Islam in the Writings of Maimonides

Introduction

Maimonides is without a doubt one of the greatest Jewish thinkers in history. Living in a time, where the Jewish people was parted between the Muslim and the Christian world, both places submitted to the whims of the rulers, and not always in a situation, where they could feel sure about their rights, if any at all.

Maimonides, who was born in Cordoba in the first half of the twelfth century, lived all his life in the Muslim world, under several different Muslim rulers, being born under the Almoravids, experiencing the conquest and forced conversions of the Almohads, fleeing Morocco and living for a very short time under Crusader rule, to stay the rest of his life in Egypt, where he first lived under Fathimid rule, for then to live under the Ayyubides the rest of his life.

Whether the accounts about his conversion to Islam is true, his knowledge about the religion is without doubt. Living under Muslim rule and being close to Muslim patrons made him knowledgeable about the religion to a degree, that not many other Jewish scholars could claim, which is also evident from the general consensus on following Maimonides’ rulings and thoughts, when deciding on matters regarding Jewish-Muslim relations.

Unfortunately Maimonides’ accounts and life has been taken victim in the Jewish-Muslim polemics of our days, and at times to an extent where the picture is not being particularly objective. The pro-Jewish (or maybe more correctly; the anti-Muslim/Islamic) polemics relate to his account on the state of the Jews, particularly the Iggeret Teyman, while the pro-Muslim polemics relate to his good relations to Muslim thinkers and rulers.

Maimonides view and understanding on Islam and Muslim is important of several reasons; a) in order to understand how modern Jewish scholars relate to Islam, based on a study on one of the most used sources, b) to get a more nuanced understanding of the Jewish-Muslim relations in the twelfth century, and c) to challenge modern Jewish-Muslim polemics and, hopefully, being able to have a more honest and nuanced discussion on Jewish-Muslim relations of our times.

Since we are basically dealing with two different approaches, a) how Maimonides relate to Islam as a religion, and b) how Maimonides relate to the Muslims as rulers, my question is twofold:

*How does Maimonides view Islam as a belief system? And does Maimonides view the conduct of the Muslims the same way that he view their religion?*

It should be clear from the onset that these two questions lead to several other
questions, such as whether his views changed during his life, how he viewed Islam compared to other religions, if he had a monolithic view on Islam or whether he related differently to the different expressions of Islam.

**The Sources Used**

There are five sources that will be used during this paper. Though they are not representative for the whole duration of his life, only one being written in Morocco under Almohad rule, while the four were written in Egypt, they are his main works, either in total or in relation to Islam.

The five sources are the Iggeret haShmad (Letter on Martyrdom), which he wrote in Fez, shortly before he left Morocco, the third part of Iggeret le-Rav Ovadyah haGer (Letter to Rabbi Ovadyah the Convert), written in Egypt to a Muslim Arab convert to Judaism, the Iggeret Teyman (Letter to Yemen), which he wrote as a response on the persecutions of the Jewish community in Yemen, parts of Mishneh Torah, his legal code, and parts of Moreh Nevuchim (the Guide for the Perplexed), his philosophical master piece.

The Iggeret haShmad is a response on another response, which was given to a question about what the Moroccan Jews were supposed to do, when forced to either say the Islamic declaration of faith, de jure accepting to become Muslims; do it and continue to live as Jews in secret or to accept martyrdom.

The answer from an unknown rabbi is that they should accept martyrdom, and that any Jew who is accepting the forced conversion and living secretly as a Jew, is to considered an apostate, who is doing a double sin with each commandment he performs.

Maimonides attacks this stance, relating to the differences between this and former persecutions, as well as relating to the differences between idolatry, heresy, and - indirectly - Islam.

This letter gives us a good understanding of how Maimonides view, a) Islam compared to idolatry and heresy, and b) how he viewed and understood this particular persecution.

The Iggeret le-Rav Ovadyah haGer is Maimonides’ answers to three questions from the convert Ovadyah. The third question is about Islam and the Muslims (mentioned as Ishmaelim according to Jewish tradition), where Ovadyah mentions a discussion with his teacher, the former claiming that Islam is not idolatry and the Muslims not being idolaters, whereas the latter claims that this is so.

Maimonides refutes the claims given by the teacher, stating that there is no idolatry in
Islam at all.

This letter gives us a good understanding of Maimonides’ theological view on Islam and the Muslims, particularly considering the rituals of the Hajj, which are the focus of this letter.

The Iggeret Teyman is another letter dealing with persecution, but the difference from this and the Iggeret haShmad, is the focus. Whereas Maimonides in the former letter dealt with the question of forced conversion, he here deal with theological question as well as Muslim polemics.

In four parts he deals with consolation of the Yemenite community, refusing Muslim polemics, dealing with astrology, and the foretelling of Messiah.

This letter gives us a good understanding of Muslim polemics, how Maimonides relates to it, and his understanding of Islam being part of God’s plans.

The Mishneh Torah is a work covering 14 books, and though most of it is law, there are some parts dealing with other subjects. It is in the parts dealing with law though that we will find him mentioning Islam, namely in the Laws about Forbidden Food, and Laws of the Kings and their Wars.

These parts gives us insight into his legal reasoning regarding Islam, as well another glimpse into his understanding of Islam as being part of God’s plans.

The Moreh Nevuchim deals with the philosophic study of true worship, and as such is not particularly concerned with Islam. He does relate to the religion directly at least once, as well as indirectly a number of times.

Though it is limited how much we will learn about his views on Islam here, there are things that can give us hints, which will help us reach a better understanding of his approach to Islam.

**Method**

I have made two major parts; a) the analyzing the primary sources, and b) a discussion. The first part is in five sub-parts, each covering one of the sources.

It is my attempt to analyze each source, in order to extract what can be extracted about Maimonides’ views and approaches to Islam. In doing this I hope to get a better understanding of how he a) relates to Islam as a belief system, and b) how he relates to the Muslims as rulers over the Jews.
I have related to translations in all but one case, the Iggeret le-Rav Ovadyah haGer is my own translation, and is presented in full. I chose to translate this letter myself of two reasons: a) since there doesn’t exist a full translation of the letter in English or any other language, and b) because I believe that if one is to make a study of a certain group of texts, it is important to get intimate with them. To analyze Maimonides is also to understand and relate to the language he is using, and though most of his writing were in Judeo-Arabic, and this particular letter was in Hebrew, it still gives a sense of how he uses the language.

I will try to relate the analysis of the texts to historical events as well as to other sources, not only Jewish but also Muslim sources, in order to give a more broad picture and understanding of the context of his writing. Nothing exists in a vacuum, and to abstain from the context of these texts, would be to loose half of our understanding of their purpose and message.

The translations I have made use of, can be found in the Bibliography in the end of the paper. I just need to note that any Biblical translations are from the JPS 1999 edition, except where the Biblical quotes are part of another translation, where I have used them as given.

**Analyzing the Source Texts**

**Iggeret haShmad**

The Iggeret haShmad, Letter on Martyrdom, does not deal much with Islam as such, but rather with the circumstances of the Almohad persecution of Jews, how this persecution differs from former persecutions, and how the Jews should react. As such we cannot learn a lot about Maimonides’ view on Islam as a belief system, but it is nevertheless interesting to deal with, in order to find out how he relate to the Jews living under Islamic persecutions.

The letter is referring to a "contemporary" of Maimonides, but the wider target is all the Jews who lived under Almohad rule under the time of the persecution at hand, and – it became – all Jews in general. It is written as a reaction to a rabbi, who answered the "contemporary" originally, an answer that Maimonides clearly did not agree with, and so he felt the need to refute the answer the rabbi gave and form one himself. The subject is how Jews should deal with the persecution at hand, a forced conversion to Islam. The "contemporary"
Jew asks the rabbi "whether he should make the confession in order not to die, although his children will be lost among the gentiles, or should he die and not acknowledge what he demands seeing that in this way he does what he is required by the Torah of Moses."\(^1\)

The Jews who are living under Almohad rule in what is part of the Iberian Peninsula and Northern Africa (mainly modern Spain and Morocco), are witnessing harsh conditions enforced upon them by the rulers, mainly through forced conversions. The Jews have three choices, to convert to Islam, to flee or to accept martyrdom.

The letter has two general parts, the first consisting of the first three chapters, where he deals with the refutation of the rabbi's answer, and the second part, consisting of the fourth chapter, where he outlines his own answer to the question at hand.

