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Averroistic Trends in Jewish-Christian Polemics in the Late Middle Ages

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A number of historians have asserted that the spread of Jewish Averroism in the late fourteenth and the fifteenth centuries was a major cause of widespread Jewish apostasy in Spain. It was felt that the propagation of a philosophy which maintained that reason is superior to any religion contributed to a weakening of the Jewish resolve to withstand intense conversionary pressure. If all faiths were of equal value, or indeed, of no value, what benefit would accrue to a Jew if he suffered for his Judaism? If he could expect no reward in the next world, as Averroism seemed to preach, would it not be better to enjoy what this world has to offer? Thus, Spanish Jews, who were deeply imbued with philosophical ideas, became Christians in large numbers.[1]

This is not the place to enter into the discussion as to whether the Averroists correctly understood Averroes or the historians correctly understood the Averroists. Suffice it to say that most late medieval Jewish philosophers basically agreed with Averroes's distinction between demonstrative and dialectical truths and believed that the latter, i.e. the doctrines of religion, could not be proven by the former, i.e. philosophical reasoning.[2] This may have led a number of individuals to think that since reason could not demonstrate the truth of any religion, Judaism could not be said to have any

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[1] The most prominent proponents of this historical reconstruction are Yitzchak Baer, *A History of the Jews in Christian Spain* (Philadelphia, 1961), and Benzion Netanyahu, *The Marranos of Spain* (New York, 1966). Both authors rely heavily on contemporaneous accounts by anti-philosophical Jewish loyalists.

[2] This distinction is made in Averroes's *Kitāb Faṣl al-Maqāl,* ed. George F. Hourani (Leiden, 1959), trans. Hourani, *Averroes on the Harmony of Religion and Philosophy* (London, 1961). Jewish authors were familiar with a Hebrew translation edited by N. Golb, "The Hebrew Translation of Averroes' *Faṣl al-Maqāl,*" *Proceedings of the American Academy for Jewish Research* 25 (1956), 99–113; 26 (1957), 41–64. The conclusions reached by the most radical Christian Averroists, those who were accused of maintaining a double-truth theory, are absent in Averroes's works. The only Jewish philosopher who adopted radical Averroism was Isaac Albalag; cf. Georges Vajda, *Isaac Albalag* (Paris, 1960). For an overview of Averroes's thought, see Alfred L. Ivry, "Towards a Unified View of Averroes' Philosophy," *Philosophical Forum* 4, 1 (Fall, 1972), 87–113.

superiority over Christianity. This, in turn, could have led to the apostasy that marked the Jews' last century in Spain.[3]

In order to investigate this question further, it would be instructive to examine the Jewish anti-Christian polemical literature of this crucial period and to analyze what effect Averroistic trends had upon it. When the anti-Jewish riots of 1391 hit Spanish Jewry, there was already a two-hundred-year tradition of such polemics among European Jewry.[4] With the increase of Christian conversionary pressure as a result of this widespread persecution, Jewish writers produced quite a number of new polemical works, many of which relied upon philosophical argumentation.[5] If we are to evaluate the claim that Averroism contributed to Jewish apostasy, this literature should provide us with further evidence upon which to make a judgment.

I

One central issue often raised by the philosophical polemicists was how one may establish criteria of verification of religious doctrines. If one wishes to claim that a particular religion is somehow superior to another, it is necessary to set up some standards of determining such priority. Joseph Albo (d. ca. 1444) put the question this way: "As there are many laws called divine, and the devotees of every one of them have a continuous tradition, the problem arises how to distinguish between the genuine divine law and the spurious, which claims and pretends to be divine, but is not divine."[6]

Albo then answers the question in the following manner. A religion may be proved either in terms of itself or in terms of the founder of the religion. If the religion corresponds to the three major principles and the derivative dogmas that Albo claims are the *sine quibus non* of any true faith, then it may

[3] It should be noted that Averroism has many facets. As it is used here, Averroism refers to the theory that religious and philosophical propositions belong in different universes of discourse. As interpreted by the Jewish Averroists, this means that reason could not be used to demonstrate the truth of religious doctrines. This could lead to the conclusion stated above, namely, from the point of view of reason, all religions are equally valid, or invalid. No religion could have *rational* (as contrasted with, e.g. ethical) superiority over another. It will be obvious from the following that the thinkers discussed here are not true Averroists but were greatly influenced by Averroes.

