The period of Judeo-Islamic philosophy is usually characterized as a *con-vivencia*, a symbiotic ecumenical relationship, which bound Muslims, Jews, and Christians into a fellowship of students and scholars of philosophy. The topics raised by Greek science and philosophy in its Arabic transmission were those discussed across tradition-specific lines. Philosophers of differing faiths read one another, sometimes even studied with one another, and addressed common issues in their writings even as they often differed on how to interpret those issues.

The Islamic context for the study of science and philosophy was not, however, quite as sanguine as modern scholars portray it to have been. Philosophy, which encouraged critical thinking, was often seen by authoritarian Muslim powers with a very suspicious eye. As Joel Kraemer has put it:3

For Islam, as for Judaism, the religious law is paramount, a comprehensive guide to life in all its aspects. Study of the Qor’an, tradition (*hadith*), theology (*kalam*), and jurisprudence (*fiqh*) dominated Muslim intellectual life. The ‘ulama’ (clerics) regarded “the ancient sciences” as alien and useless, as an insidious threat to religious faith. Taqi al-Din ibn Taymiyya (d. 1328), exemplifying this attitude, says that only science inherited from the prophet [Muhammad] deserves to be called science; the rest is either useless or not science at all.


2 The wish to see medieval Islam as a “golden age” of ecumenical, friendly, universal scholarly interchange is part of the “orientalist” mentality which has been exposed in recent years. Among Jewish scholars, it was also part of the assimilationist prejudice.

Ibn Rush (Averroes) (d. 1198), a philosopher and jurist [qadi], justified philosophy as a religious obligation, but his opinion had no effect on the career of philosophy in Islam, which was emphatically rejected by religious authorities. Even the Tunisian historian Ibn Khaldun (d. 1406) felt the need to refute philosophy.

The medieval Islamic world had no universities as did Europe, where philosophy was taught alongside theology. Muslim rulers sponsored scientific research, which was institutionalized in libraries, hospitals, and observatories. Philosophers taught privately or to circles that met in their homes or in other venues such as bookstores.

The following narrative by al-Saʿid al-Andalusi concerning the confiscation of his father’s library was typical of the attitude of many Islamic authorities throughout the Islamic world:

Those libraries held the previously mentioned collections of famous books as well as others; he [the chamberlain, Abu ʿAmir] showed these books to his entourage of theologians and ordered them to take from them all those dealing with the ancient science of logic, astronomy, and other fields, saving only the books on medicine and mathematics. The books that dealt with language, grammar, poetry, history, medicine, tradition, hadith, and other similar sciences that were permitted in Andalus were preserved. And he ordered that all the rest be destroyed. Only a very few were saved; the rest were either burned or thrown in the wells of the palace and covered with dirt and rocks. Abu ʿAmir performed this act to gain the support of the common people of al-Andalus and to discredit the doctrine of the Caliph al-Hakam. To justify this deed, he proclaimed that these sciences were not known to their ancestors and were loathed by their past leaders. Everyone who read them was suspected of heresy and of not being in conformity with Islamic laws. All who were active in the study of philosophy reduced their activities and kept, as secret, whatever they had pertaining to these sciences.

Muhammad ibn Masarra, Ibn Hazm, and even Al-Ghazzali also had bans pronounced against them, or had their books burned, or had an interdiction against studying their books proclaimed. Although some Islamic leaders were more tolerant of philosophy than others, in general the life of the philosopher in the Islamic lands was not easy.

Drawing on this background of the persecution of science and philosophy in the Islamic world, Strauss and those who followed him developed a two-faced image of Maimonides: the “exoteric” Maimonides who wrote...