His answer is dealt with in five themes:

1. The class of laws related to the time of forced conversion.
2. Definitions of the desecration of God's Name and the punishments related to it.
3. The ranks of those who die as a martyr, and those who are forcibly converted during a time of persecution.
4. How the present persecution\(^3\) differs from others earlier persecutions and what is to be done in relation to it.
5. A discussion of how advisable it is for one to be careful in the present persecution.

Of interest here is the second theme, which deals with the differences between idolatry and heresy, as well as the fourth theme,\(^1\) which talks about the differences in persecutions. Maimonides presents these differences between earlier persecutions and the present one:

1. Former persecutions involved violating commandments and performing forbidden acts.
2. This one "only" demands the Jews to say something they do not even have to mean, so they can perform the commandments secretly, even after acknowledging the apostleship of Muhammad.
3. Anyone who still chooses martyrdom has done a great deed, and will receive a great reward in the World-to-Come.
4. It is recommended to pronounce the Muslim creed instead of accepting martyrdom, but then to leave the place for a place where it is possible to live as a Jew openly if possible.
5. If one is not able to leave, then one should stay in the private and not move in public space, in order to be able to fulfill as many commandments as possible.

---

6. A victim of this persecution should observe as many of the commandments as possible, most importantly the commandments of Shabbat.

7. Everyone not choosing martyrdom should leave the lands under Almohad rule, and go to a place where they can practice the religion openly. Even without the family, and even if it means that they will expose themselves to danger. Everyone who stays should see themselves as transgressors who profane the Name.

The whole presentation of Jews in context of idolatry and heresy, is to give an understanding of how bad as situation some Jews have been in, while not being judged by it, in comparison to Islam, leaving Islam on the “better” level of heresy, idolatry, and Islam respectively. That heresy is considered the worst, can be seen by Maimonides’ statement on Rabbi Eliezer: “It is likewise well known that Rabbi Eliezer was seized for heresy, which is worse than idolatry.”\(^2\) Where the idolaters at least accept the notion of divine beings and the idea of prophecy, an important part of Maimonides’ theology, the heretic, we are told, “mock religion, and call anyone who adheres to it a fool, anyone who studies it deranged. They reject prophecy utterly.”\(^3\) With that in mind, it isn’t hard to see how Maimonides would view Islam in the better end of these three. And though the Jews could and would receive remission of sins in case of heresy and idolatry, this rabbi would still declare a Jew succumbing to the persecution of the Almohads as being a “gentile”. For Maimonides this was beyond mere ignorance, this was a reply which was “weak and senseless”, and “of foul content and form”.\(^4\) Islam is neither heresy, nor idolatry in the eyes of Maimonides.

---

*Iggeret le-Rav Ovadyah haGer*

The letter to Ovadyah haGer was written as a response on a letter sent by the latter to Maimonides, asking three questions, where the status of the “Ishmaelim” is one of them. Ovadyah, who himself was converted from Islam to Judaism, and live in Jerusalem,\(^5\) had an argument with his teacher, about whether Islam was to be considered idol worship, with Ovadyah arguing that is wasn’t, while his teacher argued that it was,\(^6\) and that the Muslims are idol worshipers:

“*Third Question:*

---

\(^2\) Ibid, p. 20.
\(^3\) Ibid.
\(^4\) Ibid, p. 15.
\(^5\) Kraemer, "Maimonides", p. 311.
\(^6\) Which might be based on Sa’adyah haGaon; Kraemer, "Maimonides", p. 311.
About the/these Ishmaelim, of which you stated that they are not idol worshipers, and your teacher said that they are idol worshipers, that the stones they are throwing in their ritual, that they are for Markulis. And he answered you in an improper way until you were saddened in your heart and you became embarrassed, And declared about you "answer the fool according to his foolishness" (Proverbs 26:5).

Answer:

These Ishmaelim are not idol worshipers at all, and it is already cut away from their mouths and from their hearts, that they designate the proper unity to God, a unity which has no imperfection. And not because they lie about us and tell tales, and say that we claim that God has a son - should we lie and say that they are idol worshipers. The Torah witnesses about them: "their mouths talk falsehood" (Psalms 144:8), And it witnesses about us: “the remnant of Israel shall not do injustice and not talk falsehood, and shall not let a deceitful tongue be in their mouth" (Zephaniah 3:13).

And if a person says that the house, which they glorify, that it is a house of idol worship, and that there is hidden idol worship within it, that their fathers did the same idol worship in the same house - so what (what is in it)? Those who today bow down there have their hearts directed to heaven, and our Sages already said in Sanhedrin, that if a person bows down to a house of idol worship, and he thinks that it is a synagogue - indeed his heart is devoted to heaven. And such are all these Ishmaelim today, children and women, idol worship is wiped out from their mouths, and their errors and foolishness is in other matters, which is impossible to tell of in writing because of the wicked of Israel, but in the unity of God they have no errors at all.

And in truth, the Ishmaelim did have three forms of idol worship on this place earlier: Pe’or, and Markulis, and Chemosh. They themselves recognize this today, and they have Arab names for them. The service of Pe’or to open oneself in front of him, or to place his head down and to show (lift) his genitals in front of him, such as these Ishmaelim do today when they are prostrating in prayer. The service of Markulis is the throwing of stones. The service of Chemosh is the removing of all hair from the head, and that one does not dress in tailored clothes. And these things are explicit, and they are known to us from before that the religion of the Ishmaelite was founded. But the Ishmaelites say today that [the reason] they shave their heads and do not wear tailored clothes in their rituals - it is in order to submit to God, and to remember how a man will rise from his grave. And that the stones that are thrown - that is against Satan that we throw them in order to confuse him. And others, from among their
wardens, gives another opinion and say: there were idols there, and we are stoning the place of these idols, which means that we don’t believe in them, and we stone them in order to disgrace them. And [yet] others say that it is a tradition.

All in all, even though the essence of these things and their basis is from idol worship - there is no person in the world, who throws stones, and no one prostates to that place, and no one does these things, for the sake of idol worship, not with his mouth and not in his heart, but rather directs his heart to heaven.”

As we see the answer comes promptly and very clear: the Muslims are not idol worshipers, and their concept of God’s unity is flawless. This declaration is important for our understanding of Maimonides’ view on Islam and Muslims, since the concept of God’s unity is one of the main concepts in Maimonides’ concept of true religion (INSERT SOURCES - M”T, M”N).

But it doesn’t end here though, there are some interesting details that need to be addressed.

The answer mostly relate to the hajj ritual, the pilgrimage to Mecca, where the Muslims shave their heads and dress in a white sheet, for then to circumvent the Ka’bah seven times and then to stone Satan.\(^7\)

This rite is understood by Maimonides as being based on pre-Islamic idol worship, related to the three gods, Pe’or, Markulis, and Chemosh, each with their own particular kind of service, which was adopted by the Muslims, but with the meaning of idol worship stripped from these particular rituals, and now rather have been given a meaning of true worship, with the hearts of the Muslims “directed towards Heaven”.

Stroumsa describes his approach as one of two approaches, here a “universal, inherent, and continuing process of development within all religions”\(^8\), having the question relating to the issue of the supposed monotheism of the Muslims being either based on the roots of the described rituals (which is essential for Ovadyah’s teacher) or the intend of the rituals being performed (which is essential for Maimonides).\(^9\)

As far as there is any blame directed against the Muslims, then it is not based on their worship or relation to God, but rather on other matters, “which is impossible to tell of in writing because of the wicked men of Israel”. It is not the religious aspect, which is wrong, rather the lies that they tell about the Jews, as we see in the claim that the Jews ascribe a son to God.\(^10\)

\(^8\) Stroumsa, “Maimonides in His World”, p. 109.  
\(^9\) Ibid, p. 110.  
\(^10\) Quran, Surat al-Tawbah 30.
So while the Muslims on the one hand can (and should?) be reviled for lying about the Jews, and that their hajj rituals - according to Maimonides - are based on pre-Islamic idol worship, then there is no possible criticism to make about their intention, nor about their conception of God’s unity. The Muslims, when it comes to this aspect, have their hearts solely “direct towards heaven”.

