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MAIMONIDES
THE CONCILIATOR OF EASTERN AND
WESTERN THOUGHT

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PREFACE

This paper on "Maimonides: The Conciliator of Eastern and Western Thought" was prepared at the request of the Indian Institute of Culture for a Discussion Meeting planned in Commemoration of the 750th year since the death in 1204 of the great Jewish philosopher and physician. The writer is Dr. David Baumgardt, Consultant in Philosophy to the Library of Congress at Washington. His essay was read and discussed at the Institute on September 23rd, 1954, under the chairmanship of the Rev. L. M. Schiff, m.a. (Oxon.)

The East and West whose ideas Maimonides attempted to reconcile were neither the Orient and the Occident of today nor the two rival power blocs now so described. They were the eastern border of the Mediterranean and the rest of Europe. Maimonides was not alone in attempting to reconcile religion and science, but there are lessons to be learned from his approach. Devout Jew though he was, he was the foe of narrow-mindedness and superstition. He followed Aristotle to a large extent in science and metaphysics, confessing willingness to learn from Gentiles no less than from Jews.

He rejected the obligation to accept the letter of any sacred text, declaring that the spirit of true religion demanded a spiritual interpretation. The God to whom he was devoted was essentially unknowable, and he saw Jewish religious thought as tending towards ever greater spiritualization of the Deity and of human life.

Not the least contribution of Maimonides was his unassuming, industrious and devoted life. He was, as Shri K. Guru Dutt said at the Discussion Meeting, a lovable personality and "really a great man in every sense."

It is interesting that he had Muslim patrons and was cited by Christian scholars like Thomas Aquinas, who, as Mr. Schiff mentioned, included him along with the Church Fathers as an authority. Maimonides, he said, had helped to keep philosophy alive when narrow religious ideas were threatening its very existence. His efforts held the promise of a world basis of thought.

MAIMONIDES

THE CONCILIATOR OF EASTERN AND WESTERN THOUGHT

It is certainly a truism that the world has grown much smaller in the 20th century than ever before. But the task of drawing the full spiritual consequences from this insight has hardly begun; and merely demanding a higher unity of our different world philosophies will surely not do. Nothing can, therefore, be more welcome and of greater importance than the assistance of allies in that great struggle for a new understanding between East and West, the two main poles of human civilization.

On a much smaller scale, mankind once achieved such a union between strongly opposed spiritual powers within the great flowering of Mediterranean culture. This was the great synthesis of Judaeo-Islamic religion and wisdom on the one hand and Greek science and philosophy on the other. The incarnation of the union of these forces which is today probably more alive than any other is that achieved by the greatest mediaeval thinker of Judaism: Moses Maimonides. Who was the man and what is his message?

LIFE AND EARLIER WORKS

A large garland of legends has grown around the life and the personality of this most representative religious leader of mediaeval Jewry. Nevertheless, from a considerable number of his letters which have been preserved and from other historical documents he is biographically better known to us than many among his contemporaries. Maimonides (or as he was called, according to ancient Jewish custom, Moses the son of Maimon, Moses ben Maimon, or Maimuni or the Rambam, *i.e.*, an abbreviation of the initial consonants of the title and the name Rabbi Moses ben Maimon), was born on the Sabbath of the eve of Passover, the spring festival, March 30, 1135, in Cordoba, Andalusia, in Southern Spain. Eight hundred years later the Government of Spain placed a memorial tablet on the wall of the synagogue in the philosopher's birthplace, during the unveiling of which I had the honour to be present, and to deliver shortly afterwards an official oration. The ancient city in which there still stands a Moorish bridge on Roman bases and a magnificent mosque, later changed into an equally magnificent cathedral, had been a centre of Jewish religious studies since the 10th century.

The philosopher's family itself counted among its members quite a number of *hahamim* and *dayanin*, sages and heads of local Jewish courts, and Maimonides' father, Maimon ben Joseph, was one of them. But it was already the evening glow of the flowering of Jewish civilization in Cordoba into which the great thinker was born. In 1148, when he was still a boy of 13, the persecutions of Jews started in Andalusia under the regime of the fanatic Almohades. Maimonides' family was forced to leave Cordoba and for years had to change its residence in other Spanish cities. Nevertheless, as has happened over and over again to refugees throughout the history of mankind and especially to the Jews, that nation of refugees *par excellence*, Maimonides always looked back to the place of his birth with unconcealed warmth; up to the last days of his life, he spoke of Andalusia as his "home": "with us, at home, in . . . Andalusia."

About 1160, Maimonides' father and his family could no longer abide anywhere in Spain and migrated to Fez in North Morocco. From Fez the movement of the Islamic zealots had taken its origin and it has, therefore, often been asked why the Maimon family fled exactly to the original centre of the persecution under which they had to suffer? From the observation of recent history two possible answers may suggest themselves. Cruel political movements are not so imposing at the place of their origin as they appear to their followers

abroad, who often wish to outdo their leaders; and, further, at the centre of these aggressive powers, able and experienced leaders of the opposition have an especially fruitful field of activity.

