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# PHILOSOPHY AND RELIGION IN R. CRESCAS'S *LIGHT OF THE LORD*

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It is a common opinion that a religious philosopher who holds a more traditional view of religion<sup>1</sup> adopts their view for religious reasons and builds their philosophy with the aim of preserving their traditional religious beliefs.<sup>2</sup> This commonly held view, once accepted, helps to build

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<sup>1</sup> For example, that God can change his will and perform miracles, or that after death, humans who fulfilled their religious obligations will go to the Paradise.

<sup>2</sup> A good example of this common view is the relation between philosophy and religion in the thought of Leo Strauss. Despite Strauss's sympathy for religious philosophers, he nevertheless argued that there exists an unbridgeable abyss between philosophy and religion. For more depth on Strauss's take on the tension between religion and philosophy, see his *Persecution and the Art of Writing* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988). On Strauss's position on religion, see L. Batnitzky, "Leo Strauss and the 'Theological-Political Predicament,'" in *The Cambridge Companion to Leo Strauss* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 41-62. On Strauss's interpretation of Maimonides, see K. Hart Green, "Introduction," (ed.), *Leo Strauss on Maimonides: The Complete Writings*, ed. K. Hart Green (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013), 1-87. Regarding the interpretation of Strauss on Maimonides, I'm nearer to the position of J. A. Bernstein, *Leo Strauss on the Border of Judaism, Philosophy, and History* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2015); but see also K. Hart Green, *Jew and Philosopher: The Return to Maimonides in the Jewish Thought of Leo Strauss* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1993). On the subject of the relation of Strauss to Judaism in general, see H. Fradkin, "A Word Fitly Spoken: The interpretation of

the stereotype that there is an inherent contradiction between philosophy and religion—i.e. the more one wishes to be a philosopher, the less one is religious. This trend is very popular both among traditionalist religious philosophers as well as among atheist philosophers.<sup>3</sup> According to this opinion, there are methods and ideas that are religious (e.g. the willingness to glean ideas from revelation, belief in the existence of a personal omnipotent and omniscient divinity, supernatural miracles, etc.), and there are methods and ideas that are philosophical (e.g. the method of questioning everything and the naturalist view of the world). The adherents of this opinion tend to read it back into the history of philosophy and see in all the major medieval philosophers different ways to be more or less “religious” or “philosophical,” each according to their distance from or proximity to traditional religious views. In other words, to the degree that a given medieval author adopted the traditionalist approach, he is described as more religious and less philosophical, while another thinker who goes against this traditionalist opinion is considered more philosophical and less religious.<sup>4</sup> This historical argument is important for both the traditionalist and the atheist because it affords both

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Maimonides and the Legacy of Leo Strauss” as well as K. Seeskin, “Maimonides’ Conception of Philosophy,” in *Leo Strauss and Judaism: Jerusalem and Athens Critically Revisited*, ed. D. Novak (Boston: Rowan and Littlefield, 1996), 55-86 and 87-110. For a critique of Strauss’s interpretation of Maimonides, see M. Kellner, “Strauss’s Maimonides,” *Iyyun* 50 (2001): 397-406, and S. Sadik, “Disciples of Aristotle and the Prophets: The Religious Passion of the Radical Jewish Philosophers and Its Political Implications,” *JUDAICA* 74 (2018): 243-262.

<sup>3</sup> On the functional alliance between religious conservatives and modern atheists, see my [Hebrew article on the Academia website](#). In this article I argue that the alliance between these two groups, which claim that true religious philosophy cannot exist, served to suppress the development of religious philosophy starting from the 17<sup>th</sup> century up until the last quarter of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. However, since then there has been somewhat of a revival of religious philosophy due to factors relating to a developing crisis surrounding the atheistic opinion, and a general increased sophistication of thought in orthodox religious circles across all the major religions.

<sup>4</sup> Another good example of this historical opinion is Rachel Haliva, *Isaac Polqar: A Jewish Philosopher or a Philosopher and a Jew? A Study of the Relationship between Philosophy and Religion in Isaac Polqar’s ‘Ezer ha-Dat [in Support of the Law] and Teshuvat Apikoros [A Response to the Heretic]* (Hamburg: DeGruyter, 2020).

a historical basis for denigrating any philosophical interpretation of religion, even in our days. They both agree that, historically, philosophy and religion have always been in opposition.