Iggeret Teyman

In Iggeret Teyman we read about three classes of nations, which rose up to fight the Jewish nation. The first class, which consisted of nations such as the Assyrians, the Babylonians, and the Romans, tried to do so through violent measures. The second class, consisting of nations such as Syrians, Persians, and the Greek, tried to do so by fighting against the ideological foundations of the Torah. The third class, which consists of the Christians and the Muslims, combined the two methods.

But though the Muslims are among those, who attempt to destroy the Jewish nation, this is foreseen by God. Relating to the prophecy of Daniel 7:8, Maimonides explains that the present situation of the Jews is all part of God’s plan, and that He has never forsaken the Jews, even if it seems so.

Relating to an “apostate”, Maimonides begins to refute some classical claims about Muhammad and Islam in the Jewish Bible. It is clear that Maimonides holds the claims of the apostate Jew in contempt, writing that “[t]hese arguments have been rehearsed so often that they have become nauseating”, and that “to cite them as proofs is ridiculous and absurd in the extreme.” The people quoting these claims are mostly converts to Islam, who only quote these verses to “win favor in the eyes of the gentiles by demonstrating that they believe in the statement of the Koran that Muhammad was mentioned in the Torah.”

The arguments are not so important in themselves, but the fact that he denies them, as well as spend a whole chapter of the letter on refuting them, tells us two things: a) that Maimonides himself didn’t accept any particular claim of Muhammad being mentioned in the Torah (while the more general mentioning of Islam and the consequences the religion would bring for the Jews, would be a different matter), and b) that the claims were of such strong nature that Maimonides did see it necessary to refute them, though he claim the opposite.

---

12 Maimonides differ between Jesus and the later Christian Roman/Byzantine empire.
14 This person’s identity is unknown to us, but it is interesting to see the similarity between the claims that Maimonides refute in his letter, and those forwarded by Samaw’el al-Maghribi, the Jewish convert who wrote the Ifham al-Yahoud, though not all of the claims of the treatise is mentioned by Maimonides. The treatise was written around 1161, while the Epistle to Yemen was written in 1172, making the two texts very close to each other. The apostate mentioned here probably wasn’t al-Maghribi, who lived in Baghdad at the time, but more likely a Jewish convert who had read his treatise.
times and places where Jews were submitted to a harsh Muslim rule, the temptation to accept Muslim polemic claims, particular these, could be very tempting.

Islam is foretold in the Bible though, but not as the Muslims claim. In the third chapter of the letter we read about the attempt by many Jews to calculate the coming of the Messiah. Maimonides explains about the errors and the principles, and nearing the end does he mention both the Arab nation and Muhammad, a passage best quoted in its entirety:

“From the prophecies of Daniel and Isaiah and from the statements of our sages it is clear that the advent of the Messiah will take place some time subsequent to the universal expansion of the Roman and Arab empires, which is an actuality today. This fact is true beyond question or doubt. Daniel is the last prophet to portray the kingdom of the Arbs, the rise of Muhammad, and then the arrival of the Messiah. Similarly, Isaiah intimated that the coming of the Messiah will occur after the rise of the Madman, for he says: Riders on asses, riders on camels, horsemen in pairs (Isa. 21:7,9). Now the rider on ass is the Messiah, as is evident from the verse, which describes him as humble, riding on an ass (Zech. 9:9). He will follow the man riding a camel, that is the Arab kingdom. The statement horsemen in pairs refers to the two empires Edom and Ishmael. A similar interpretation of Daniel’s vision concerning the image and the beasts is correct beyond doubt. They are conclusions drawn from the plain meaning of the text.”

Islam is the necessary precursor for the coming of the Messiah, having been foretold in the Bible. As such Maimonides did consider Islam as part of God’s plan or will, as we also will see other places.

That the Arab nation would be a great nation, as in numbers, is also foreseen in the Bible, which we are told during Maimonides’ refutation of the Muslim polemical argument, relating to the prophecy of Ishmael, stating that the term “bm’d m’d” is related to the number of Ishmael’s descendants, not to his spiritual level or role (as the forefather of Muhammad and thus being the one promised to Abraham).

But the Muslim nation is not only needed as a precursor for the Messiah, but also as a punishment for the Jews, as Maimonides explains in the last chapter of the letter. Reminding the readers of the letter, he explains that “on account of the vast number of our sins God has hurled us into the midst of this people, the Arabs, who have persecuted us severely, and passed baneful and discriminatory legislation against us ... Never did a nation molest, degrade, debase, and hate us as much as they.”

Ibid, pp. 121-122.
Ibid, pp. 126-127.
Ibid, p. 126.
The state of the Jews under Muslim rule is partly their own fault, caused by their sins, though - according to Maimonides - no other nation has treated the Jews as bad as the Arabs have.

We see that Maimonides on the one hand consider the Muslims as rebelling against God, attempting to destroy the Jewish people, while on the other hand everything is foreseen by God, and that Islam would be a necessary precursor for the coming of the Messiah. These two are not necessarily conflicting notions, that the Arabs rebelled can perfectly well be foreseen by God, who then would then take advantage of the Arab rebellion as a tool to punish the Jews for their sins.

An important part that needs to be dealt with here, is Maimonides’ refusal of the apostates’ claims. Though Maimonides describe these claims as having been repeated so often that they have become “nauseating”, he still deals with them.

In order to understand which claims the Muslims did put forward against the Jews, and how these claims were perceived by Maimonides, we will deal with the three claims that he refutes here.

And interesting point of observation is that Maimonides’ answers to these claims, which probably were in general circulation among the Muslims, seem to fit the claims presented by Samaw’al al-Maghribi in his Ifham al-Yahoud, and though the apostate mentioned by Maimonides most likely isn’t al-Maghribi himself, it might be very likely that he was influenced by al-Maghribi. Therefore I have also chosen to relate to his presentation of the claims, and how Maimonides answered them.

The three claims that Maimonides deals with are based on three Biblical passages: a) Genesis 17:20, dealing with God’s blessing of Ishmael, b) Deuteronomy 18:15, dealing with the prophet that will rise among “their brethren”, and c) Deuteronomy 33:2, dealing with the revelation on Sinai.

Genesis 17:20:

“As for Ishmael, I have heeded you. I hereby bless him. I will make him fertile and exceedingly (bm’d m’d) numerous. He shall be the father of twelve chieftains, and I will make of him a great nation.”

Two claims are based on this verse by the Muslims, a) that the numerical value of “bm’d m’d” equals the numerical value of Muhammad, and b) that the prophecy of God making
Ishmael into “a great nation”, is a prophecy about Islam.

One example is Samaw’al ibn Maghribi, who in his Ifham states that “this word, ‘exceedingly’, bi-me’od me’od, if we compute the numerical letters, will add up to ninety-two, which is also the numerical value of the letters in the name Muhammad.”\(^{21}\)

Maimonides does not accept this claim though, stating that “the name of the prophet that the Ishmaelites think is written in the Torah, bm’d m’d, to which the apostates cling, is not MHMD but AHMD. So it is explicitly stated: ‘They find him mentioned in the Torah and the Gospels;” “his name is AHMD.”\(^{22}\)

According to him, if this claim should have been true, that the numerical value of bm’d m’d should hint at Muhammad, then the name Muhammad should have been used in the Quran instead of Ahmad, and by that establishing a link between the two verses. It is not the only argument he has against this claim, he also points to the context of bm’d m’d, which hints at God blessing Ishmael in numbers, not in spiritual value, explaining that “the phrase bm’d m’d simply signifies exceedingly. If the allusion in the phrase were intended to that one, it would read and I shall bless him bm’d m’d, so that whoever likes to hang on a spider’s web might then declare that it means: ‘I shall bless him that that one may be his seed.’ But since bm’d m’d follows I will make him numerous, it can only denote an extravagant increase in numbers.”\(^{24}\)

Maimonides can only understand the context of bm’d m’d as God heeding Abraham’s request for remembering Ishmael, and thus making him into a great nation, and nothing more than that. Indeed, Maimonides - following Jewish traditions about the connection between Ishmael and the Arabs - most likely would accept that this indeed was a prophecy about the Arab nations, but nothing more than that.

As thus also the claim that God “will make of him a great nation”, should be a prophecy about Islam and the Muslims, would also be refused by Maimonides, who - again - probably would accept this as a prophecy about the Arabs, but not in the sense that their religion would exchange the religion of Israel, but only as far as it would be a numerous and great nation.