Soon after his arrival in Fez, Maimon ben Joseph wrote a "letter of consolation" to the Jews in North Africa and his son, obviously not much later, took an even more daring step. He not only consoled his persecuted coreligionists but he also turned against a narrow-minded Jewish scholar who had frightened the Jewish populace of the country by insisting that to comply with any Mohammedan ritual would be a deadly sin and would be apostasy, even if done under threat to life.

In his answer to this blind rigourism, Maimonides reveals for the first time the full independence of his superior mind. As he did so often, later, he refused to bow to the literalness of unthinking orthodoxy or to abet the sham settling of any spiritual issue. He emphasized that it would not only be cruel to make a man responsible for what he was forced to do entirely against his will but it would also not be in the sense of Scripture to put any enforced abandonment of faith into the same category as a voluntary one.

And yet, in this masterly polemic, his *Epistle on Apostasy*, "*Iggeret Hashemad*" or, as it is entitled in his collection of letters and *Responso*, "*Ma'amar Kiddusk Hashem*," "Statement concerning the Sanctification of the Divine Name," Maimonides certainly did not condone any compromise in religious convictions themselves. On the contrary, he strictly advises emigration from a country in which religious oppression endangers even the maintenance of man's inmost faith. And to give some cheer to himself and his disheartened Jewish people, he added: Emigrate from a land of tyranny; "the world is large and wide"—a consolation certainly not out of place at that time, though unfortunately it may be so today.

Still another observation on exile made by Maimonides on another occasion is even more penetrating. He taught that life in banishment from one's native country may have the special value of increasing man's humbleness¹—again a remark which, perhaps, does not generally hold true but certainly applied to a man of his intellectual stature and his profound natural humility.

Obviously the young Maimonides had already completed two of his minor works in Spain: *Heshbon ha-Ibbur* on the complicated astronomical problems concerning the Jewish calendar, especially the Jewish leap month; and *Millot Higgayon*, a treatise on basic terms of Aristotelian logic, in which he stressed that logic is, so to speak, the grammar of thought—an observation which is particularly pertinent to the structure of Aristotle's metaphysical system. Though Maimonides himself did not give much weight to this tract on logic and metaphysics—the first fruit of his studies of Aristotle—the work was translated into Latin as late as 1527, into English by I. Efron and was commented on in 1761 by the best-known German Jew of the 18th century. Moses Mendelssohn.

These two earlier writings and the *Epistle on Apostasy* already show the especially wide range of the young Maimonides' erudition. Religion and the whole field of science of his day attracted him from his early youth with equal strength. More than even some religious liberals of our day, Maimonides determinedly confessed that in matters of science he was willing to learn not only from Jews but no less from Gentiles, nay, from worshippers of idols,² from religiously most objectionable minds, if they had to offer any true insight into life and nature.

But obviously in Fez the pursuit of any secular research, which had once in Spain brought the young Maimonides in contact with noted Arab scholars,³ became more and more

difficult; and life there itself became so unbearable to the Maimon family that they were forced to continue their migrations and probably sailed first to Palestine. According to a report which is, however, perhaps not thoroughly authentic, the small boat almost sank in heavy storms. But finally they reached the land of their forefathers, the loss of which Jews all over the globe have bewailed in their daily prayers for almost 2,000 years—that loss of their home from which all their age-old suffering originated. Yet, the homelessness of the Maimon family did not end after their entrance into their ancient homeland. Palestine was an especially war-torn country, in these years between its capture by the Crusaders and its re-occupation by the Moslems. It was evidently not fit for the settlement of newcomers and could hardly provide a living for the group of Jews residing there.

It was in Egypt, in Fostat, to the south of the present city of Cairo, under the comparatively tolerant rule of the last Fatimite Caliph and Saladin, that Maimonides found—from about 1167—more than 30 years of sufficient peace and concentration for the completion of his mature, monumental life work. But even then fate did not entirely spare him. Soon after his family's arrival in Egypt or, according to another report, during their stay in Jerusalem, there occurred the death of his father, to whom he had always felt tied not only by strong filial bonds but also by the affection of the student for the teacher. It is very touching to see how much he once hesitated, for instance, when he felt driven to dissent from a religious decision reached by his father.⁴

But obviously an even greater loss than the death of the father was that of his younger brother David. A merchant with a scholarly mind, David, who had supported the family, was drowned in a ship disaster in the Indian Sea with all the family possessions—the full stock of his business in precious stones. The letter in which Maimonides describes his grief over this loss to the Dayan Japhet ben Eliahu who had once welcomed him in Acco, Palestine, is quite an unusual human document. It certainly is one more proof of the fact that men of true genius, even if thought to be mere rationalists, have generally far less unshakable poise than most of their admirers would like to admit.