[4] The first specifically anti-Christian works were written around 1170 by Joseph Kimhi and Jacob ben Reuben. On the general topic, see Salo W. Baron, *A Social and Religious History of the Jews,* 9 (Philadelphia, 1965), 97–134; and Judah Rosenthal, "Sifrut Ha-Vikuaḥ Ha-'Anti-Noẓrit ᶜAd Sof Ha-Me'ah Ha-Shemoneh-ᶜEsreh," *Areshet* 2 (1960), 130–79; "Milu'im," *Areshet* 3 (1961), 433–39.

[5] For the differences between Jewish polemics before and after 1391, see Netanyahu, *Marranos,* pp. 80–94. It should be remembered that philosophical argumentation occupies only a small portion of the polemical literature. Most space is devoted to exegetical arguments, i.e., those which concern the correct interpretation of the Hebrew Bible or the New Testament.

[6] *Sefer Ha-ᶜIqqarim,* ed. Isaac Husik (Philadelphia, 1946), 1, chap. 18, p. 153. Albo distinguished between natural, conventional, and divine laws *(datot).* Therefore, it is important for him to provide criteria for establishing which laws are actually divine, and not, e.g., solely conventional. Cf. Husik, "The Law of Nature, Hugo Grotius, and the Bible," *Hebrew Union College Annual* 2 (1925), 381–417.

be considered divine. Similarly, the lawgiver who established the religion must be proven to have received a prophetic message and to have been sent by God to give mankind a law. Albo demonstrates that Judaism not only has the correct content, but also was given by someone who fulfilled the criteria of being the messenger of God.[7] Most of Albo's reasoning here, it should be noted, is circular since proof of Moses' revelation is derived from biblical verses which, presumably, are the result, not the verification, of prophecy. Christians, however, could not fault his conclusion, since they, too, believed in the divine origin of the Hebrew Bible.

Having established to his own satisfaction that Judaism may be called a divine religion, Albo next asks a question which must also have been perplexing his Averroistically influenced contemporaries: Will man's ultimate felicity be achieved through philosophical or religious means? Albo answers as follows: Since we have proof that miracles were performed only for religious individuals and not for philosophers, it follows that afterworldly reward is also reserved for those whose accomplishments are religious, not philosophical. Belief, then, not the use of reason, leads to reward.[8] Yet, it is obvious that not every belief produces happiness. A false belief, e.g. that a nonexisting thing exists or that an existing thing does not exist, cannot provide reward.[9]

This leads Albo to the central question that confronted the philosophical polemicists: "How can we tell whether a thing is true and demands implicit belief or is not true and should not be believed. If we say that the question must be determined by reason, it will follow that ratiocination stands higher than faith."[10] This cannot be the case, Albo argues, since he has already established that faith, not reason, leads to ultimate reward. How could it be possible, then, that belief, which is superior to reason, is to be judged by reason?

Before proceeding to Albo's solution of this problem, we might turn to Elijah del Medigo's formulation of the same question. Del Medigo, who lived in Italy in the latter part of the fifteenth century, begins his *Beḥinat Ha-Dat* by distinguishing between religious and philosophical truths, declaring that the study of philosophy is not only permitted by Judaism, but, indeed, is necessary for the intelligent religionist. Del Medigo warns against trying to prove the truth of Judaism by philosophical means. In fact, the attempt to demonstrate the truth of strictly religious doctrines by means of philosophy is counterproductive for two reasons. First, one would be attempting to explain with philosophy that which is amenable only to a religious ver-

[7] *ʿIqqarim,* 1, chap. 18–20, pp. 154–73. As developed throughout the *ʿIqqarim,* the three principles of any divine religion are the existence of God, revelation, and reward and punishment.

[8] Ibid., chap. 21, pp. 173–78.

[9] Ibid., chap. 22, p. 178.

[10] Ibid.

ification. Second, once one finds that the truth of religion cannot be proved by reason, one might very well be led to heresy.[11]

The following objection, however, is raised: What would be the course of action if Judaism demanded belief in an irrational doctrine, for instance, divine incarnation or an accident's becoming substance or a substance's becoming an accident without any generation or corruption.[12] If we say that reason requires us not to believe in such an impossibility, why do we not also say that Jewish religious doctrines, which, del Medigo has already admitted, cannot be proved by reason, should also be rejected. In other words, if religion and reason are in separate universes of discourse, one should theoretically accept either all teachings of religion, whether or not they are, prima facie, in accord with reason, or no teachings of religion.[13] This is, in essence, the same question raised by Albo: If reason cannot be the deciding factor in religion, on what basis does the adherent of one religion favor his own doctrines over those of another?