Deuteronomy 18:15:

Another popular claim among the Muslims, even in our days, is the claim that Muhammad was prophesied in the Biblical verse about a future prophet:

“\textit{The Lord your God will raise up for you a prophet from among your own people (m-q-r-b-kh m’-h-y-kh), like myself; him you shall heed.}”

\(^{21}\)Perlmann, “Ifham al-Yahoud”, p. 46.
\(^{22}\)Quran 61:6.
\(^{24}\)Ibid, pp. 107-108.
Al-Maghribi is clear about his understanding of this passage: “This certainly is an allusion to the fact that they shall believe Muhammad.”

To the refusal that the Jews would say that this passage relates to “from among your own people”, as hinting at this future prophet being an Israelite, al-Maghribi relates to the passage saying “your brethren the children of Esau,” which also uses ‘h-y-kh-m, but here about non-Israelites, further arguing that “if the children of Esau were brethren to the children of Israel because Esau and Israel were the sons of Isaac, then the children of Ishmael are likewise brethren to all the progeny of Abraham.”

Though al-Maghribi certainly has a point here, Maimonides argues very well for the positive. The passage has to be read in its context, not simply as a fragmented reading, comparing two different Biblical passages (though that is not a practice foreign to Jewish exegesis). Explaining that this is not a prophecy about any certain prophet, Maimonides makes it clear that this is a notion about prophets, in plural, being sent with instruction from God, to which the people should heed, rather than relating to sorcery, astrology, or the like. And rather than having to search this prophet out, traveling “from country to country”, the prophet will arise among the Jews, and “this is the sense of in your midst.” For Maimonides the verse does not only speak about which nationhood the prophet will be of, but also about his geographical appearance.

Maimonides relate to al-Maghribi’s use of the Biblical passage about Esau, stating that the passage about the prophet coming “from among your own people”, could be “misunderstood and taken to refer also to Esau and Ishmael, since we do find Israel addressing Esau as brother, in the verse.” Thus says your brother Israel.

Maimonides relates to the passage “Never again did there arise in Israel a prophet like Moses”, as a proof-text that Deut. 18:15 didn’t have in mind a prophet on the same level as Moses, a prophet coming with a new law. The theme of Divine Laws is central in Maimonides’ discussion about prophets and prophecy in the Guide for the Perplexed, a subject we will return to later. One argument he doesn’t relate to here - at least directly - is that the Muslim could claim that “arise in Israel” didn’t rule out a non-Israelite, but returning to Maimonides’ geographical context of the passage, it might be likely that he would claim, that since a prophet only would appear in a certain geographical area, then this would rule out any non-Israelites as well.

26 Deuteronomy 2:4.
29 Numbers 20:14.
31 Deuteronomy 34:10.
Deuteronomy 33:2:

“He said: The Lord came from Sinai; He shone upon them from Seir; He appeared from Mount Paran, And approached them from Ribeboth-kodesh, Lightning flashing at them from His right.”

The JPS translation changes an important detail here. The part “and approached them from Ribeboth-kodesh”, in Hebrew “”, is translated by al-Maghribi as “and with Him myriads of the holy.” This is an important change for the interpretation of the verse. According to JPS’ translation God has four stations, whereas He only have three in al-Maghribi’s translation. The reason that this is important is that al-Maghribi interprets the three stations as the giving of the Torah, the Gospel, and the Quran. How he arrives at that conclusion is based on the physical presence of the people living in the three geographical places mentioned; Sinai, Seir, and Paran. Where it is well known that the Torah was given at Sinai and as thus clear why he connects Sinai with Judaism, the reason why he connects Seir to Christianity is less clear. This is based on the people of Esau, who live on “Mt. Seir” which “is the mountain range of Sharât”, and that the “children of Esau … believed in Jesus.”

It is not clear what he bases this idea on, but my immediate guess is that it’s based on the older Jewish connection between Esau and Edom, Edom being the nation based on Esau, and the Jewish usage of Edom about Christians and Rome. Another interesting connection is based on Jesus’ name in Arabic, which is spelled عيسى (‘ayn-ya-sin-ya), which in Hebrew is almost equal to עינ (‘ayin-sin-wav), and not יושע (yod-shin-wav-‘ayin) as is the Christian tradition for Jesus’ name. The connection between Esau’s name in Hebrew and Jesus’ name in Arabic probably also prompted the connection.

Paran is Islam, which is argued to be the case from the fact that the Torah itself states that Ishmael lived in Paran, and this he relates to the Islamic tradition that Mt. Paran is the mountain of Mecca, and thus connecting Islam to the third station.

JPS connects the term translated by al-Maghribi to “and with Him myriads of the holy”, מרבבת קדש (Mirvevot qodesh), to Deuteronomy 32:51, where we find the term מראיית קדש (Merivat qadesh). I think that JPS has the most correct translation, but al-Maghribi’s translation was by no means forced or wrong by the time.

We see for example Rashi translating the term the exact same way in his commentary.

33 Ibid.
34 This is also related by Perlmann in note 31, p. 47.
36 Perlmann, "Ifham al-Yahoud", p. 47.
on the verse, and Maimonides doesn’t react on it either, revealing that this was indeed the normative way of reading the verse. And by all means, JPS is a modern critical translation, not following the traditionally translations and interpretations of the Torah.

Of course Maimonides doesn’t see this as an allusion to the order of the three Abrahamic religions. He points out that the grammatical structure of the passage denies this: “Appeared is past tense.” The passage doesn’t talk about something that will be in its future, but rather something that already has passed, namely the revelation of the Torah. Rather than relating to three different revelation, this passage relates to the gentle arrival of the revelation on Mount Sinai: “It did not descend suddenly like a thunderbolt, but came down gently, manifesting itself gradually first from the top of one mountain, then from another, until it came to rest on Sinai.

Maimonides takes advantage of this opportunity to present a counter-argument in his polemic. Explaining that the idea that the Divine presence descended gradually from mountain to mountain “is conveyed in Deborah’s description ... when she exclaimed: O Lord, when You came forth from Seir, advanced from the country of Edom.” This is the verse which Sifrei interprets as God sending angels out to the non-Jewish nations, offering them the Torah, all of them having some excuse to refuse it, before He revealed it to Israel, which accepted it. Maimonides gives a blow at both the Christians and Muslims, stating that “God sent a messenger before the time of Moses to go to the Romans, and another to go to the Arabs with the purpose of presenting them with the Torah, but each of them in turn spurned it.” Since God already did once offer both the Christians’ and the Muslims’ forefathers the Torah, and they refused, why would He then later give them something to replace the Torah? They themselves refused then, so how can they now claim something else to have been given in place of the Torah?

**Mishneh Torah**

Where the Guide of the Perplexed is Maimonides’ masterpiece when it comes to philosophy, the Mishneh Torah holds the title, when it comes to law. Consisting of 14 books, giving it its name “Yad haHazaqah”, the Mighty Hand, it covers all details of Jewish law, organized in classes covering the 613 commandments of the Torah, each which the explanations based on the Oral Tradition, as interpreted and decided by Maimonides.

---

37 Which was in the wilderness of Zin.
41 Ibid.
We are not going to discuss the nature or structure of the code more than necessary, but though one would expect a code of law only dealing with law,\textsuperscript{42} we still find traces of philosophy and theology here and there, at places more expressed and in more extensive ways than others.

Here we will relate to two halachot, one from \textit{Hilchot Ma’achalot Assurat}, and one from \textit{Hilchot Melachim u’milchamoteyhem}:

The first halachah is part of a discussion of the status of wine, particular wine of gentiles. Here Maimonides relates to the wine of the \textit{ger toshav}, the resident non-Jew, who has accepted the \textit{seven Noahide commandments}:

\textit{Mishneh Torah - Hilchot Ma’achalot Assurat 11:7}:\textsuperscript{43}

\begin{quote}
“As we have explained, it is prohibited to drink the wine of a resident alien (\textit{ger toshav}), that is one who has accepted the seven commandments, but it is permitted to derive monetary benefit (\textit{muttar be-haniyyah}) from it. ... And so it is with any gentile who does not practice idolatry like these Muslims: their wine is prohibited for drinking but permitted for monetary benefit. And so rule all the geonim.”
\end{quote}

As we can see Maimonides levels the \textit{ger toshav} and the Muslim, both not practicing idolatry. Though the wine is still forbidden for drinking, it is allowed to derive benefit from their wine.