According to this opinion, the critique of Maimonides<sup>5</sup> by R. Crescas, and indeed all the philosophical opinions of R. Crescas, are a critique of a more philosophical opinion (i.e., that of Maimonides) by a more religious thinker who merely uses his philosophical knowledge for the sake of his religious (traditionalist) aims. In this article, I will argue against this very common opinion. In my view, the differences between Maimonides and R. Crescas are essentially philosophical, and their differing religious opinions are just the upshot of their different philosophical views. To prove this, I will summarize some of the more important differences between the opinions of Maimonides and R. Crescas before arguing that they both think that religious texts and beliefs have to be interpreted according to philosophy, and that even the obligation to practice Judaism's commandments has to be proven philosophically.

However, before launching into this investigation, I shall first provide a brief definition of philosophy and religion that will lay the basis for the rest of the article. Let it be noted that formulating proper definitions of two such fundamental concepts warrants an entire article unto itself, if not an entire book, which is obviously impractical here. Nevertheless, it is still important to have a working definition for the purpose of this essay.

**What is philosophy?** The essence of philosophy is to free man from his learned assumptions by espousing a willingness to analyze them, to understand their foundation and validity, and to determine when they accord with reality. Every person, as a social creature, has been educated in a particular society and absorbs beliefs and opinions from early

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<sup>5</sup> There are a lot of different interpretations of Maimonides. I hold a naturalist view of Maimonides and his philosophy that is more like the medieval commentators R. Josef ibn Kaspi and R. Moses from Narbon. My exposition of Maimonides's position in this article will be according to this specific interpretation. Unfortunately, there isn't room for me to lay out the arguments in favor of this interpretation of Maimonides. On this subject see S. Sadik, "The Secret of the Multiple Secrets of Maimonides' *Guide of the Perplexed*," *AJS Review* (forthcoming), and S. Sadik, *Maimonides: A Radical Religious Philosopher* (Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias Press, forthcoming).

childhood; he becomes accustomed to doing certain acts and seeing certain social behaviors, learning which ones are to be considered normative and which abnormal. Philosophy requires a person to question these beliefs (and the acts associated with them) and put them to the test. Rationalist approaches to philosophy appeal to reason and experience to free a person from their prejudices. By contrast, more skeptical approaches use various strategies to cast doubt on humanity's ability to attain certainty. Despite the different answers they give to basic questions, what every philosopher has in common is the willingness to doubt everything and not take anything for granted, to demand proof or evidence for every position and every social convention. By this definition, philosophy will always be subversive, since the philosopher casts doubt on the beliefs and mores that form the basis of society.

**What is religion?** As a working definition, I submit that religion is the combination of obligatory acts, moral exhortations, prohibitions, texts, and stories that are considered sacred by a specific group. The sacred texts and stories tend to imply a common set of beliefs whose very maintenance may also be considered a religious obligation. Even so, these beliefs can only be shared by a religious community as they are expressed in language, and verbal formulations of seminal beliefs lack well-defined ideational content. However, in my view, religious identity tends to be more determined by shared language and practice than by agreement on some shared ideational content.<sup>6</sup>

If philosophy is essentially a desire to discover the foundations of everything via critical thinking, and religion is a collection of deeds and holy writings, then there is no inherent contradiction between them. A contradiction only exists when religious thinkers demand the acceptance

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<sup>6</sup> This generalization is true even regarding Christianity, though only if one takes Christianity as one religion, rather than as a set of related religions. However, some might argue that Catholicism is a distinct religion, and as such, the only religion that has developed, with some degree of success, a mechanism that oversees the opinions of its believers and leaders. Indeed, the controversy surrounding the pope's authority is the central controversy that separates the other Christian sects from the Catholics.

of certain specific religious beliefs and deeds as dogmas that cannot be challenged or criticized at all.<sup>7</sup>

In the first part of the article, I will summarize the opinion of R. Crescas on some classic philosophical subjects (God's attributes, free will, and more), while in the second part of the article I will summarize the opinion of R. Crescas on the question of the obligation to keep the Jewish commandments.

## The Philosophical Way of R. Hasdai Crescas

The writings of R. Hasdai Crescas reflect a specific path of religious philosophy. R. Crescas had a keen scientific mind and is considered a central figure in the rejection of Aristotelian physics, with this rejection eventually paving the way for the advent of modern science.<sup>8</sup> For example, R. Crescas replaces the definition of "infinite" as something without any borders with a more nuanced definition as something that lacks borders in some dimensions, but may have borders in other dimensions.<sup>9</sup> We can imagine this kind of infinite by imagining a rectangle

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<sup>7</sup> In an article from 2018 I argue that this position is common to both religious conservatives and atheists. Religious conservatives provide atheists with the inflexible definition of religion that atheists can reject, and vice-versa with conservative atheists' definition of philosophy being inherently anti-religious, leading religious conservatives to reject philosophy.