Maimonides is not ashamed to confess in this letter that in the death of his brother he laments also the loss of his provider; and he does not conceal what it had meant to him that, thanks to David, he had been able to devote himself undividedly to his work without any concern for his livelihood. But all these honest, if somewhat selfish, reflections are completely outweighed by the spontaneous outburst of profound love for his young brother.

“How can I find consolation,” he exclaims, “after having lost him who was not only my brother but also my student, who grew up on my knees and who was a never-ceasing delight to my eyes and my mind? Eight years have passed and still when I see some of his handwriting my heart is wrung in sorrow.” Moreover, in this letter, Maimonides is not abashed to speak of a marked emotional frailty which, after the death of the brother, threw him on the sickbed with a “confused heart” and with fever for almost a year; and he even adds that if there were not the study of religion and science “in which I can drown my pain I would be lost in my misery.”⁵ No attempt to interpret these utterances as a mere flourish—so popular in Oriental literature—will succeed in explaining away the quite personal and true ring in these confessions and this mourning.

To provide a livelihood for the widow of his brother, her little daughter and himself, Maimonides turned now to the practice of medicine. Along with his extended study of Aristotelian, Arab and Jewish philosophy; he had also acquired an extraordinary knowledge of the medical science of his day. At least eight of the medical treatises ascribed to him are

established as genuine; one of them, on asthma, has only recently been published; and modern historians, such as J. Pagel, attribute great value even to Maimonides' criticism and comment on Galen, still the greatest medical authority for the Middle Ages.

But it was doubtless not only Maimonides' mastery of theoretical knowledge that secured him his high reputation as a physician in Egypt; it was evidently no less the warmth of his sympathy with the sick and the weak and his remarkable power of observation of men's individual needs.

Evidence of this may be inferred, for instance, from the detailed medical advice he once gave the impetuous, vehement Regent, Al Malik Al Afdal; and it is especially instructive to see how, in his letter to the prince, he stressed the decisive influence of human emotion on the body, much as is done in the most recent medical theory. He was frequently consulted by members of the family of Saladin, Egypt's greatest ruler in the 12th century; and to Saladin's son he became even a physician at court. A Christian Prince, one of the Crusaders in Palestine, probably Richard Coeur de Lion, is reported to have invited him to enter his service and to accompany him to Europe; but Maimonides declined.

Probably about 20 years after his arrival in Egypt, the honorary title of Nagid, "prince" or president of the Jewish community of Egypt, was conferred on him, though he does not seem to have made much administrative use of this position of honour. He advocated, however, strong measures against the influence of the Karaites, a Jewish sect (founded by Anan in the 8th century a.d.), which proclaimed exclusive adherence to the Bible and refusal of the rabbinical tradition. And yet, in personal contact with the sect he urged and himself showed every kind of human understanding and good neighbourliness. For the extremely wide scope of religious counsel he extended he did not accept any payment and, though himself certainly an intellectual aristocrat, he manifested the greatest modesty to any genuine seeker after truth. But the arrogant and conceited he knew how to answer firmly and even sharply.

Again, during grave religious persecutions of the Jews in Southwest Arabia, he strengthened their "slackening hand and faltering knee" by a powerful epistle of consolation, the *Iggeret Teman*. The inspiration which this letter gave the suffering Jews in Yemen was so great that they expressed their thanks for it from that time on by mentioning the name of Maimonides in their holiest prayer, the Kaddish.

In Egypt Maimonides not only became the religious adviser of Oriental Jewry; he was consulted by all parts of the dispersed nation from France to Bagdad; and his enlightened, benevolent *Responsa* and letters show him, in fact, to be what his admirers called him, a "mind and heart as wide as the ocean," a "strong hammer" and "the great light from the West" dispelling superstition and darkness in the East and West while fostering everywhere the strength of deeply rooted faith.

At an advanced age Maimonides married, obviously for the second time, and the promising intellectual development of his son Abraham (born in 1186) apparently was the greatest personal joy of the father in his later years. But, on the whole, Maimonides' last span of life must have been years of heroic resignation. He had completed his voluminous principal writings; but, despite an ever-increasing debility of the body, he carried on an overwhelmingly heavy burden of activity. In a letter to the translator of his *Guide for the Perplexed*, Samuel ibn Tibbon of Lunel, France, he graphically describes how his days were often filled to long after, midnight with treatment of the sick at the Court in Cairo and at home in Fostat, as well as with religious counseling of the members of his congregation, and

other Jewish communities far away, by his extended correspondence. Often, as he tells us, he had to lie down during his work, could hardly speak any longer and found far too little time even for his hasty meal. But in the highest sense of duty he carried on his work until the hour of his death in 1204.

He was buried in Tiberias on the western shore of the Sea of Galilee near what is said to be the grave of Rabbi Akiba, one of the greatest of ancient Jewish sages who died more than a thousand years before him. And there is a pious legend, whose origin seems difficult to trace,⁶ that a gang of robbers attacked the transport carrying the body of the great thinker from Egypt to Palestine. They tried to throw the coffin into the sea. But even the united efforts of 30 men did not succeed in doing so; of such weight was even the dead body of Moses ben Maimon.