The underlying motive here is idolatry. The reason why gentile wine normally is prohibited, even for deriving benefits from it, is based on the commandment against encouraging or participating in idolatry, even indirectly. The wine of idolaters would normally be feared to have been devoted to some kind of god, and thus the Jew would derive benefit from something connected to idolatry, even if he only buys the wine and sell it to others. This fear doesn’t exist with the \textit{ger toshav} (who has accepted the \textit{seven Noahide commandments}) or the Muslim, whose heart “is directed towards Heaven”.\textsuperscript{44}

The next halachah is being presented in two forms, one is the translation of R. Eliyahu

\textsuperscript{42} Though there are great discussions as to which realm Maimonides true nature belongs, either the philosopher or the halachist, Strauss claiming that the former is the case, many also argues that Maimonides merged the two, among them we find Hartman. And though the M”T is mainly concerned with law, it can be argued that some whole parts of the code is concerned more with the realm of philosophy, such as Hilchot Yesodei Torah.

\textsuperscript{43} Bousek, “Polemics”, p. 65.
Touger\textsuperscript{45}, the second is Stroumsa’s translation of the halachah\textsuperscript{46}.

There are some noteworthy difference in the two versions, which appear to be based on different manuscripts\textsuperscript{47}, but though some details will be of importance in our analysis, the overall concept is the same.

\textit{Mishneh Torah - Hilchot Melachim 11:4 (R. Eliyahu Touger):}

"Nevertheless, the intent of the Creator of the world is not within the power of man to comprehend, for His ways are not our ways, nor are His thoughts, our thoughts. [Ultimately,] all the deeds of Jesus of Nazareth and that Ishmaelite who arose after him will only serve to prepare the way for Mashiach’s coming and the improvement of the entire world, [motivating the nations] to serve God together as [Tzephaniah 3:9] states: “I will transform the peoples to a purer language that they all will call upon the name of God and serve Him with one purpose.”

How will this come about? The entire world has already become filled with the mention of Mashiach, Torah, and Mitzvot. These matters have been spread to the furthestmost islands to many stubborn-hearted nations. They discuss these matters and the mitzvot of the Torah, saying: “These mitzvot were true, but were already negated in the present age and are not applicable for all time.”

Others say: “Implied in the mitzvot are hidden concepts that can not be understood simply. The Mashiach has already come and revealed those hidden [truths].”

When the true Messianic king will arise and prove successful, his [position becoming] exalted and uplifted, they will all return and realize that their ancestors endowed them with a false heritage and their prophets and ancestors caused them to err.”

\textit{Mishneh Torah - Hilchot Melachim 11:4 (Stroumsa):}

“As far as the Jewish nation is concerned, [these two religions] only pave the way for the Messiah, to prepare the whole world to worship God in unison, as it is said [Zeph. 3:9]: “For then will I turn to the people a pure language, that they may all call upon the name of the Lord, to serve Him with one consent.”

These notions have spread to distant isles, among many people, uncircumcised of heart. They discuss these matters and the commandments of Torah. Some [that is, the Muslims] say: Those commandments were true, but they were abrogated in our times, and were not meant to be binding for generations to come. Others [that is, the Christians] say: Those matters have

\textsuperscript{44} Iggeret le-Ray Ovadyah haGer, responsa to third question.
\textsuperscript{46} Stroumsa, “Maimonides in His World”, p. 108.
\textsuperscript{47} The Moznaim edition doesn’t hold any information on which manuscripts the translation is based upon, while Stroumsa’s is based on the Rome edition.
esoteric meanings; they were not meant to be taken literally, but the Messiah has already come and revealed their meaning.

*When the true King-Messiah will appear, when he succeeds and is exalted and glorious, they will all repent immediately. They will then realize that they have inherited naught, and that their prophets and ancestors lead them astray.*

Relating to Christianity and Islam, Maimonides explains that both religions have a role of educating the nations of the world, in order to pave the way for the Messiah.

This is done by making the nations aware of such things as the Messiah, Torah, and the commandments (Touger’s version states this outright, Stroumsa’s version uses “these matters” regarding the Messiah, “and the commandments of Torah”, for the mitzvot and the Torah, uniting these two concepts).

Two approaches to “these notions” (Stroumsa) are then presented; some say that the commandments were true and should be followed in former times, but today they are abrogated and were never meant to be binding for all times, while others claims that the commandments have esoteric meanings, not meant to be taken literally, and that the Messiah already has come.

When relating to the two approaches presented by Maimonides, we see disagreement between Touger and Stroumsa. Where Touger claims that the first approach is that of the Christians, while the second is that of the Muslims, Stroumsa has the opposite order.

Touger’s attribution of the first approach to the Christians might seem obvious, if we follow the chronological order of the religions (both in time and as mentioned by Maimonides when presenting them in this context), but Stroumsa’s attribution seems more correct. Though the notion of the commandments being of a temporarily nature does exist in Christianity, the main argument is not this, but rather that the commandments pointed forwards to the sacrifice of Jesus, that is, the sacrificial commandments having an esoteric meaning.48 The Muslims have never attributed any esoteric meaning to the commandments, but claim that the Torah has been abrogated, and thus while once in effect, today the commandments have been replaced by the Quran.49

Islam is - as is the case with Christianity - part of a Divine plan to make the Torah known to the nations, as well as educating them. This will in turn pave the way for the Messiah, so the whole world will be aware of a Messiah coming, and what to be aware of in this context. Where

---

48 While it isn't claimed that the commandments were not real or meant to be followed before Jesus, the main value of them were of esoteric character.

49 The concept of *nashk*. Some examples on this is the keeping the Shabbat, not eating milk and meat together, wearing tzitzit, and so on.
the Christians don’t claim that the commandments and the Torah has been abrogated as such, they are still not ascribing any true motives to the commandments, but rather claim that they are esoteric in meaning, as well as the Messiah already came. The Muslims, on the other hand, do ascribe the “*pshat*” reading of the Torah (sort of speaking), but claim that it has been abrogated.

It could be interesting to delve into Maimonides’ understanding of the Christian claims here for a moment. The Christian understanding is actually that the commandments have been abrogated, that they are not meant to be followed. Or rather, that either you follow the commandments flawlessly, or you will go to hell, if not accepting the grace of Jesus. Since no mortal man can keep the commandments in their total, because of the original sin, then there is basically no choice. Jesus was the final and perfect sin-offering and today there is no Temple, which means no way of redeeming our sins.\(^50\) So while the Christians do ascribe the commandments an esoteric meaning, they also - at least to a great extent - view them as being abrogated.

Maimonides probably knew this well, but since the Mishneh Torah wasn’t meant to be focused on theology or philosophy, besides what was needed, and it was directed to people only needing the simple explanation, he most likely left those long discussions out. There was simply no need, the ordinary Jew wouldn’t understand the issue being discussed, and it would be enough to give a very short summary of the issue at hand.

But if that is the case, that Maimonides knew all these details, then he probably would feel even stronger against Christianity, compared to Islam; not only did they ascribe the commandments an esoteric meaning to the extent, that they are not really to be followed, that they only pointed to Jesus, they also claim that they are no more in effect. At least the Muslims only did the latter, while still having an understanding of the Law, close to that of the Jews.

This is mostly speculation of course, but I do find it interesting whether Maimonides would or wouldn’t know Christian theology better than here expressed, and if he did, whether it wouldn’t affect his view and understanding of the religion. We know that he viewed Christianity as idolatry, while Islam wasn’t in his view.

The discussion of his view on Christianity here, is only relevant in the context of Islam though. When holding these two religions against each other, Maimonides could only get a more positive view of Islam - at least as a religion - compared to Christianity.

This also shows from the halachah in *Hilchot Ma’achalot Assurot*, where we see that he understands Islam as being on the same level as the religious practice of the *ger toshav*, the non-Jew accepting the seven Noahide commandments. Islam is not idolatry, and as thus the prohibitions being instituted for idolaters don’t apply for Muslims.

So while both Christianity and Islam are part of God’s plans, only Islam is viewed by Maionides as a religion not teaching idolatry.

\(^50\) See for example the writings of Paul, Augustine on the matter.
Moreh Nevuchim

Maimonides’ Guide is a philosophical masterpiece, dealing with the correct reading of the Torah and the correct worship of God. As such it is mostly relating to Jewish concepts, but does relate to various philosophical approaches as well as other religions, the latter particularly in context of idolatry.