The answer to this question, which is raised in one form or another by most philosophical polemicists in the late Middle Ages, and even by someone as modern as Moses Mendelssohn,[14] is derived from Maimonides's *Guide of the Perplexed.* In 1.73.10 and 3.15, Maimonides distinguished between the logically impossible, over which God has no power, and the naturally impossible, over which God does have power. Drawing upon this distinction, the Jewish polemicists argue that whereas one may believe in a religious doctrine that contradicts natural impossibility, one may not accept a doctrine that assumes a logical impossibility.

Albo puts it this way: "There are two kinds of impossibility. There is the essentially impossible *(nimnaᶜot qayyamot be-aẓmam)* which we cannot conceive that even God can make possible."[15] There is another class, the impossibility which it is conceivable that God may make possible — namely that which is merely impossible according to the laws of nature *(ha-nimnaᶜot eẓel ha-ṭevaᶜ bilvad).* For example, it is essentially or logically impossible that the part be greater than the whole or that the side of a square be larger than the diagonal or that the angles of a triangle be equal to more than two right angles. "Such impossibility can never be accredited by tradition."[16] On the other hand, it is only naturally impossible that the dead could be revived or that a person could survive forty days and forty nights without eating or drinking.[17] Therefore, assuming there are other standards of verification

[11] *Beḥinat Ha-Dat,* ed. Isaac Reggio (Vienna, 1833; reprinted), pp. 11–12.

[12] This is an apparent reference to transubstantiation.

[13] *Beḥinat Ha-Dat,* pp. 12–14.

[14] See his letter to Karl Wilhelm Ferdinand, hereditary Prince of Brunswick, in *Moses Mendelssohn Gesammelte Schriften,* Jubiläumsausgabe (Berlin, 1930), 7:301, trans. Alfred Jospe, *Jerusalem and Other Jewish Writings* (New York, 1969), pp. 123–24.

[15] *ᶜIqqarim,* 1, p. 178.

[16] Ibid., p. 179.

[17] Ibid., pp. 179–81.

such as witnesses and reliable tradition, a religion may reasonably demand a belief in a doctrine based upon the suspension of a natural impossibility. A religion may not, however, require faith in a logical impossibility no matter what other presumed evidence for this belief it may have.[18]

Elijah del Medigo, for his part, claims that Judaism could not command belief in a self-contradictory notion. If the Jews were enjoined to accept such a belief, they would have to reject it, since God Himself has given man the rational ability to distinguish truth from falsehood. In addition, any possible irrational beliefs that a Jew might be commanded to hold, e.g. incarnation, could not be necessary for the maintenance of the Jewish religion. Thus, if Judaism demanded belief in divine incarnation, a Jew should disown such a view, since, as irrational, it could not be central to his religion. Lastly, Del Medigo claims that this whole issue is, in truth, irrelevant. Since even the masses would not accept irrational beliefs, God would not command them. Del Medigo does not explain how it is that Christianity, which to his thinking does demand irrational beliefs, had so many adherents.[19]

Del Medigo, now, is confronted with one more question: If one insisted that only religious doctrines which reason did not reject were acceptable, was one not thereby diminishing God's power? Did not Jews agree that God is omnipotent *(yakhol ᶜal kol davar)?* Echoing Maimonides and Albo, Del Medigo answers that God cannot do that which is logically self-contradictory, and He would have absolutely no desire to do so. Thus, belief in a logical impossibility is not acceptable.[20]

Mention might be made here of a few other Jewish thinkers who argued in a similar fashion. Hasdai Crescas (1340–1410), for instance, lays down two principles that he feels should be acceptable to both Christians and Jews. First, "faith cannot force the intellect to believe something that is self-contradictory." Second, "the divine power cannot be imagined to be able to contradict first principles, nor derivatives that are explained by absolute proofs, because these are derived from first principles." In other words, Crescas is arguing that any doctrine which is rejected by reason cannot possibly be acceptable to religion.[21]

Likewise, Elijah Hayyim of Genazzano (sixteenth century) declares: "We

[18] Cf., also, ibid, p. 51: "For the Torah does not oblige us to believe absurdities, which are opposed to first principles, or any imaginary notions which the reason cannot conceive."

