



Known as 'The Copenhagen Maimonides', the manuscript of the *Guide of the Perplexed* was illuminated in Catalonia in the years 1347-48 CE. *Courtesy the Royal Library, Copenhagen*

Medieval but not Christian

It's shocking that histories of medieval philosophy celebrate only Christian thinkers, ignoring Islamic and Jewish thought

by Yitzhak Y Melamed

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In 1989, Cambridge University Press announced the publication of a new, three-volume book series: *The Cambridge Translations of Medieval Philosophical Texts*. The first volume – edited by Norman Kretzmann and Eleonore Stump, and dedicated to logic and the philosophy of language – contained 15 medieval texts, of which 15 were composed by Christian authors. The second volume in the series, this time focusing on ethics and political philosophy, appeared in 2000. Seventeen of the 17 texts included in this collection – edited by Arthur S McGrade, John Kilcullen and Matthew Kempshall – were authored by Christian writers. Late-medieval Jewish or Islamic texts on ethics or politics? Not in our school.

The third volume of the series, this one dedicated to mind and knowledge, and edited by Robert Pasnau, appeared in 2002. It contained 12 texts, of which 12 were Christian. No Islamic or Jewish sources made the cut.

Due to the success of the first three volumes, the press decided to expand the series by two more, devoted, respectively, to metaphysics and to philosophical theology. It would not be rash to predict that neither volume will include any works by Islamic or Jewish authors. In all likelihood, a reader of this series would get the impression that there simply *were* no Islamic or Jewish philosophers in late-medieval times (or, at least, no Jewish or Islamic philosophers who wrote on logic, philosophy of language, ethics, politics, or philosophy of mind, or whose works deserve any attention).

But perhaps we are jumping to conclusions. Perhaps it was the unavailability of competent translators of medieval philosophical texts in Arabic and Hebrew that accounts for this strict exclusion of such works. If that were the case, then we might, of course, wish to enquire about the *reasons* for the absence of competent translators. But, for all I can tell, the issue of availability of translators from Arabic and Hebrew had nothing to do with the exclusion of Jewish and Islamic works in this series. If this omission were merely a technical matter, it would be easy for the editors to accommodate such difficulty by retitling the series ‘The Cambridge Translations of Medieval *Christian* Philosophical Texts’ (my emphasis). This would seem to be a simple matter of ‘truth in advertising’. And, yet, they did not make this simple qualification.

Why did the editors of *The Cambridge Translations of Medieval Philosophical Texts* not adopt a title that would specify that the series was restricted to *Christian* texts? Presumably, the specification would make the series look much more *parochial* – as it indeed is – being a set of anthologies devoted to a specific religious tradition. In attempting to present the Christian tradition as the only game in town in late medieval philosophy, the editors of the series apparently thought they were representing *universal* philosophical discourse (rather than that of a particular religious tradition), and thus the exclusion of Islamic and Jewish works became a device for asserting the universality of Christianity.

An alternative explanation for the exclusion of medieval Islamic and Jewish philosophy might be that the series editors were simply *unaware* of the exclusionary, distorting and discriminatory nature of their editorial policy: they may have innocently assumed that medieval philosophy is just Christian philosophy. Ascribing conceptual blindness of such a vast scope to highly competent scholars seems to me barely credible, and yet we cannot absolutely rule it out since such blindness is indeed a common mark of activity dominated by ideology.

Before we discuss what readers of the Cambridge volumes are missing, let me make one brief observation. Current Anglo-American philosophy is seriously (and rightly) engaged with the question of how to rectify the historical exclusion of various groups from the philosophical tradition. The neglect of medieval Islamic and Jewish philosophy from the historiography of medieval philosophy is only partly like the exclusion of other groups, however. There is a crucial irony to this particular exclusion. Medieval philosophical culture, despite all its problems, was significantly multicultural; Islamic, Jewish, and Christian authors frequently engaged with each other's work, sometimes even collaborating. It is only *we*, *today*, who are creating a purely Christian narrative that excludes Jewish and Islamic authors from the philosophical discourse.