MAIMONIDES' PRINCIPAL WORKS

What, then, is the essence of Maimonides' thought and its value for us today? Of course, we have to limit our discussion to only too few points selected from his three most important works, all of which were completed in Egypt. But, minute as such a cutting from an extremely large whole must be, it may nevertheless give us a glimpse into this apparently far-away world.

The first of these three works by Maimonides is a *Commentary on the Mishnah* written in Arabic and completed in 1168. The Mishnah—briefly, though not sufficiently characterized—is the basic official interpretation given by Judaism to the laws of the *Five Books of Moses* and was composed in the first two to three centuries A.D. Yet the Mishnah offers not only official opinions but also very lively discussions of opinions of numerous Jewish sages; and, quite unlike the New Testament which originated at about the same epoch of history, the Mishnah covers in its pages the whole realm of legal, moral, ritual, sanitary and other regulations of the Jewish community life of its time.

The Babylonian and the Jerusalem Talmud, however, which were composed by generations of Jewish scholars in Babylon and Palestine between 200 and 500 A.D. also contain an interpretation of the Pentateuch, the *Five Books of Moses*, both these recensions of the Talmud being based on the interpretation given in the Mishnah. In fact, as one may observe, the reverence for their Holy Scriptures and especially their Torah, the Books of Moses, was so overwhelmingly great in Jewry that for far more than a thousand years a large part of their religious post-Biblical literature wished to present its own ideas only in the shape of a commentary on the Old Testament. Even the *Sohar*, the *Book of Splendour*, the chief work of Jewish mysticism, is offered merely as an interpretation of the Pentateuch.

The two principal works of Maimonides, however, which present themselves as commentaries on the Jewish Law—the *Mishnah Torah*, the monumental systematization of the whole Talmud written in Hebrew, completed in 1180, and his *Commentary on the Mishnah*—naturally concern far more Jewish theology than general philosophy; and therefore only very few of their teachings, of universal significance, may be touched upon here. Yet Maimonides' last, chief work has indeed proved to be of world historical importance in the intellectual development of mankind: it is his *Delalat al-Hairin*, written in Arabic, his *Guide for the Perplexed* or, as the Hebrew title runs, *Moreh Nevuhim*, completed in 1190.

But even in the study of *The Guide for the Perplexed* we must not lose sight of the fact that in general the world of ideas of Maimonides' epoch is more remote to us than ancient

Indian, Greek and Jewish thought, though Greek and Indian philosophies as well as the Jewish Bible had taken shape many centuries before the flowering of Islamic civilization. Even the names which we give our various branches of science and our principal terms for the characterization of scientific methods (such as analysis, hypothesis and so on) are predominantly taken from ancient Greek, not from Arabic: and our most important religious concepts are derived from the ancient Orient and not from mediaeval Islamic culture.

Obviously, the reason for this is the unique vigor with which ancient Greek, Indian and Jewish thought break entirely fresh ground in their appeal to the mind and heart, Islamic philosophy, however, is an artifice built up with elements of Greek and Jewish insights into nature and life. It presupposes knowledge of Greek speculation and Jewish-Mohammedan religion and it shares with all such complex and learned products of the mind a certain lack of vital simplicity, though it has also a special attraction for the thinker willing to delve into this world of thought seemingly quite alien to us.

Finally, there is no gainsaying that very much of Maimonides' philosophy of nature and his metaphysical speculation is now and will remain forever of only historical interest. Like countless mediaeval scholastics before him and especially after him, in the fields of science and metaphysics, Maimonides adheres to a large extent to the teachings of the great Greek "master"⁷ of secular knowledge, Aristotle, and his commentators.

Throughout his philosophy Maimonides accepts, for instance, Aristotle's basic distinction between matter and form in all objects of nature—a doctrine which has rightly been rejected by the modern science of the last 300 years and seems to be no longer fruitful in philosophical discussion either, except in a sense very different from Aristotle. And there are, further, numberless details of Aristotelian astronomy, physics, chemistry, biology and psychology taken over by mediaeval scholastics which are certainly unacceptable to us.

There is, for example, the ancient assumption of only four basic elements in the "sublunar" world: fire, air, water and earth, and the equally naive belief that fire and air, by their very nature, must always tend to move from below upwards toward the firmament to their "natural place," while earth and water, by their very essence, tend from below the firmament downwards, to their "natural place." Maimonides shares both these primitive beliefs.⁸ But there is certainly no chance of our return to this type of mediaeval chemistry and physics after modern exact science has based its gigantic successful work precisely on the complete untenability of those mediaeval presuppositions.

