

**Thanks to certain great figures, Muslims, Jews and Christians formed at certain times an exceptional cultural and intellectual community based upon the same language and the same texts and aware of difference. Three examples of a fecund exchange.**

# Those Walls Knocked down by Medieval Islam\*

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IN THE MEDIEVAL, late medieval and pre-modern world of Islam, Muslims, Jews and Christians constituted a unique cultural and intellectual commonality. They shared a language, Arabic, which they spoke in daily life and which they also used for their theological, philosophical, legal and scientific writings. Moreover, they often read the same books, so that a continuous, multi-dimensional exchange of ideas, texts, and forms of discourse was the norm rather than the exception.

While this has been amply demonstrated, especially for the 9th through 12th centuries CE, scholars usually opt for a one-dimensional approach with an (often exclusive) focus on either Muslim, Jewish or Christian authors and their writings. In all three fields and for a variety of reasons, the scholarly investigation of the so-called rational sciences (theology, legal methodology, philosophy and related disciplines) beyond denominational borders is still in the beginning phase. The approach I am arguing for aims at crossing the boundaries between three major disciplines of academia and research, viz. Islamic Studies, Jewish Studies and the study of Eastern Christianity.

Such an approach also serves a wider purpose: in a world in which borders – national, religious, cultural and economic –

increasingly gain significance, academic research can and should demonstrate that intellectual developments characteristically disregard any such borders and that symbiosis – which is often inaptly idealized in anachronistic terms such as tolerance or pluralism – was often the norm rather than the exception. This held true particularly in one of today's hottest conflict areas, the Middle East. I am arguing that an open mind in research, a willingness to widen the scope of scholarly investigation and to share its results with a wider audience can significantly contribute to shaping a less biased and more refined public opinion.

I shall discuss three case studies in order to demonstrate that this intellectual whirlpool effect touched Muslims, Christians and Jews alike. It would be incorrect to say that since they were the dominant community, it was exclusively the Muslims who were at the giving end while the Christian and Jewish minorities were only ever at the receiving end. The three cases I have chosen rather represent three different patterns.

Case One represents a familiar pattern, namely that of a convert who polemicizes against his former religion, possibly with the aim of convincing his Muslim patron of the genuineness of his conversion. A Nestorian

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Christian convert to Islam by the name of Abû al-Hasan 'Alî Ibn Sahl Rabbân al-Tabarî (d. 865), an accomplished scholar of medicine, composed after his conversion to Islam two refutations of his former religion. A first, brief text is a straightforward refutation of Christianity. The second one, entitled *The Book of Religion and Empire* which he dedicated to the reigning Caliph al-Mutawakkil, contains an extensive discussion of passages taken from virtually all books of the Bible (Old and New Testament alike) that according to the author predict the mission of the Prophet Muhammad, although his former co-religionists regarded the same passages as testimonies to Jesus. Being primarily addressed to a Christian readership, it seems to have taken two centuries for the book to come to the attention of Muslim readers. From then on, however, it became very popular among Muslim authors who employed the Biblical testimonies contained in the book in their polemics against both Christianity and Judaism.

Case Two completely breaks away from the familiar pattern. 'Izz al-Dawla Ibn Kammûna was born into a Jewish family of 13th century Baghdad and received a thorough education in both Jewish and Islamic letters. Little is known about his life but it is evident that he held a high-ranking position in the administration of the Ilkhânid empire, although there is no indication that he ever converted to Islam. As was the case with many Muslim scholars of his time, he enjoyed the patronage of the Minister of State, Shams al-Dîn al-Juwaynî (d. 1284) and his family, to whom he dedicated most of his works. He also corresponded with the most important intellectuals of his time.


#### CROSSING INTELLECTUAL BOUNDARIES

Ibn Kammûna's philosophical writings and particularly his commentary on the *Kitâb al-Talwîhât* by the 12th century founder of a new type of Islamic philosophy, Shihâb al-Dîn al-Suhrawardî, as well as his independent works in this discipline significantly shaped the development of Islamic philosophy in the Eastern lands of Islam over the following

centuries. Ibn Kammûna's commentary on Suhrawardî's *Talwîhât* – the first commentary ever written on this work – immediately became very popular and was extensively quoted in the philosophical works of his Muslim contemporaries and of the following generations. Hundreds of copies of Ibn Kammûna's philosophical writings were produced still during his lifetime and over the decades and centuries following his death. The majority of Muslim scholars and scribes were aware that he was Jewish and refer to him as '*al-Yahûdî*' or '*al-Isrâ'îlî*.' Others do not mention his Jewishness at all, which suggests that it was a matter of no concern for them. Compared with the widespread reception of his philosophical *œuvre* among Muslims, the Jewish reception of his writings is meager.

