ANTI-MAIMONIDEAN DEMONS

José Faur
Netanya College

To the blessed memory of R. Hayyim ha-Arukh of Segovia, and my maternal grandfather, Jacob Arukh Joli

It is a generally accepted truism that in his endeavor to explain Judaism “philosophically,” Maimonides “established principles which did not by any means bear a Jewish stamp on them, nor were they in consonance with the Bible, and still less with the Talmud.” It is reasonable therefore to argue that those, “whose learning was entirely confined to the Talmud” would oppose him. To support this assessment, it was pointed out that some Maimonidean doctrines, such as those regarding “miracles,” “prophecy,” “immortality,” and particularly the status of the non-legal elements of the Talmud (haggadah), were “in the eyes, not only of the strict Talmudists, but also of more educated men, a heretical attack upon Judaism, which they believed it was their duty to energetically repel.” To further substantiate this view, scholars point out to the high level of assimilation, heresy, and apostasy befalling Iberian Jewry. “There were many, it would seem, in Spain, who found in Maimonidean philosophy convenient support for their extreme liberalism,” remarked a celebrated historian. “These men accepted only a faith of reason and rejected popular beliefs. They put rational understanding ahead of the observance of the commandments.” In addition, they “denied the value of talmudic aggadot.” The cause, it is freely assumed, lies in the “philosophical” and “rationalistic” trends generated by the “Maimonideans,” “Averroism” in particular. In conscious opposition, the anti-Maimonideans are depicted as saintly men of superlative scholarship and impeccable

behavior, motivated by altruistic ideals alone. Even when disagreeing with this or that particular act of some anti-Maimonidean, historians concur in the excellence of these men. In fact, the anti-Maimonideans are credited with stopping the tide of assimilation and standing in the frontline against “philosophy” and other “rationalistic” pursuits that, as it is well known, lead to religious laxity and apostasy.3

The purpose of this paper is to question this truism. In the ancient communities of Syria, Egypt, and Yemen, and throughout North Africa, where Maimonides’ works and intellectual tradition reigned supreme, none of the above took place. Why? For reasons having to do more with ideology than scholarship, historians failed to take into consideration the connection between the triumph of the anti-Maimonideans, the rise of Qabbala,6 and the decay of Jewish learning and leadership, leading to mass conversions and culminating in the Expulsion of 1492. It may not be superfluous to point out that mass apostasy to Christianity took place after not before the ban against Maimonides. Nobody cared to notice that apostates of the like of Petrus Alfonsi (twelfth century), Nicholas Donin (thirteenth century) and Pablo Christiani (d. 1274) were all product of the anti-Maimonidean type of schooling.7 Elsewhere I proposed that rather than stopping assimilation, the anti-Maimonidean movement (1180-

---


6 The present analysis does not apply to the doctrines authoritatively taught by the celebrated mystic ha-Ari. Rather, it pertains to the mystical doctrines developed after and as a consequence of Jewish massacres committed by the Crusades (eleventh-thirteenth centuries). For some insights into the psychological consequences of these tragic events and the theological and ideological developments, see Lippman Bodoff, “Jewish Mysticism: Medieval Roots and Validation; Contemporary Dangers and Problems,” in The Edah Journal 3:1, Fall 2002. See also idem, “The Real Test of the Akedah,” in Judaism 42 (1993), pp. 71-92.

7 Contrary to John Tolan, Petrus Alfonsi and his Medieval Readers (Gainesville, 1993), Petrus Alfonsi was born in Northern Spain and was not “Andalusian.” He knew neither Hebrew nor Arabic well and his knowledge of Bible and Talmud was extremely shallow.