Further, in the beginning of the second part of *The Guide for the Perplexed* and in the first book of his *Mishneh Torah*, Maimonides explains why, like Aristotle, he assumes that there are a number of circular orbits, heavenly spheres, which encompass the world and are higher Intelligences. In his determined struggle against superstition and fatalistic astrology—he sent a special letter on astrology to inquirers in Marseilles in 1194—Maimonides warns against all those grossly anthropomorphic misconceptions which would see in these spheres intelligences of our human type. But all the same he ascribes to those heavenly orbs a soul and an understanding which enables them to grasp and to glorify the majesty of the one God, their creator.⁹ This certainly is a belief of great poetical beauty and even the founder of modern scientific astronomy, Johannes Kepler, still uttered similar views in the 17th century—though they have with him essentially a symbolic meaning—and Goethe even later gave the strongest poetical expression to these ideas in some opening verses of his *Faust*. Yet from the point of view of exact scientific astronomy, we certainly have to deny to all these teachings any factual value.

Still one last point of Maimonides' teaching which is connected with Aristotle's cosmology has occupied the minds of philosophers and theologians for an even longer time than the ones previously mentioned: this is the problem of the eternity of the universe. On this point Maimonides shows an especially remarkable philosophical independence of Aristotle and his commentators as well as of the Mohammedan Mutakallemun (Kalamists). One may say that the Greeks, the first discoverers of exact natural laws, often overshot the mark and, in systems such as that of Aristotle and some of his Neo-platonic commentators, they tried to prove that the world was governed from eternity by precise rules. Maimonides shows in detail why these proofs of an eternal existence of the world are not conclusive.¹⁰

But although he himself, in accordance with Jewish tradition, assumes the creation of the universe by a personal God, he remains, nevertheless, a sufficiently critical mind to grant that all the proofs of a creation of the universe are untenable as well. The *Kalam*, the teaching of the Arab Mutakallemun, had overconfidently tried to demonstrate the correctness of the theistic belief in a creation. Yet Maimonides rejects these proofs, too, as inconclusive and even as sophistry.¹¹ With superior scientific self-restraint, he contents himself, therefore, with justifying only the possibility of world creation; and he offers, along with this argument, a very ingenious and rather modern-sounding observation, namely, that it makes sense to speak of time only in relation to existing nature.¹² In another connection he is also certainly in agreement with the principles of modern exact science, when he indicates that it is the least complicated hypothesis which is always the preferable one.¹³

But Maimonides himself placed no decisive emphasis on his philosophy of nature¹⁴ or even on two of his ethical writings which form part of his *Commentary on the Mishnah*, the so-called "*Eight Chapters*" on psychology and morals and his "Commentary on the 'Sayings of the Fathers,'"—that classical collection of pithy moral and religious aphorisms by leading Jewish sages of the first post-Biblical centuries. In ethics, too, Maimonides wishes to adhere to principles of Aristotle, though in fact he does so even less unconditionally than in his cosmology. Only in general does he accept Aristotle's best-known principle as a guide. Virtue is to him, too, mainly the mean between two vices; generosity is as far removed from the extreme of dissipation as from the extreme of avarice; bravery is as little identical with foolhardiness as with cowardice; gentleness is essentially the mean between irascibility and effeminacy.¹⁵

And yet, Maimonides does not hesitate to modify quite significantly this ethical teaching of the proud rational world of the West in the light of his Jewish tradition of the East. In agreement with the religious wisdom handed down in the "Sayings of the Fathers," he praises in quite a number of human virtues what is not exactly the mean between two vices and he often lauds far more some definite inclination toward the more ascetic value.¹⁶ Especially in the case of modesty, he emphasizes that the virtue between haughtiness and abject self-humiliation is not mere modesty but, far more to the side of humiliation, true humbleness. Even Moses, the greatest of all prophets—Maimonides recalls in this connection—paradoxically excelled by his humility; and the mightiest King of ancient Israel, David, sang in his Psalms conspicuously and emphatically the praise of the "contrite and broken heart."¹⁷

Nevertheless, Maimonides rejects all extreme asceticism, self-castigation and mortification, and it is perhaps not insignificant that in a tract "On True Bliss" whose authorship has been attributed to Maimonides by such a noted scholar as Wilhelm Bacher, we see a reference even to that lusty and daring saying of the Talmud (Baba Bathra 75a)

according to which for every truly pious man seven marriage canopies will be prepared in a life beyond.

Some of these few points of Maimonides' teaching mentioned so far may perhaps explain why he could noticeably attract the attention of leading Christian thinkers of the middle Ages and the Renaissance up to the beginning of modern times. But to us these details can hardly be of more than limited historical interest. It is comprehensible why the greatest Aristotelians among the Christian scholastics, such as the German Albertus Magnus, the Italian Thomas Aquinas, and, even earlier, the English Franciscan Alexander of Hales were impressed by Maimonides' refutation of all the ancient proofs offered for an eternal existence of the universe. Each of these mediaeval thinkers gladly referred and subscribed to Maimonides' argument; and Thomas, like Albert, follows Maimonides even in characterizing the *Kalam's* proofs in favour of a world creation as mere fallacies.¹⁸

In addition, the great French encyclopaedist Vincent de Beauvais in the early 13th century; the acute opponent of Thomas, the English Franciscan John Duns Scotus as well as Thomas of York; the German Dominican Berthold von Mosburg and the German mystic Meister Eckhart have all admittedly consulted Maimonides' teachings on one point or another. And further, by thinkers of the Renaissance, such as Nicolaus Cusanus and the Italian Giovanni Pico della Mirandola, up to the Spaniard Miguel Serveto and the great French political scientist Jean Bodin, and even up to Leibnitz in the 18th century, Maimonides was valued as the most representative exponent of Jewish philosophy in the development of Western Judaeo-Christian civilization.