Islam is not often mentioned, and when it is it is within the context of philosophy, being part of a criticism of the two Kalâm schools in Islam, the Mu’takallimûn and the Ash’ariyyah. Other time it seems that Maimonides is relating to the religion and its found indirectly, but as is obvious we can’t say for sure if he really does has these two in mind. Still, some of these passages might still be of interest, and as such I will deal with two of them here.

There are not many passages mentioning Islam or Muslims directly, though we find one in Maimonides’ discussion about the Kalâm (in Part I of the Guide), and another indirectly in a later discussion about the myths of the Sabians (in Part III of the Guide). We will begin with the former.

I will not go into details about his discussion about the Kalâm though, since that is not dealing so much with Islam as a religion (even opposing religion), but rather only in order to address the background for the Kalâm among Jews (such as Sa’adyah Gaon):

“There is no doubt that there are things that are common to all three of us, I mean the Jews, the Christians, and the Moslems: namely, the affirmation of the temporal creation of the world, the validity of which entails the validity of miracles and other things of that kind. As for the other matters that these two communities took the trouble to treat and were engrossed in — for instance, the study of the notion of trinity into which the Christians plunged and the study of the kalâm into which certain sects of the Moslems plunged — so that they found it requisite to establish premises and to establish, by means of these premises that they had chosen, the conceptions into the study of which they had plunged and the notions that are peculiar to each of the two communities, having been established in it: these are things that we do not require in any respect whatever.”

The discussion is part of his greater discussion of a number of themes in the overall work (the exact number of themes are several, such as the languages of the Bible, the meaning of the Law, Prophecy, true worship and so on). This is a philosophical work, and as such relate to the discussed issues from a philosophical point of view, why also Islam is being related to

---

through this approach.

We see that there are things common for the three Abrahamic religions, those being the concept of creation ex nihilo, which would include the believe in miracles, among other things. The differences mentioned by Maimonides here are of speculative nature. We see that the basic acceptance of the existence of God (see part III, chapter 29), as well as the already mentioned belief in creation ex nihilo, are two common ideas in the three religions, making them kindred when it comes to the “Foundation of all Foundations”. 52

The differences are of speculative nature, for the Christians the concept of trinity, and for the Muslims - at least certain sects- the concept of Kalâm.

In the later discussion about the Sabians, 53 Maimonides indirectly mentions Christianity and Islam in a somewhat positive, or less negative, context, stating that “[i]f the belief in the existence of the deity were not generally accepted at the present to such an extent in the religious communities, our days in these times would be even darker than that epoch.” 54

It is not impossible that Maimonides would ascribe some sense of prophethood to Muhammad, but it would not be in the sense he ascribed it to Moses. Particularly considering the Muslim accounts of Muhammad’s revelations 55 would support Maimonides’ understanding of Muhammad as being some kind of prophet. We see him for example explain that “everyone who communicates knowledge as to something secret, whether this be with the help of soothsaying and divination or with the help of a veridical dream, is likewise called a prophet.” 56 That this is not only limited to the Israelites is seen from his following remark, that “prophets of Baal and prophets of Asherah are called a prophet.” 57

Still, even if he did ascribe some form of prophethood to Muhammad, he would still not consider him on the same level as the Israeliite prophets, particularly not Moses, who was above all other prophets, and whose prophethood was of an extraordinary kind. 58

Discussion

52 M”T, Hilchot Yesodei haTorah, 1:1.
54 Of the Sages of Babylon, ibid. With the “Sages of Babylon” he is probably thinking about the time up to and during the Babylonian exile, and not to the Talmudic times.
55 Some Islamic accounts tell of Muhammad’s first revelation coming in a dream, e.g., al-Bukhari Vol. I. Book 1. hadith 3. Maimonides also relates to the Talmudic saying that a dream is the sixtieth of a prophecy, TB Berachot 57b, as well as relating to Numbers 12:6, where God states that He will speak to a prophet in his dream: Pines, “The Guide”, Part II, chapter 36, p. 370.
57 Ibid.
Maimonides was born Moshe ben Maimon, in Cordoba ca. 1138.\(^{59}\) At that time al-Andalus was still under the rule of the Almoravids, but this only lasted until 1147, where Ishaq ibn Ali lost to the Almohads, led by Abd al-Mu’min al-Gumi, in a battle at Marrakesh.

This defeat of the Almoravids meant that the Jewish and Christian subjects would have to either accept conversion to Islam, to leave the lands under Almohad rule, or to die.

For Maimonides and his family the question remains whether they accepted conversion or not,\(^{60}\) but that they left Cordoba is certain. Exactly where they stayed is not sure, but some hints exist that they might have lived under Christian rule temporarily\(^{61}\), though returning to Almohad rule, living in Fez by 1159/60.\(^{62}\) Maimonides only stayed in Fez until 1165, where he left Morocco for the Holy Land,\(^{63}\) Acre more precisely, until 1166, where he left for Egypt.\(^{64}\) In Egypt he, and his family which had followed him, lived in Alexandria for a short time, before they moved to Fustat, where he would stay the rest of his life\(^{65}\), until his death in 1204.

Most of his live he would live under Muslim rule, and it is no wonder that his opinions on Islam are given weight in Jewish traditions. If the theory of his conversion to Islam - which we will deal with shortly - was true, then he most likely had a very good understanding of the religion, giving him the knowledge to judge the religion fairly in context of Jewish teachings of other religions.

Maimonides wrote an incredible amount of writings. From commentaries, to responsas, legal works, to philosophical works, nothing was too much for him to delve into on a very high level. But in all of them it is possible to sense the Islamic world in the background. Whether we are talking about philosophical thoughts, legal decisions, or his responsas dealing with the situation of the Jews living under Muslim rule, Islam was always present to lesser or greater extent.

Though most of his responsas, as well as his two greatest works, the Mishneh Torah and the Dalâlat’ul-hâ’irîn, was written in Egypt, a huge amount of his writings was produced while searching a permanent haven\(^{66}\). His writings reflect not only his legal and philosophical view on Islam, but also his personal experiences as well as his concern for the Jews living under Muslim rule.

\(^{60}\) Bousek, “Polemics”, p. 54.
\(^{61}\) Kramer, “Maimonides”, p. 41.
\(^{62}\) Ibid, p. 83.
\(^{63}\) Ibid, p. 125.
\(^{64}\) Ibid, p. 141.
\(^{65}\) Ibid, p. 145.
\(^{66}\) Of the five texts I have dealt with in the analysis, only the letter of Martydom was written before Egypt though.
One of the greatest questions relating to Maimonides himself, in context of Islam, is his supposed conversion to Islam. Bousek explains shortly about the two sides regarding this discussion, while not wanting to take a definite approach to the question himself. While I have my own conviction, I still choose to follow his approach of caution, I still dare to put forward a suggestion.

What do we know about his supposed conversion and what does it mean for his view and understanding of Islam?

The choice given by the Almohad conquerers was three-fold, either to leave, to accept Islam, or to die. Some chose the first, while others chose the second. How many who chose martyrdom is not clear, but as we have seen - Maimonides related to exactly that question in his letter on Martyrdom, arguing against this choice and in the positive for a pretended conversion, stating that the Muslim rulers would settle with mere uttering of the shahadah. At the same time he recommended that the Jews should leave the lands of persecution, as soon as they had faked conversion, in order to move to another place, where it would be possible to practice the religion openly. Yet, Maimonides stayed in the lands of the Almohads from their conquest in 1147 until he left Fez in 1165, at an age of 27. Why did he stay such a long time, if he had suggested to do the opposite?

I suggest two reasons (there might be more). Bousek points out that the new Almohad ruler, Abû Ya'qûb Yûsuf, made new decrees of “extorted conversions and persecutions upon the Jews of Fez”, which led to the death of Maimonides’ teacher, R. Judah ibn Shushan. Until then it seems that the Jews could practice their religion fairly freely as long as it wasn’t in the open. This might have been enough for Maimonides not to feel a great urge or need to leave, but simply live outwardly as a Muslim, while practicing and studying the Jewish religion in private.