[19] *Beḥinat Ha-Dat,* pp. 14–16. The question of the Christian success did intrigue a number of Jewish thinkers. Two standard answers are found in the literature, either that Christians maintained their belief because of the prejudices of upbringing, or that Christianity was forced upon people in the days of Constantine. The latter answer is especially poignant in light of the forced conversions of the day.

[20] Ibid., pp. 16–17. Del Medigo adds that a religion is judged not only by its doctrines but also by its practices. Therefore, even if Judaism is not rationally superior to Christianity, it could be ethically superior.

[21] *Biṭṭul ᶜIqqare Ha-Noẓrim,* ed. Ephraim Deinard (Kearny, N.J. 1904; rep., Jerusalem, 1972), p. 10. As a fall-back position, Crescas argues further that if the arguments for both religions were of equal value, priority would be attached to the religion that appeared first; cf. p. 11.

Hebrews do not say that one should believe only in those doctrines which the intellect affirms by demonstration. We do say, however, that one cannot believe that which the intellect refutes and rejects altogether so that their existence is seen to be impossible."[22] This point, namely that reason does not have to prove a religion true but that religious beliefs may not be irrational, is made also by the Jewish polemicists Shem Tov Ibn Shaprut (fl. 1385–1405),[23] Joseph ben Shem Tov (ca. 1400–ca. 1460),[24] Abraham Bibago (late fifteenth century),[25] Judah Aryeh de Modena (1571–1648),[26] and Isaac Lupis (late seventeenth century).[27] An Averroistic outlook, then, clearly does not prevent a Jewish thinker from asserting the rational superiority of his religion over Christianity.

It is very well, of course, to proffer a theory which states that natural impossibilities are acceptable as religious beliefs and logical impossibilities are not, and that one's own religious doctrines involve only natural impossibilities, whereas the opponents' religion is dependent upon logical impossibilities. It is quite another thing to develop that theory of possibility satisfactorily so that it can be applied impartially to all religious doctrines. Even Maimonides could not come up with such a theory of possibility. Though reason should be the final arbiter of the possible and the impossible, he argues, the Kalam theory of admissibility which makes imagination the final arbiter is "not something one hastens to reject in its entirety with nonchalance."[28] Thus, for the philosophical polemicists to prove their point that Judaism is rationally acceptable and Christianity is not, they must fully develop the theory of possibility outlined above.

II

In their theories of religious verification, a number of Jewish polemicists mentioned the following criterion of a doctrine's rationality: if the belief implies a defect in God, it is not acceptable. For instance, Joseph Kaspi, who, though he lived earlier than the period in question (1279–1340), was greatly influenced by Averroism, asks the following question: Why do Jews accept creation and resurrection of the dead if they deny incarnation and divine change? Were they not both equally unreasonable? Kaspi answers: "Those notions concerning which we admit that God has power [e.g. creation] do not involve a defect. God forbid that in God's essence there be the power

[22] *Vikuaḥ,* ed. Judah Rosenthal, *Mehkarim U-Meqorot* (Jerusalem, 1967), 1, p. 451.

[23] *Even Boḥan,* Jewish Theological Seminary of America MS 2426, fol. 50v.

[24] *Commentary on Profiat Duran's Iggeret Al Tehi Ka-'Avotekha,* National and University Library, Jerusalem, MS Heb. 8° 757 (printed Jerusalem, 5730 [1969–70]), pp. 28–32.

[25] *Derekh Emunah* (Constantinople, 1522; rep., Westmead, Eng., 1970), p. 99r, and ed. Chava Fraenkel-Goldschmidt (Jerusalem, 1978), pp. 296–98.

[26] *Magen Va-Ḥerev,* ed. Shlomo Simonsohn (Jerusalem, 1960), pp. 22–24.

[27] *Kur Maẓref Ha-Emunot U-Mar'eh Ha-'Emet,* ed. Isaac Altaris (Metz, 1847), p. 18v.

[28] *Guide* 1.73.10.

and possibility of evil, defect, or lack of dignity."[29] Kaspi's point is as follows: Creation and resurrection are doctrines that enhance our concept of God, and, therefore, are believable; incarnation is a doctrine that diminishes our concept of God, and, therefore, is to be rejected.