But, as it seems to me, the most vital problems with which *The Guide for the Perplexed* once wrestled are by no means out of date even for the perplexed minds of our times. These central issues of Maimonides' philosophy concern the fundamental relations between religion and science, faith and reason, poetical cosmic feeling and rational analysis of natural phenomena, in short, between the religious wisdom of the East and Western rationalism. And indeed, hardly anywhere in the history of human thought has this contrast between the Eastern and Western approaches to reality been faced with greater resoluteness and clarity than in Maimonides' work.

He strictly refused to gloss over or to minimize the seriousness of the clash between these two world views. He squarely admitted the gravity of the conflict; and yet he rejected any submission or even yielding of one party to the other. Patiently, and with an exemplary freedom from bias, he pointed the way to a true reconciliation.

With a firm grasp of its basic importance he starts all these lengthy discussions with a careful analysis of the term "image."¹⁹ There is in the beginning of the Old Testament a famous passage (*Genesis* I, 26) in which God is said to have created man in his own image; and Maimonides entirely grants that if we take this verse in its gross literal sense no peace between man's reason and the play of his religious imagination can be maintained. Rational reflection can never admit that infinite reality, God, should have the same—or even similar—bodily characteristics as the frail, mortal and only too finite human being.

Scientific reasoning must definitely protest against the assumption that the mere letter of any poetical religious writing can convey factual truth; and *vice versa*, if we insist on the literal truth of the contents of our ancient religious documents, then the results of all our rational thought would become unacceptable. But this is now Maimonides' decisive question: Are we religiously bound to the belief in the letter of any sacred text? And he answers with unmistakable firmness: No. On the contrary, the very spirit of true religion

demands a spiritual interpretation and never a slavish adherence to the mere vehicle and vessel of the spirit.

Therefore he engages, with painstaking care, in the exegesis of a large number of ancient sayings laid down in the Jewish religious tradition, especially the Bible, the Mishnah and the Talmud; and he untiringly stresses how the basic tendency of this religious development was directed toward greater and greater spiritualization of human life and Deity. By its emphatic, passionate belief in only one all-powerful godhead of which there should never be “any graven image or likeness” (*Exodus XX, 4*), Judaism certainly for centuries distinguished itself from practically all the other religious faiths in the Western world; and the Greeks, philosophically the most gifted nation of antiquity, could rightly, therefore, praise Jewish religion as even more “philosophical” than their own.

Thus the long line of Jewish and Arab medieval philosophers of religion, and especially Maimonides, doubtless did a genuine service to mankind by bringing into the highest possible relief the innate tendency toward abstract spiritual purification of their religious heritage. By these efforts only, the grandiose and stirring poetical language of ancient religious documents ceased to be a temptation to merely superstitious beliefs and to the blind deification of all-too- earthly objects.

One single masterpiece of Maimonides’ philosophical Bible exegesis may, perhaps, give us sufficient insight into what is at stake here. It concerns the sublime, yet at first glance extremely strange theophany depicted in the last few verses of the 33rd chapter of the Pentateuch. We are told there, in “The Second Book of Moses,” that “no man shall see . . . God’s face and live,” only His “goodness” and His “glory” was He willing to let pass before His prophet; and thus man shall never see more than His “back”; he will forever be unable to face the blinding splendor of the inscrutable countenance of his God.

According to Maimonides’ interpretation,²⁰ all the elevated and impressive poetical language of these verses serves only the one great purpose: to drive home even to the common man, in the most graphic way, that any knowledge of God’s true nature is entirely beyond man’s reach. Finite man is and must remain unable to grasp the essence of the Infinite. Even the prophet, the most illuminated mind, can gain no insight into the positive characteristics of absolute reality. Man must, of necessity, limit himself to the exploration and understanding of the “goodness and the glory” of the Absolute revealed in God’s creation, in the visible universe perceivable by our senses. Only the works, the acts of God, but not His nature, not His way of being, can ever become objects of human knowledge; and this basic philosophical insight Maimonides also sees at work in numerous other poetical passages of the Old Testament and the post-Biblical religious literature of Judaism.