But what do we, as readers and scholars, miss out on if we neglect medieval Islamic and Jewish philosophy? I will speak to the case of Jewish philosophy, but the same ideas (though with edifying variations and divergences) apply to Islamic philosophy.

philosophy.

Medieval Jewish philosophy engages with arguments related to its two main textual sources: Aristotelian philosophy, and classical Jewish works (the Talmud, *midrash*, and Scripture). So far, this characterisation is not *that* different from medieval Christian philosophy. However, on a closer look, the differences abound.

Judaism was a small, marginal and dispersed religious minority in the Middle Ages. These characteristics played a role in determining the features of its philosophical discourse. Partly due to its far-flung social distribution, and partly due to its stress on performance of religious commandments (ie, actions) rather than beliefs, rabbinic Judaism never developed a set system of binding dogma. There were attempts to create such a system – the most famous of which was Maimonides’s enumeration of his Thirteen Principles of Faith – but without exception such attempts were colossal failures. As a result, on many issues of theological and philosophical significance, the views of medieval Jewish philosophers were all over the place.

Some claimed that God has no physical features, while others viewed God as encompassing all of space within himself (or even as having a body); some viewed God as having no personal features whatsoever, while others ascribed to God feelings, such as regret, love, and even guilt. Does this variety of perspectives reflect a principled commitment to tolerance of diversity? Not necessarily. A certain degree of tolerance was required for the sheer survival of Jewish communities: the price of a harsh policy against dissent would have been the loss of members of the community and, for such a small community, such a loss would be a heavy price to pay.

Medieval Jewish philosophy was, above all, deeply informed by the literary persona of a single author: Moses Maimonides (1135-1204). Maimonides was not only the greatest medieval Jewish philosopher but also one of the greatest rabbinic authorities of all time. His *Mishneh Torah* is still widely considered one of the two most authoritative codifications of Rabbinic law. And yet, paradoxically, Maimonides was also considered by many Jews to be one of the greatest *heretics* of their religion.

Maimonides privileged daring, unorthodox philosophical positions, denying that God has any personality

Although Maimonides was quite loyal to the teachings of Aristotle, he took far bolder positions on theological issues. Thus, for example, in his philosophical masterpiece, the *Guide of the Perplexed*, Maimonides argued that, if unbiased philosophical enquiry led to belief in the eternity of the world, rather than in the Biblical account of creation, one should not shy away from affirming philosophical truth just because it conflicts with Scripture. He pointed out that there are many more passages in Scripture that ascribe corporeality to God than passages that support creation *ex nihilo*. Resolutely advocating a radical reinterpretation of all such passages to make them conform to the philosophical view that God is incorporeal, Maimonides claimed that we should likewise reinterpret all Biblical passages referring to creation to imply that the world is eternal, if that was the more tenable philosophical view.

On several key religious issues, Maimonides also privileged daring and unorthodox philosophical positions, denying that God has any personality (can a non-person be a lawgiver?), as well as naturalising the notion of divine providence (so that 'reward' is just the natural result of conducting ones' life rationally and properly). He deflated the miraculousness of divine miracles, and carefully crafted a denial of personal immortality.

The first reactions to Maimonides's claims were quite volatile, but his supporters were also numerous among the rabbinic strata. And when some of his opponents announced a ban on studying philosophy for anyone under the age of 25, Maimonides's proponents responded by announcing a counter-ban on those who disallow the study of philosophy. Maimonides's followers were numerous among medieval Jewish philosophers and, within a short period of time after his death, one can already speak about a Maimonidean school – or rather, schools – of philosophy, distinguished from each other by the degree of boldness in their pursuit of the philosophical truth, regardless of its agreement with common religious beliefs and norms.

Benedict de Spinoza (1632-77) and the audacious rationalist philosopher Salomon Maimon (1753-1800) were two of the latest representatives of this school of radical Maimonideanism. Both were willing to pay a significant personal price for the sake of maintaining their intellectual and philosophical integrity. The radical Maimonideans were not atheists. In fact, the very opposite is true: they were motivated by a genuine zeal for a true conception of God, a conception that is free and clean from the widely prevalent anthropomorphic portrayal of God among both the masses and a significant share of the rabbinic elite. In this context, Maimonides himself would occasionally refer derogatorily to ‘*Hamon ha-Rabbanim*’, literally, the rabbinic multitude, or, if you wish, the rabbinic *hoi polloi*, though his rabbinic qualifications were far more impressive than the vast majority of these ‘commoners’.

The Janus-faced reputation of Maimonides and his thought persisted in conflicted attitudes during the early modern period. In the 18th century, Rabbi Jacob Emden (the rabbinic consultant of Moses Mendelssohn, the leader of the Jewish Enlightenment movement) proposed that perhaps there were two authors named Moses Maimonides, for one could not possibly comprehend how the illustrious author of the celebrated rabbinic code, the *Mishneh Torah*, could also pen the horrible philosophical assertions found in the *Guide of the Perplexed*.

A similarly ambivalent response is reflected in a common practice among early modern central-European rabbis who wished to study Maimonides’s *Guide of the Perplexed*. A 16th-century document issued in Prague contains a detailed list of the suspicious, heretical opinions one can find in the *Guide*. Any rabbinic scholar of the time who wished to study the book was required to review this list of opinions and to confess, on the one hand, not to believe in any of these heretical opinions while, on the other hand, promising not to impute any of them to Maimonides, the great Talmudist.

Thomas Aquinas’s writings demonstrate sustained interest in the views of non-Christian writers

In many ways, Maimonides was a Mediterranean thinker, as Sarah Stroumsa puts it in her fascinating [study](#). This characterisation is apt not only in terms of his actual biography (he was born in Córdoba, Spain, emigrated to North Africa, then Palestine, and eventually settled in Fustat, Egypt), nor even in terms of his correspondence (which ranged from Provence in the west, to Yemen and Baghdad in the east) but, even more so, in terms of the community of philosophers with whom he was conversing. His two favourite philosophers were Aristotle and [al-Farabi](#) (for the most part, Maimonides had little appreciation for his Jewish philosophical predecessors). Indeed, Maimonides bluntly asks his readers to avoid evaluating views according to our social disposition or our categorisation of the speaker who expresses them. ‘Hear the truth from whoever spoke it’ became a slogan of this attitude of Maimonides. Judging opinions according to their veracity, rather than the social milieu of the speaker, is a recommendation that is still very much advisable today.

Maimonides was not at all unique among medieval philosophers in ascribing much importance to the philosophical views of thinkers who were not his co-religionist. Thomas Aquinas’s writings demonstrate sustained interest in the views of Maimonides, [Avicenna](#) and other non-Christian writers, and [Aquinas’s](#) discussion of these writers is respectful and serious. We should not disregard the significant religious violence that was not uncommon in the later Middle Ages. Still, there is something quite impressive in the manner in which medieval Christian, Islamic and Jewish philosophers read the works of each other, frequently disagreeing, but not that rarely also taking inspiration from the writing of thinkers belonging to other religions.

Let me return to the riddle of Maimonides. What happens to a culture whose greatest religious scholar is also its greatest heretic? This question has bothered scholars of Maimonides, of medieval Jewish philosophy, and of rabbinics for a very long time, and we are still far from having a satisfying answer to the question. It is clear, however, that many standard assumptions are suddenly called into question by virtue of the centrality of such a thinker. ‘If Maimonides could assert x , why may not I?’

The only way to embark on such questioning of our assumptions, prompted by

past philosophical insight, is by studying the actual works of the philosophers whose insights move us. Many such gems of philosophical wisdom are contained in medieval and early modern Jewish and Islamic philosophical works. And there are many. But to study this corpus of philosophical literature, we must first acknowledge its very existence. And this is something that present-day assumptions about the scope and study of philosophy's past have lamentably obscured.

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