Abraham Bibago offers a similar argument. He reports having been asked by a Christian scholar in the presence of King Don Juan II of Aragon why Jews reject incarnation, which admittedly is a rationally impossible belief, if at the same time, they accept creation, which Aristotle had demonstrated also to be impossible. Either one should reject everything of which reason disapproves, or one should accept all religious doctrines, no matter how seemingly irrational they are. Bibago responds first by denying that Aristotle had demonstrated that creation is impossible. Basing himself on Maimonides, Bibago asserts that creation is rationally possible. Bibago then continues: "If we were to believe the first impossibility [incarnation], we would be ascribing a defect to the divine nature, but [a belief in] the second impossibility [creation] ascribes a perfection to the divine nature. If we were to say that God, may He be blessed, was acted upon, became incarnate, was murdered and died, this is an imperfection in divinity." Bibago, therefore, rejects incarnation.[30]

This basic argument can be reduced to two syllogisms. First: (A) God cannot do the logically impossible; (B) God's making Himself imperfect is logically impossible; therefore (C) God cannot make Himself imperfect. The major premise, God cannot do the logically impossible, is a generally accepted principle that has already been discussed, the argument remaining, of course, as to what is logically impossible. The minor premise, "God's making himself imperfect is logically impossible," follows from another widely held proposition, namely "God is *necessarily* perfect." The conclusion, "God cannot make Himself imperfect," follows clearly from the premises.

The second syllogism is this: (A) God cannot make Himself imperfect (the conclusion of the first syllogism); (B) Incarnation, for God, is an imperfection; therefore, (C) God cannot become incarnate.

The conclusion, "God cannot become incarnate," follows logically from its premises. Assuming the premises are all true, one who believes that God did become incarnate would be accepting a logically impossible doctrine. Thus, the Jewish polemicists argued, incarnation is not a natural impossibility but a logical one.

As can be seen immediately, the weak point in this argument is the minor premise of the second syllogism, i.e., "Incarnation, for God, is an imperfection." That God should become man was considered by Jewish polemicists to be an imperfection. To Christian thinkers, however, God's willingness to become man shows His greatness, and, therefore, incarnation enhances the

[29] *Maskiyot Kesef,* ed. Shlomo Z. Werbluner, *Sheloshah Qadmone Mefarshe Ha-Moreh* (Jerusalem, 1961), p. 126.

[30] *Derekh Emunah,* p. 99r, ed. Frankel-Goldschmidt, pp. 296–98.

concept of God.[31] It would seem, then, that for Jews to argue that Christianity is logically impossible on the basis, for instance, that divine incarnation is an imperfection, is for them to beg the question.

Undoubtedly, Jewish philosophical polemicists were aware of this point. In fact, when they drew the distinction between what was fitting and what was not, the polemicists seem to have posited this distinction not as a real criterion for judging possibility, but only as an *ad hoc* reply to the accusation that they were not being consistent. As Bibago stated, the question of propriety was not the only basis for accepting creation. The other reason Jews allowed *creatio ex nihilo* consisted in the intellect's not judging this doctrine to be logically impossible, in addition to its being taught by revelation. We must look further, then, to see if the polemicists developed this theory of possibility in a philosophically acceptable manner.

III

Let us return to Joseph Albo. As we have seen when approaching the question of reason and faith, Albo distinguishes between essential impossibilities *(nimnaᶜot qayyamot be-ᶜaẓmam)* and natural impossibilities *(ha-nimnaᶜot eẓel ha-ṭevaᶜ bilvad)*. As he turns to the actual polemic against Christianity in 3.25 of the *ᶜIqqarim,* Albo repeats this distinction. Specifically he says: "Anything that is the subject of belief must be conceivable by the mind, though it may be impossible as far as nature is concerned."[32] Natural impossibilities, such as the dividing of the Red Sea or the turning of the rod into a serpent, can be conceived by the mind and can be believed. However, "a thing which the mind cannot conceive, for example that a thing should be and not be at the same time, or that one and the same number should be both odd and even, and so on, cannot be the subject of belief, and God cannot be conceived able to create another like Him in every respect, or to make a square whose diagonal is equal to its side, or to make now what has happened not to have happened. For since the mind cannot conceive it, God cannot do it, as it is essentially impossible."[33]

We, therefore, have the following theory of possibility as it relates to the verification of theological propositions. If a religious doctrine is of the type of the splitting of the Red Sea, then reason allows it to be believed. If it is of the type of the square's side and diagonal being equal, reason does not permit it to be believed. For a Jewish polemicist to follow through on this argumentation against Christianity, he must be able to demonstrate that

[31] Cf., e.g., Augustine, *Sermo XIII de Tempore,* PL 39:1997–2001; Anselm of Canterbury, *Cur deus homo,* PL 158:359–432, trans. Joseph M. Colleran, *Why God Became Man* (Albany, 1969); Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* 3.1.