The second reason is his letter on Martyrdom, which could have been too open a declaration of his true intention, when it comes to his acceptance (or lack of it) of Islam. True, the Muslim rulers probably did know that most Jews didn’t truly believe in or accepted Islam, which can be seen by the later distrust under Yûsuf’s rule, but to openly declare this might have been too much, forcing Maimonides to take his leave.

Both hint at Maimonides accepting forced conversion, if only outwardly.

---

67 Bousek, “Polemics”, pp. 54-55.
70 Ibid, p. 31.
71 Bousek, “Polemics”, pp. 55-56.
73 Kraemer interprets this letter as an admission of his forced conversion; “Maimonides”, p. 116.
74 Bousek, “Polemics”, p. 56.
There are other hints, such as Arabic sources mentioning his conversion, for example Ibn Abî Usajbi’a, who mentioned Maimonides’ conversion to Islam and renouncing of same.\(^75\) Also Ibn al-Qiftî mentions his conversion,\(^76\) telling us about a case, where a Muslim from Morocco, who had known Maimonides as a Muslim, saw him appearing as a Jew in Fustat. Understanding what had happened (irtadda), he took Maimonides to court, where ‘Abd al-Rahim ibn ‘Ali al-Fadil, the qadi, ruled that since the conversion had been forced, Maimonides would not be punished for renouncing Islam, since “there is no compulsion in religion”.\(^77\)

We also have a very clear statement from Joseph ben Judah ibn ’Aqnin, who mentions the forced conversions of the Almohids, as well as Maimonides as being forcibly converted.\(^78\)

These accounts seem to point to Maimonides’ forced conversion, something also Stroumsa argues for,\(^79\) also mentioning the probably choice of Maimonides to act pragmatic and make the best out of the situation, studying Islam and Islamic texts,\(^80\) which also is hinted at in Abi Usajbi’a’s account.

It seems to me very plausible to accept the theory of Maimonides’ conversion, to the extent that he even was active as a Muslim, while living in Fez. We know that he had a great curiosity and interest in philosophical subjects, and it would surprising if his curiosity didn’t also show in context of religions, particularly a religion which would embrace the study of philosophy.\(^81\)

As far as we accept this, that he did accept forced conversion, and that he acted in the open as a Muslim, participating in Muslim social live, as well as studied Islamic texts, what does this tell us of his basic relation to Islam, as far as his years as a teenager and young man was spent this way?

It would seem that the influences would be two-fold. First, he would know Muslims from personal experiences, though only from a negative point of view, when it came to Muslim authorities. How he related to the individual Muslim is not easy to answer as such, but it would probably be influenced by personal friendships and enemies (as far as he had any).

He would see how cruel Muslim rule could be, though he also - as is evident - would see how flexible it could be in enforcing its cruelty, and saw it in a historical context. The Muslims were by no means the first to attempt forced conversion on the Jews.

---

\(^{75}\) Ibid, pp. 58-59.


\(^{77}\) Quran, 2:256.

\(^{78}\) Kraemer, "Maimonides", pp. 116-117.


\(^{80}\) Ibid, p. 60.

\(^{81}\) It has been positively shown that Maimonides was heavily influenced by several Muslim philosophers, such as al-Farabi, ibn Bajja, and ibn Rushd; see Pines Introduction to his translation of the Guide.
Second, with his personal studies of Islam, he would know the theological points of view of the religion, understanding its concept of Tawhid, the total unity of God, and its hostility to anything remotely reminding of idolatry. And this seems to influence his relation to the religion and its practitioners onward.

The next part of the discussion on Maimonides and Islam, is how this background formed his philosophical, theological and legal view on Islam.

Because of his background in Fez, Maimonides knew perfectly well that Islam wasn’t a monolithic religion. He knew well to differ between the various Islamic philosophical streams, singling out Kalâm (not only known to him from his Islamic studies, but also from such Jewish scholars as Sa’adyah Gaon)\(^{82}\) for criticism.

Maimonides didn’t view the followers of Kalâm as philosophers. We see him relating to the contrast between the Mutakallimûn and philosophers, in an account of a discussion between a Mutakallim and a philosopher.\(^{83}\) The discussion, on the question of matter, is not relevant. What is relevant is that he differs between the followers of Kalâm on the one hand, and the philosophers on the other. If one was to follow Strauss and others in their view on Maimonides as in truth being a philosopher,\(^{84}\) only disguising himself as a religious person out of need, it could be argued that this was a way to differ between the religious people (the followers of Kalâm), who are opposed to philosophy, and the philosophers on the other hand, Maimonides being one of them, only having Islam as one type of “clothing” among others. If we are to follow that approach, then the philosophers would probably not be seen as Muslims, more than Maimonides would understand himself as a Jew.

I tend to follow Frank’s argument that his philosophical and legal approaches constitute a “coherent whole”,\(^{85}\) which means that Maimonides didn’t see this as a struggle between religion and philosophy, but rather as two different expressions within the same religion, here Islam, where the one would be more correct than the other, both of them Islamic though.

We see Maimonides relating to another group of Islamic thinkers, the ahl al-bâtin (the Ishma’îlis possibly), as a group that believed in the figurative meaning of the miracles.\(^{86}\)

Maimonides also relates positive to several Muslim philosopher, such as Abu Bakr ibn al-Sa’îgh, whose opinions Maimonides promoted himself.\(^{87}\)

---

\(^{82}\) I would wonder if not his studies of Islamic philosophy helped him to reach a critical attitude to Kalâm. By being exposed to the discussions between the various Islamic philosophers, he got an invaluable understanding of the various philosophical arguments. Would he have been exposed to the varieties of philosophical claims, if he had never been forcibly converted?


\(^{84}\) Frank, “Maimonides and Aristotelianism”, p. 139.

\(^{85}\) Ibid, pp. 139-140.


\(^{87}\) Ibid, p. 268.
So we see that Maimonides had a very nuanced view on Islamic philosophy, some arguments and points of view he attacked, others he agreed with.

When it came to his theological approach we also see a very nuanced view of Islam. We saw from his letter to Ovadyah haGer, that he in no way consider Islam to be connected to idolatry, even in cases where it would seem, that old idolatrous rituals has been adopted by Islam. The intention is the deciding factor, and the intention is with a heart directed towards Heaven.

The concept of Tawhid in Islam was also flawless in Maimonides’ eyes. As he writes to Ovadyah haGer; “…they designate the proper unity to God, a unity which has no imperfection.”88 While there might be philosophical opinions which are problematic, their understanding of the Oneness of God is as it is supposed to be.

Islam is also part of God’s plan, the one religion, together with Christianity, which actually works for the positive in spreading knowledge of and discussion about the Torah and the commandments.89

That doesn’t mean that it is a true religion as such, though certainly preferable for the non-Jews, just that it is part of God’s plans. On the contrary, in Maimonides’ eyes Islam is - as is the case of Christianity - a religion based on the copying of Jewish concepts. We see his comparison between Judaism and the other religions: “The difference between our religion and the other denominations that liken themselves to us is like the difference between the living, rational individual and the statute skillfully molded out of marble, wood, silver, or gold that looks like a man.”90 That is, though their religions might appear valuable and seductive, they are - when all comes to all - only fake copies without (spiritual) life.

As we saw from the Mishneh Torah91, Maimonides ascribed the rules applicable for the ger toshav for the Muslims as well. It seems that Maimonides understood Islam to fulfill the seven Noahide commandments - as should already be clear by now - and as such the Jew does not have to shy away from relations with the Muslims, when it comes to ordinary cases.

There even is a great halachic discussion up to our times, whether a Jew can pray in a mosque or a church. While Ra”N rules that Jews are prohibited from praying in either place, the general consensus, based on Maimonides’ attitude, is that while Jews are prohibited from praying in churches, since they are seen as houses of idol worship, mosques are allowed. In our days we see several prominent rabbis ruling according to this, among them we find Ovadyah

88 Letter to Ovadyah haGer, third question.
89 Hilchot Melachim u’Milchamoteyhem 11:4.
91 Hilchot Ma’achalot Assurot 11:7.
Yosef, who even mentioned seeing several rabbis praying in the tomb of Abraham, at the time it still was a mosque only.  

Some concluding words need to be said about Maimonides’ life after Morocco, since he did spend most of his life in Egypt, as well as wrote his two greatest works there.