This doctrine doubtless represents one *of the* profoundest religious teachings of the middle Ages. Centuries before Maimonides it was called “negative theology”; but he has certainly given it an especially strong and influential expression. Man is not made, as he repeats, for any exhaustive understanding of that fullness and abundance of life which we call Absolute Reality. God, the Absolute, the incarnation of the whole of life, is far above, elevated and extolled beyond any part of the visible creation, however large. Mortal, finite man can, therefore, understand only what is finite, changing and perishable in nature but not the immutable, eternal “rock” of Reality itself.

We can inform ourselves only about the finite and transitory characteristics of those parts of the universe which we perceive. But these are precisely the attributes which cannot be ascribed to God. We, therefore, know only what God is not. We have knowledge only of His

“negative predicates”; but we can never have any understanding of His positive attributes. Even existence in the human sense of the word cannot be ascribed to Him.

In this elaborate way, Maimonides tried to show why the ancient myth about God’s face handed down to us in the Hebrew Bible is by no means an absurd tale which has no truth value at all and must, therefore, be discarded as valueless by the verdict of science and philosophy. On the contrary, the wisdom of Judaea, of the East, is shown thus to confirm and to supplement the results of the purely rational thought of the West, of Greek philosophy and science. All this, however, certainly represents anything but a light-hearted consolation for the perplexed mind of the man standing between the world views of the East and the West.

Maimonides refused to yield even a mite of his “Western” scientific convictions to religion. But with equal firmness he protected religion from the intrusion of that pseudo-scientific spirit which fancies itself to provide for all the needs of human existence. He insisted that, while the absolute vastness and majesty of that power which manifests itself in the universe will always be unfathomable to us, there is all the more reason for us to be constantly aware of that power and not to lose ourselves hopelessly in the business of running the routine of our daily lives and satisfying nothing but our small daily wants.

On this point, moreover, the poised, acute rationalist, Maimonides, almost becomes the religious ecstatic and mystic for which Giovanni Pico della Mirandola had erroneously once taken him. In accordance with the whole of Jewish tradition, he demands that man must not only fear but also love that all-embracing power which pervades the universe. He must love it “with all his heart, with all his soul and all his might”; and as he adds in his *Mishneh Torah*, strengthening this basic religious commandment by reference to a verse from the “Song of Songs,” the love of the Almighty must fill man in all he does, whether he is seated or standing, eating or drinking, as it is with those lovers who are “sick for the want of love.”²¹

Also, at the very end of *The Guide for the Perplexed*, Maimonides once more comes quite near to a marked mystic intensity of religious feeling when he speaks of the highest aim of man. This aim, he reasserts, can be nothing but the understanding of what the ever-unknowable Godhead is to us and our unlimited reverence and love of Him; and, in reference to a Talmudic saying, he calls this highest state of mind reached in the hour of death the experience of the “Kiss of God” of which only Moses, the prophet, Miriam, his sister, and Aaron, the High Priest, were once thought worthy.²² Again, in these circumspect reflections, Maimonides indicated how religion and rational thought, instead of excluding each other, may work together for a greater common goal, despite the strict maintenance of their separate functions.

And this does not seem to me an outmoded teaching. To us, too, no doctrine, no emotional or volitional belief should be acceptable if it can be held only in contradiction to the exact principles of modern scientific reasoning. What had been built up in groping beginnings by the Greeks and carried forward since Galileo by the most acute minds of many nations and generations with a unique power of persistence and ingenuity—the method and principal results of modern physics and other related sciences—rests on such firm ground that no attempt at denying it can give true peace of mind to any thinking man of the East or the West. To be sure, there have been, there will and there should be numerous palace revolutions within the imposing scientific structure of work which the last few centuries have erected. But these revolutions do not concern the foundations of the structure itself.

We cannot supplant the methods of impartial verifiable inquiry in modern science by any return to older, unverifiable, metaphysical speculations. What exact science has achieved in

the last few centuries is, in fact, the first broad insight into the complicated richness of precisely describable relations between the data of our phenomenal world; and, in wise, critical self-confinement, science limited its work to the exploration of the phenomenal world; it did not extend it to the investigation of a world in itself independent of verifiable experience. It is vain, therefore, to denounce modern science as the analysis of the mere facade natural phenomena or as a crude and ambitious drive for a mere subjugation and exploitation of the magic forces of nature.

Yet, immeasurably valuable as modern scientific knowledge is, by its very nature it cannot and, properly understood, it should not, aspire to represent the whole field of man's intellectual interests. There are the arts, there is poetry and there is undeniably that general attitude toward nature and fate which is rightly called religion, whether it is named the fear and love of God or "*amor fati*" love of one's fate, "*amor dei intellectualis*" or the revolt against fate.

These basic religious convictions decisively shape our goals of conduct, our reaction to the blows and the blessings of fate and our very concepts of happiness or condemnation. Ethics, as far as it aims at scientific method, must count with these elementary religious feelings and must evaluate them; but it cannot create them. The wisdom of the East, Chinese and Indian philosophies, have created religious images and religious ways of life which differ from the philosophy of Western science as much as Maimonides' religion once differed from that of Aristotle.

Needless to say, the emphasis on these contrasts must never blindly be over sharpened. It is one of the many special merits of Dr. S. Radhakrishnan to have shown that Indian teachings such as the *Nyaya* and the *Vaisesika* may well be characterized by the use of typical Western rationalistic terminology such as "logical realism" and "atomistic pluralism"²³ and *vice versa*. Western mysticism throughout the ages, and Western admiration for Indian thought, naturally reveal how much possible understanding may, after all, be presupposed between the apparently irreconcilable beliefs of East and West.

And yet, certainly nothing would be more utopian than the hope that we could simply add the wisdom of the East to the achievements of Western critical rationalism in order to acquire peace of mind and a world jumty of thought. As the example of Maimonides may teach us, infinitely greater labour is required to bring about an inner synthesis of contrasts of thought grown up on a quite different soil of the heart and the mind. Human thought and emotion transplanted can thrive only if nourished by the full richness of the new earth into which they are set.

Unless the very blood stream of a spiritual personality takes hold of and pulsates in an idea or feeling newly acquired, these new acquisitions can never become his own. Maimonides has shown us in detail how his profound love and understanding of Western rationalism could be fully nursed, not to the detriment but to the genuine enrichment of his Oriental Jewish devotion to the Infinite. If this achievement could become a guiding star for *our* "perplexed" minds also, and for our similar new tasks of thought, this would certainly be the most rewarding fruit of our present commemoration of Maimonides' life and work.

DAVID BAUMGAKDT

CITATIONS

¹ MAIMONIDES, Book I (*Sefer ha-Madda*), Section V, *Mishnah Torah*, (*Hilhot Teshuvah*), Perek II, 4. Under the chief editorship of JULIAN OBERMAN, Yale University Press has only recently begun to publish an English translation of the work which is of special value. As far as the volumes of this edition have as yet appeared, my quotations may easily be traced in them.

² *Mishneh Torah*, Book III (*Sefer Zemanim*), Section VIII, (*Hilhot Kiddush ha-Hodesh*), Perek XI, 25.

³ See *The Guide for the Perplexed*, Part II, Chap. 9.

⁴ *Mishnah Torah*, Book V (*Sefer Kedushah*), Section III, (*Hilhot-Shehitah*), Perek XI, 10.

⁵ See *Kovetz teshuvot Ha-RaMBaM veigrotav* (Collection of Responsa and Letters of Maimonides), ed. by A. Lichtenberg, 1859, Helek II, Sheet 37.

⁶ See, e.g., ABRAHAM HESCHEL, *Maimonides; eine Biographic*, 1935, P- 278.

⁷ See, for instance, *The Guide for the Perplexed*, Part I, Chap. 5, translated by Michael FRIEDL. ANDER, 1919, p. 18,

⁸ *Ibid.*, Part I, Chap. 72; Part II, Chap. 10 and 30 and *Mishnah Torah*, Sefer I, (*Sefer ha-Madda*'), *Hilhot Yesode Ha-Torah*, Perek 4.

⁹ See *The Guide for the Perplexed*, Part II, Chap. 2 ff., Chap. 5.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, Part II, especially Chap. 14 ff.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, Part II, e.g., Chap. 16.

¹² *Ibid.*, Part II, Chap. 13.

¹³ *Ibid.*, Part II, Chap. n.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, Part II, Chap. 2.

¹⁵ "Eight Chapters," (*Shemonah Perakim*), Chap. IV, 1.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, Chap. IV, 6.

¹⁷ " Commentary on the ' Sayings of the Fathers,' " Perek IV, 4, the commentary on the saying of Rabbi Levitas of Jabne : " Be very, very humble ; for the prospect of man is the worm," and see there the references to *The Book of Numbers*, Chap. XII, 3, and Psalm LI, 17. Compare further *Mishnah Torah*, Book XIV (*Sefer Shofetim*), Section I (*Hilhot Sanhedrin*), Perek XXIII, 8, the reference to Rabbi Samuel ben Nahman's saying: "A judge should always think of himself as if he had a sword hanging over his head and hell gaping under him."

¹⁸ See JACOB GUTTMANN in *Moses ben Maimon*, edited by: the Gesellschaft zur Forderung der Wissenschaft des Judentums, 1908, Vol. I, p. 149 ff. especially p. 158ff., 188 ff.

¹⁹ *The Guide for the Perplexed*, Part I, Chap. 1.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, Part I, Chap. 54.

²¹ *Mishnah Torah*, Book I (*Sefer ha-Madda*), Section V (*Hilhot Teshuvah*), Perek X, 3 ff.; and the references made there to *Deuteronomy*, Chap. VI, 5 ff. and to "The Song of Solomon," Chap. II, 5.

²² *The Guide for the Perplexed*, Part III, Chap. 51.

²³ See S. RADHAKRISHNAN, *Indian Philosophy*, 1927, Vol. II, p. 29 ff.