In the many studies of the influence of Maimonides’ *Guide of the Perplexed* on Christian theology and biblical exegesis, ethics has received little focused attention. The present essay seeks to open up the field, first reviewing the distinctive accommodations between Greek ethics, Islamic thought and Jewish tradition advanced by Maimonides, and then re-examining the Christian reception of the *Guide* in the light of those of its ethical teachings that were adapted by influential scholastics.

Maimonides’ approach to ethics reflected a Jewish and Islamic discourse which differed substantially from the main Christian Scholastic approaches to virtue ethics. Nevertheless, “Rabbi Moyses,” as the author of the *Guide* came to be known in Scholastic circles, offered a number of strategies for relating biblical revelation, law and natural ethics which were used in a series of thirteenth- and fourteenth-century scholastic works. That a Jewish source of ethical philosophy was acknowledged even as the Inquisition was censoring and burning his books may too easily be passed over. The *Guide* was introduced amid heated scholastic debates over the extent to which ethical philosophy was a universalistic enterprise. If glowing references to Rabbi Moyses were increasingly coloured by hints at the ethical heights to which an individual might freely raise him- or herself, the pace of its adoption also reflected the swiftly developing debate over the place occupied by morality and ethics in contemporary Christian teaching about Jews and Judaism.

*Maimonides: Biographical Background*

Moshe ben Maimon (1135–1204) was the son of the chief religious judge (dayan) in the Jewish community in Cordoba, in Muslim Spain.¹

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¹ For introductory discussions of his life and work, see *A Maimonides Reader*, ed.
Like many other Jews and Muslims, his family fled soon after the Almohad invasion of 1148, Jews being forced to choose between conversion to Islam, flight or death. Moshe’s education encompassed the broad range of religious and secular subjects studied in Spanish Jewish communities at the time, and continued during difficult times while the family continued to move from country to country. They settled in the Almohad capital, Fez, around 1160. Some commentators have argued that he must have converted to Islam in order to remain there. We know, at least, that here he wrote a tract arguing that an enforced nominal conversion was not prohibited, though flight was preferable. Maimonides’ education also equipped him to engage with a range of heterodox Islamic communities, bolstered by Spanish immigres, which thrived in Fez at the time.

After briefly moving to Acre in 1165, the family very soon left for Fatimid Egypt, settling in Fustat (Old Cairo). Here, Maimonides made his name, as a scholar and authority in matters of Jewish law, and as physician to the Vizier of Salah al-Din from 1185, after the fall of the Fatimids. The practical demands of Jewish life in the Islamic world motivated much of Maimonides’ philosophical output, largely aimed at an intellectual elite struggling to maintain their religious faith in competition with the trend towards philosophical naturalism, with the attractions of conversion to Islam, and with the ongoing struggle with the Karaite opponents of rabbinic tradition.

**Ethics in the Works Written by Maimonides Prior to the Guide**

The *Guide of the Perplexed*, written in the 1190s, was the last of a series of major works through which Maimonides reshaped Jewish philosophy, each of which discussed different dimensions of the role of ethics in Jewish faith and practice.

The conflicting teachings of the series of works written before the *Guide*, unavailable to most scholastics, have fed an ongoing debate over the nature of Maimonides’ approach to ethics in the *Guide* itself. While some scholars have suggested the differences are largely explained

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