When Maimonides left Morocco for the Holy Land in 1165, he came from one reality to another. Where Morocco under the Almohads had been conformed to Islam, and only one form of Islam, Acre was a mixed city with people from all over the known world. This was during the Crusader Kingdom, and Acre was under Christian rule. This didn’t prevent people from different religions to socialize here, even Muslims and Christians, leaving the war between Christianity and Islam be something between rulers.

Though the Christian custom officers treated people of other faiths with respect, Maimonides still sided with the Muslim against the Crusaders. This is interesting considering the context for Maimonides’ presence in Acre. One would expect that coming from a Muslim country, which you had to flee in order not to be forcibly converted or killed, for then to come to a Christian country, where you would be greeted by respectful officials, and seeing a city allowing all kinds of faiths, would make you most positive inclined towards the latter. Yet, given the history of Jews living under Christian rule probably had left its imprint on Maimonides’ attitude and conscience of Christians, as well as his knowledge of the two religions already at that time would have given Islam a higher place in Maimonides religious hierarchy.

Maimonides arrived to Egypt in 1166, at first staying in Alexandria, but later moved to Fustat, where he lived in the Mamsusa Quarter with his family. This is not without importance, since Mamsusa had both Jews, Christians and Muslims living together, mostly Christians though. At the time Maimonides arrived, Egypt was under Fatimid rule, a dynasty adhering to Isma’ilite Islam, being one of the Shi’ite denominations of Islam. Though he only lived under Fatimid for a short time, from 1166 to 1171, it was still long time enough to open a new world for Maimonides, not only in relatively freedom to live openly as a Jew, but also - and maybe especially - in context of the intellectual relations between Jews and people of other faiths, particularly Muslims. Kraemer explains about the Fatimids:

---

93 Kraemer, “Maimonides”, p. 133.
94 Ibid, p. 132.
95 Ibid, pp.129-130.
96 Ibid, p. 133: Kraemer bases this on Maimonides' dedication of a book to al-Qadi al-Fadil, which he doesn't quote.
98 Ibid.
“The Fatimid idea that the inner meaning of revelation was philosophic opened the door to the study of philosophy and the sciences, and an ethos of untrammeled inquiry and unrestricted scientific thought lured intellectuals to the Fatimid court. The life of the intellect was accessible to all religious groups, and scientists could exercise their powers freely and contribute to the advancement of knowledge.”

It would not be surprising to see that Maimonides then had certain influences from Isma’ilite thought, such as the distinction between the exoteric and the esoteric, the negative theology, the similarity in the theological vocabulary of Maimonides on the one hand and Isma’ilite philosophers, such as Hamid al-Din, on the other hand. Particularly a philosopher like al-Farabi, who held Isma’ilite opinions, was highly esteemed by Maimonides.

The Ayyubid, and thus Sunni-Islamic, conquest of Fatimid Egypt, does not seem to have had any great influences on Maimonides theological teachings. Though he lived under Ayyubid rule from 1171 to his dead in 1204, Maimonides held to teachings being closer to the Isma’ilite thought, even if Salah al-Din followed the Ash’arite teachings, a school of thought, which Maimonides criticized in his Guide.

Maimonides did have contact to many religious judges, qadis, though, and might as such have gotten a good insight into Sunni Fiqh, particularly that of the Maliki and Shafi‘i legal schools, a contact based on his role as Ra‘is al-Yahoud, as well as having contact to army officers, based on his work as a physician.

Conclusion

I asked in the beginning how Maimonides viewed Islam as a belief system. It is clear that Islam receives a higher place in the religious hierarchy, being viewed as a non-idolatrous religion, whose followers are regarded in the same way as the gerei toshav. This doesn’t mean that Maimonides sees Islam as a true religion as such, only Judaism is, but the worship and intention is true. That also makes it possible to have business relations with the Muslims, which otherwise wouldn’t be allowed for the Jews. Islam is furthermore part of the Divine plan to promote Torah, and the concepts of the commandments and Messiah to the nations, which is also the case for Christianity - both in each their own way, but which makes them differ from other religions.

102 Ibid, pp. 222-223.
103 Ibid, p. 196.
It is interesting and noteworthy that Maimonides was more influenced by Shi’ite ideas and concepts, as far as it is accepted that this is the case, than of Sunnite theology. It could be interesting to delve into this as a subject, as to why he related more Isma’ilite theology.

I furthermore asked if Maimonides’ view on Islam and the Muslims is the same. I believe that it has been shown that where Maimonides’ view Islam as a belief system positively, his view on the attitude and behavior of the Muslims in general is viewed very negatively. In that sense we learn that Maimonides takes different approaches to the religion and its followers. While the theological points are good and accepted, the way the followers are dealing with the Jews is unacceptable, and among the worst examples experienced in Jewish history. The Jews are humiliated to an extent close to the unbearable.

It has been interesting to note that there is no particular change in his approach to Islam and Muslims during the years. It would not be weird to see some changes in how one relates to different ideas and opinions, but Maimonides has been consistent, both in his general positive view on Islam, as well as in his negative view on Muslim behavior towards Jews. And though there has been many chances to attack Islam, Maimonides has taken care not to attack the religion, but rather to direct criticism against the particular person in question or the Muslims in general instead. His views are always well founded and nuanced, drawing from many sources and observations, rather than being based on his own personal world view, though this is also visible in his writings, as being based on his concern and care for the Jewish communities.

It is interesting to note the way Maimonides is using different approaches to Islam. While there certainly is a thread through all of his writings - which is noteworthy, considering the years between them - he relates and presents Islam differently in each text. In the Iggeret haShmad Islam is seen in context of heresy and idolatry, being less grave than the two, though only presented as such indirectly. In the letter to Ovadyah haGer Islam is being defended from charges of idolatry. In Iggeret le-Teyman Islam is being presented as part of God’s plans for the Jews, as well as the Muslim polemics being refuted. In the Mishneh Torah Islam is dealt with in context of legal relations. And in the Moreh Nevuchim Islam is dealt with from a philosophical point of view. All five texts present Islam in different relations and contexts, but in all of them it is being used and presented in order to comfort the Jews. The general message to the Jews not to worry, that things are really not as bad as it looks, that claims can be stated about the particular, but that we need to look at the general to get the true and full picture.

Yes, the persecution of the Almohad is bad, and it is preferable to choose martyrdom, but Jews have bowed to worse persecutions before, and still been forgiven. And yes, there are some rituals in Islam, which is similar to those of idolaters, but the true motive is directed towards heaven, and as such Ovadyah is correct in his disagreement with his teacher. And though the persecutions of the Jews in Yemen reach such a hard degree, that it is unbearable, not only forced to full submission, but also faced with apostates presenting convincing arguments, and false messiahs, this is still a part of God’s plans, which was already told a long
And for all the Jews living in Muslim lands, it is possible to do business with the Muslims, without any strong limitations. Only the Guide stands out here, in as much as this is not a response on a worldly matter as such, but a guidance in true worship and understanding of the true religion. It is not for the many, but for the few.

It could be interesting to make a more broad study of his general view on religions and religion as a concept, both on its own and in a comparative study of other contemporary religious thinkers, Jews and non-Jews alike. This would give a better picture on exactly how he understood Islam, not only in context of Judaism, but also in context of other religions. This paper has only or mostly been focused on his view on Islam and the Muslim, which leaves us without the sense of how this view is compared to his view on the other religions, though some has been mentioned. Nothing exists in a vacuum, and as such it is alway preferable to know what we are up against, when we present things. Not only in regards to how Maimonides views Islam in comparison to other religions, but also in regards to how Islam was generally perceived among the Jews at the time, not to speak about how the religion is conceived in other periods, particularly our days.

**Bibliography**

**Primary Sources:**


*Iggeret el Rav Ovadyah haGer* - יִזְהַק מֵאָת "הַרְמָבָּה מִיפָּרָיו": "הַגֵּר שׁוֹבֵדְהוּ רַעְאָא אֵין אָגַּרְתּ", א. שילוח, א. כרך, אדומים מעלה, יישלט hombres והזאת, שילוח, 1995

---

104 And here is probably also a personal comfort for Ovadyah, considering his family was still Muslims. To be told that they were idolators probably wasn't something that was easy to accept by Ovadyah. Maimonides gave him comfort, even indirectly; no, your family are not idolaters, their intentions are pure and they worship God in a fitting way for non-Jews, even if Islam is not the true religion, the true religion which you have acknowledged in your wisdom.


Secondary Sources:


