Muslim* (London: Routledge, Kegan & Paul, 1973). This author's major work on the topic.
- Meddeb, A., and Stora, B. (eds.), *A History of Jewish-Muslim Relations: From the Origins to the Present Day* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2013). Detailed and accurate series of essays on the topic.
- Nasr, S., and Leaman, O. (eds.), *History of Islamic Philosophy* (London: Routledge, 1996). Comprehensive treatment of both Islamic philosophy and those forms of Jewish philosophy that pursued the same style of writing.
- Rosenzweig, F., *The Star of Redemption*, trans. B. Galli (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 2005). The major philosophical work of this thinker.
- Siret, C., *A History of Jewish Philosophy in the Middle Ages* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985). Very detailed and clear account of the topic.
- Zonta, M., *Hebrew Scholasticism in the Fifteenth Century. A History and Source Book* (Dordrecht: Springer, 2006). By the foremost scholar in the field, a detailed account of this significant period of Jewish philosophy.

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