[32] *ᶜIqqarim,* 3, p. 220.

[33] Ibid., pp. 220–21. For a more detailed examination of Joseph Albo's theory of verification, see this author's forthcoming article (Hebrew) in *Daᶜat.*

essential Christian beliefs are of the diagonal/side-of-the-square variety and not of the Red-Sea-splitting variety.[34]

A careful examination of the Jewish philosophical polemics, especially from the late Middle Ages, shows that this is exactly the tactic used by the anti-Christian authors. They took a number of major Christian doctrines, notably the Trinity, the Incarnation, transubstantiation, and the Virgin Birth, and subjected them to a rigorous philosophical analysis. They contended that such an examination demonstrated the logical impossibility, rather than the natural impossibility, of the Christian tenets. For instance, the Christian belief in a triune God was held to contradict God's unity and incorporeality, both of which were considered by Jews and Christians to have been demonstrated by logical proofs. Likewise, divine incarnation subverts God's absolute unity, incorporeality, and immutability. Furthermore, the polemicists argued, transubstantiation requires one to believe that substance can become accident and accident can become substance, that one body can be in more than one place at one time, and that bodies are interpenetrable. As for the Christian doctrine of virgin birth *in partu,* the Jewish polemicists argued that this belief necessitates a suspension of the logical principle that two bodies cannot occupy the same space at the same time. In all these cases, the Jewish polemicists repeated argument upon argument to show that the Christian doctrines are based upon logical impossibilities. In addition, these writers asserted that Christianity is self-contradictory, and, therefore, illogical, in the sense that it maintains mutually incompatible statements, e.g. "God is one" and "God is a Trinity."[35]

The Averroistic Jewish polemicists did maintain, then, that Judaism is, in a sense, rationally superior to Christianity. Despite the claim that Averroism undermines all religion, these thinkers argued that philosophy actually supports Judaism in its debate with Christianity. The question arises, however, as to how successful the Averroistic Jewish polemicists were in their attempt to brand Christianity as irrational, in the sense that reason rejects its cardinal doctrines.

Without entering the specifics of the Jewish arguments, one might nevertheless note the following three facts. First of all, the Christians were aware of these criticisms, and they, in turn, generally insisted that their beliefs were dependent upon only natural impossibilities. Thus, the Christian thinkers

[34] It would seem that Jewish polemicists should also show that Jewish beliefs are based only on natural, not logical, impossibilities. This, however, is not a pressing issue, since Christians admitted the truth of the miracles in the Hebrew Bible. See below.

[35] The arguments mentioned here are considered at length in this author's *Jewish Philosophical Polemics Against Christianity in the Middle Ages* (New York, 1977). I show there that the Christians were aware of the logical problematics of their doctrines and that many Jewish arguments are already found in internal Christian works. The Jewish attempt to undermine Christianity with philosophy is not restricted to the period in question, but it attains its keenest expression in works that show Averroistic influence. The fact that philosophy is used so extensively to defend Judaism at this time, as Netanyahu himself recognizes (*Marranos,* p. 108, n. 639), may argue against the role of Averroism in the mass conversions. See below.

went to great lengths to demonstrate that reason does not reject their doctrines even if, as Averroism maintains, reason could not prove them.[36] To be truly effective, the Jewish writers would have had to consider this philosophical defense of Christianity. An examination of the polemical literature shows that this aspect of Christian apologetics was generally ignored.[37]