<sup>8</sup> *Light of the Lord*, I:I-II, 30-97. On R. Crescas's critique of Aristotelian science and Crescas's handling of Arabic (in Hebrew translation) and Christian sources, see H. A. Wolfson, *Crescas' Critique of Aristotle* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1929); Z. Harvey, *Physics and Metaphysics in Hasdai Crescas* (Amsterdam: J. C. Gieben, 1998); H. Maccoby, "Crescas's Concept of Time," in *Time and Eternity: The Medieval Discourse*, ed. G. Jarit and G. Moren-Riano (Turnhout: Brepols), 163–170; T. Levy, "L'infini selon Rabbi Hasdai Crescas (1340–1412)," in *Inquisition et pérennité*, ed. D. Banon (Paris: Cerf, 1992), 161–166; S. Sadik, "Crescas' Critique of Aristotle and the Lost Book by Abner of Burgos," *Tarbiz*, 77 (2008): 133–155 [Hebrew]; N. L. Rabinovitch, "Rabbi Hasdai Crescas (1340–1410) on Numerical Infinities," *Isis*, 61 (1970): 224–230; A. Ackerman, "Hasdai Crescas and Scholastic Philosophers on the Possible Existence of Multiple Simultaneous Worlds," *Aleph: Historical Studies in Science & Judaism* 17 (2017): 139–154.

<sup>9</sup> On this subject see, N. L. Rabinovitch, "Rabbi Hasdai Crescas (1340–1410) on Numerical Infinities"; T. Levy, "L'infini selon Rabbi Hasdai Crescas (1340–1412)."

with one side extending infinitely and all other sides finite, as a regular rectangle. This difference in mathematical definition has important philosophical and religious impact, because some Maimonidean proofs for the existence and the uniqueness of God are dependent on the Aristotelian definition of "infinite."

For R. Crescas, the dismantling of Aristotelian physics removed the basis of some central metaphysical opinions of Maimonides. On the ruins of Aristotelian (and Maimonidean) science, R. Crescas built a new philosophical view that maintained that what we can demonstrate God's existence<sup>10</sup> but not his uniqueness.<sup>11</sup> The only way to know God's uniqueness is to learn it from its revelation in the Bible. The next question has to be why R. Crescas asserted that God can reveal certain truths that humans cannot attain through their philosophical inquiry. Maimonides, I maintain, rejected this position.<sup>12</sup> One then wonders if this does not constitute proof that R. Crescas abandoned his philosophical investigations at some point and simply based his position on the plain (or traditional) interpretation of the Bible. I don't think so, because R. Crescas gives a metaphysical explanation for his opinion. Thus, we see that his more traditional understanding of divinity is part and parcel of his philosophical inquiry.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> *Light of the Lord* I.III.2, 100-101.

<sup>11</sup> *Light of the Lord* I.III.4, 114-115. R. Crescas thought that it is possible to prove that in this world there is only one God, and even if other worlds exist, our God governs them as well. However, in his opinion, it is impossible to disprove the existence of god-like beings, though if they exist, they do not govern any worlds.

<sup>12</sup> As per my esoteric, naturalist understanding of the *Guide*. On the topic of prophecy in the thought of Maimonides, see H. T. Kreisel, *Prophecy: The History of an Idea in Medieval Jewish Philosophy* (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Press, 2001), 148-315. In the plain sense of the *Guide*, Maimonides also adopted the opinion that prophecy can give us an understanding that we could not reach by philosophical investigation alone (for example *Guide of the Perplexed* II:25). The main question on this subject is related to the creation of the world. On this, see D. Lemler, *Création du monde et arts d'écrire dans la philosophie juive médiévale (Xe-XVe siècles)*, Thèse de doctorat de Philosophie, école doctorale de Ecole Pratique des Hautes études, 2015.