Case Three concerns the outstanding Jewish scholar David ben Joshua Maimonides (b. ca. 1135, d. 1215), the last head of the Jewish community of Egypt from the descendants of Moses Maimonides. In contrast to Ibn Kammûna, his professional life was within the confines of the Jewish community(ies) and his works (all written in Arabic, but in Hebrew characters) circulated exclusively among Jewish readers. Born in Egypt, David succeeded his father Joshua Maimonides as *nagîd* or Head of the Community following the latter's death in 1165. For reasons that remain unclear, he left his homeland to take up residence in Syria for a decade during the 1170s and 1180s. He resumed his office as head of the community after his return to Egypt and retained it until his death.

Apart from being a prolific author himself, David is well known as a book collector and an accomplished scribe, and numerous autograph copies of works by earlier Jewish and Muslim authors in a variety of disciplines have survived. It was particularly during his time in Aleppo that David assembled an impressive library containing numerous copies of works that he had either commissioned or copied himself. These testify to his scholarly abilities and his erudition in both the Jewish and Muslim literary traditions. He wrote a commentary on Maimonides' *Mishneh Torah*, an influential code of Jewish law, as well as numerous works in the fields of ethics, philosophy, logic as well as a comprehensive handbook of Sufi mysticism. These works testify to David's deep immersion into a variety of Muslim rational sciences. In philosophy, he was not only familiar with the peripatetic thought of Avicenna, but was also

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acquainted with numerous writings of the founder of Illuminationist philosophy, Shihâb al-Dîn al-Suhrawardî, and he may have possessed a copy of Ibn Kammûna's commentary on Suhrawardî's *K. al-Talwihât*. David was likewise familiar with the writings of the renowned Muslim thinker Abû Hâmid al-Ghazâlî (d. 1111) and of the latter's student Fakhr al-Dîn al-Râzî. In addition, he quotes extensively from the earlier Muslim literature on mysticism, and was evidently well-versed in the Muslim astronomical tradition.

Although none of the works of David ben Joshua ever reached a wider Muslim readership as was the case with the writings of his co-religionist Ibn Kammûna, he did reach out on a more personal level. During his time in Syria, David befriended with the Muslim scholar 'Alî Ibn Taybughâ al-Halabî al-Hanafî al-Muwaqqit (d. 1391?), author of a commentary on Maimonides' *Mishneh Torah*. It took modern scholars quite some time to accept that a Muslim scholar had commented on a text by Maimonides that was originally composed in Hebrew. It is now clear that 'Alî Ibn Taybughâ got interested in the *Mishneh Torah* due to the influence of David whose Arabic translation of the *Mishneh* and his commentary on the work he used. The extant manuscripts of David's translation and commentary and of 'Alî Ibn Taybughâ's commentary on Maimonides' *Mishneh Torah* thus provide evidence for a fruitful and stimulating exchange between two distinguished scholars of the 15th century, a Jew and a Muslim, on a text of primarily Jewish interest.

These three cases may suffice to demonstrate that there were no fixed patterns of crossing intellectual boundaries in the medieval, late medieval and pre-modern world of Islam and that the exchange of ideas and texts was more variegated and far more frequent than is often assumed. This – theoretically – widely accepted historical reality calls in my view for radically breaking away from the established one-dimensional

academic pattern replacing it with a multi-dimensional interdisciplinarity, not only beyond established disciplinary boundaries but also beyond political ones.

The scholarly attention or rather non-attention that had been paid until recently to the cases of Ibn Kammûna, David ben Joshua and 'Alî Ibn Taybughâ and the evident difficulties of scholarship to come to terms with a Jewish thinker who significantly shaped the course of Islamic philosophy or with a Muslim intellectual who commented on Maimonides' *Mishneh Torah* shows the extent to which even modern scholars are restricted in their thought to real or imagined religious boundaries.

An enhanced awareness of the constant intertwinedness of the various 'worlds' under consideration would also lead scholars to new, so far unexplored materials and perspectives. For example, much of the literary legacy of the theological movement of the Mu'tazila, one of the most significant strands within rational Islamic theology between the 8th through 11th century, has been lost in the Islamic world. However, due to the Jewish reception of its doctrines, Jewish repositories possess comprehensive holdings of Jewish copies of many of those lost Muslim texts, sometimes in Arabic script, at times transcribed into Hebrew characters. Exploring these materials (in many ways this still needs to be done) opens entirely new perspectives for students of Islamic studies.

Most proponents of religious boundaries, be they Muslims, Jews or Christians, claim the past as their prime witness to justify their own boundary drawing. It is the responsibility of scholarship to show the other side of the coin and thus to help form a different, less biased and more open-minded public opinion.

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**Greater awareness of the constant intertwining of various worlds would lead modern scholars to consider unexplored material and adopt new perspectives** »»