Second, even Jewish beliefs were open to the charge of essential impossibility. If one accepted the Aristotelian position as outlined in Maimonides's *Guide* 1.73.10, one would have to admit that any miracle, i.e. any deviation from nature, is essentially impossible since the laws of nature consist of necessary propositions.[38] Thus, there would be no difference between the Red Sea's splitting and the diagonal's and side's being the same length. Both, for the strict Aristotelian, are equally impossible. Now, if a Jewish thinker wishes to believe that the splitting of the Red Sea is possible, he must show that the laws of nature are not necessary and immutable, and, therefore, that they do not have the status of strictly logical propositions. This, indeed, was the standard position of most medieval Jewish philosophers. Yet most of the attempts to prove the possibility of miracles were not based upon a philosophical demonstration that natural impossibilities are any more possible than logical impossibilities. Rather, they revolved around the recourse to reliable tradition and the nature of the prophet who recorded the event. As mentioned before, this can become quite circular. On the other hand, it should be remembered that Christians did not dispute the existence of miracles, especially those recorded in the Hebrew Bible. Hence, there was no need for Jewish polemicists to prove the possibility of these miracles. Nevertheless, the fact that Jews did believe in the suspension of natural impossibilities and that strict Aristotelians did not recognize the distinction between natural and logical impossibilities opened them up to the charge that they were inconsistent.[39]

A third factor that weakened the Jewish Averroistic argumentation is the decidedly *ad hominem* and *ad hoc* flavor of it. The principle of verification derived from this theory of possibility was not created in a theological vacuum. It appeared as a result of the practical religious questions of the day

[36] Not all Christians believed that their doctrines were compatible with reason. Tertullian, for instance, said: "Prorsus credibile est, quia ineptum est," it is believed because it is senseless, and "certum est, quia impossibile est," it is certain because it is impossible (*De carne Christi* 5). Medieval Christian philosophers, of whom the noticeable representative is Thomas Aquinas, generally did argue that their beliefs are not logically impossible. See, for instance, his statements in *Summa contra gentiles* 1.7 (Rome, 1934), pp. 6–7.

[37] Only a few Jewish polemicists, e.g. Profiat Duran (late 14th century) and Judah Aryeh de Modena, give evidence of close familiarity with Christian sources. The lack of Jewish discussion of the philosophical defense of Christian doctrines may be attributable to the more popular nature of polemical literature. For a more thorough discussion, see Lasker, *Jewish Philosophical Polemics,* pp. 161–65.

[38] On the laws of nature as logically necessary propositions, cf. Lenn E. Goodman, "Did Al-Ghazâlî Deny Causality," *Studia Islamica* 47 (1978), 83–120.

[39] Cf. Bibago, *Derekh Emunah,* p. 99r; ed. Fraenkel-Goldschmidt, pp. 296–98.

that have already been mentioned. In fact, a number of Jewish authors maintained contradictory positions in their separate philosophical and polemical works.[40] Thus, it would be too much to expect a completely objective philosophical theory of possibility that was not influenced by polemical considerations.

Despite the philosophical weaknesses of their debating position, Jewish Averroists demonstrated that one could be both an Averroistic philosopher and a loyal Jew. The polemicists arrayed an impressive lineup of philosophical arguments against Christian doctrines, while at the same time defending the rational possibility of such Jewish beliefs as creation, revelation, and resurrection. As Averroists, they knew they could not demonstrate rationally the truth of Judaism. They did, however, maintain that they could demonstrate the falseness of Christianity. Conversely, they asserted that Christians could not demonstrate the falseness of Judaism. Thereby, they established a principle which, though subject to criticism, allowed them to be Averroists at the same time as they proclaimed that reason could determine the superiority of one religion over another. That principle is: Reason cannot prove a religion, but it can disprove one.

In light of this analysis of Jewish Averroistic polemics, we might look again at the claim that Averroism undermined Jewish resistance to conversionary attempts. It is clear that Averroism as preached and practiced by the Jewish polemicists gives no indication that it might lead to apostasy. On the other hand, as we have shown, the Averroistic defense of Judaism had several serious flaws. A philosophically trained potential convert might very well have rejected the Jewish argumentation and concluded that neither religion was rationally superior. If the Jewish philosophical defense was not irrefutable, he might have decided that he should take the easier path of conversion. In a sense, then, the Jewish reliance on Averroistic philosophy for its critique of Christian doctrines may have been counterproductive.

This conclusion assumes, however, that philosophy and reason were major motivating forces in the lives of medieval people. So far, there has been no research as to the effect of the Jewish or Christian polemical literature on the religious choices made by the people of this period. Whether such an investigation is even theoretically possible is highly doubtful. It would seem, then, that the actual influence of Averroism on the course of Jewish history in Spain must be left a matter of conjecture.

BEN-GURION UNIVERSITY OF THE NEGEV

[40] The best example is Hasdai Crescas (1340–1410); cf., Lasker, *Jewish Philosophical Polemics*, pp. 69–78, 87–89, 165–67.