<sup>13</sup> In my opinion a good argument in favor of the naturalistic interpretation of Maimonides is that he does not mention a philosophical explanation for his more traditionalist

Crescas constructed a different metaphysics that philosophically explains changes in divine will.<sup>14</sup> The basis of his novel metaphysical opinion is the distinction he draws between attributes that merely describe the essence of quiddity (תואר עצם) and attributes that are actually essential to quiddity (תואר עצמי). The essence is the definition of a being or object. (An example from modern science would be to define the sun as gas that is in a constant state of nuclear fusion.) Those attributes that are actually essential are those that come from the essence but are not identical with the essence. (For example, light does not define the sun, but it is an essential attribute of the sun.) R. Crescas then applies this distinction regarding attributes to develop his theology: he explains that while we cannot define God's essence (for the same reasons given by Maimonides<sup>15</sup>), we can understand the attributes that are essential to God. These attributes, it should be noted, do not define God's essence, but only present those attributes that necessarily arise from the divine essence. From this differentiation, we can see that there is a difference between God's essence and his will, the latter being an essential attribute. For these reasons, these attributes—including even God's will—can change without changing the divine essence, which stays perfect and immutable.<sup>16</sup> Thus, a careful reading of R. Crescas shows that his belief that there can be changes in God's will is not a consequence of an *a priori* dogmatic acceptance of the plain sense of the Bible. Rather, Crescas's belief in the

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pronouncements (e.g. regarding miracles in *Guide* II:29). By contrast, his argument implies a naturalist opinion (God does not change). This is actually one of the main arguments of the naturalist interpreters of Maimonides that justify the reading of his traditionalist passages as esoteric, with the exoteric part there only for pedagogical reasons.

<sup>14</sup> *Light of the Lord* I.III, 97-119.

<sup>15</sup> For example, that the essence of God cannot have different parts that are the bases of all definitions of the divine essence, and that God is the most basic ontological being while all other beings are defined by more basic, ontological beings. Even the categorization of God as a being is not completely accurate.

<sup>16</sup> On R. Crescas's theory of divine attributes, see H.A. Wolfson, "Crescas on the Problem of Divine Attributes," *Jewish Quarterly Review* 7 (1916): 1-44, 175-121; S. Sadik, "The Influence of Abner of Burgos on Rabbi Hasdai Crescas: The Question of Divine Attributes," In *Rabbi Hasdai Crescas: Leader and Philosopher*, ed. Zalman Schazar (E. Eisenmann), 180-195.



mutability of the divine will is a specific and unavoidable ramification of his general metaphysical investigation into the nature of the attributes of all beings.

This novel metaphysical stance affords R. Crescas the possibility of maintaining traditional definitions of prophecy,<sup>17</sup> providence,<sup>18</sup> and miracles. His opinion on God's attributes and prophecy allows him to argue that God can reveal to humans certain truths that humans cannot attain via their own intellectual capacity. However, this opinion derives not only from a religious belief in the Bible, but also from a more skeptical view of philosophy than that of Maimonides, and specifically from a different metaphysical opinion on attributes, with the Bible merely affirming the conclusions of a purely philosophical investigation.

Crescas, in one very important case, draws a philosophical conclusion that differs from the plain understanding of the Bible and of the sages to a greater extent than even Maimonides.<sup>19</sup> His deterministic opinion in this case<sup>20</sup> sets him apart from nearly every other Jewish philosopher.<sup>21</sup> Its philosophical basis is causal determinism, which he adopted after reading the arguments of thinkers such as Abner of Burgos and Averroes. Consequently, R. Crescas interpreted all biblical stories—as well as all

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<sup>17</sup> On R. Crescas's opinion on prophecy, see H. T. Kreisel, *Prophecy: The History of an Idea in Medieval Jewish Philosophy*.

<sup>18</sup> On R. Crescas's opinion regarding providence, see C. Touati, "La providence divine chez Hasday Crescas," *Daat*, 10 (1971): 15–31; A. Ackerman, "The Composition of the Section on Divine Providence in Hasdai Crescas' *Or Ha-Shem*," *Daat* 33 (2003): xxxvii–xlv.

<sup>19</sup> On the opinion of Maimonides on this question, see S. Sadik, "Maimonides' Mechanism of Choice," *AJS Review* 38 (2014): טז-יח. [Hebrew].

<sup>20</sup> *Light of the Lord* I.V, 189–205.

<sup>21</sup> On the opinion of R. Crescas on this question, see I. Epstein, "Das Problem des göttlichen Willens in der Schöpfung nach Maimonides, Gersonides und Crescas," *Monatsschrift für Geschichte und Wissenschaft des Judentums* 75 (1931): 335–347; S. Feldmann "Crescas' Theological Determinism," *Daat* 9 (1982): 3–28; Z. Harvey, "Comments on the Expression 'Feeling of Compulsion' in Rabbi Hasdai Crescas," *Jerusalem Studies in Jewish Thought* 4 (1985): 275–280; A. Ravitzky, "Crescas' Theory of Human Will: Development and Sources," *Tarbiz* 51 (1982): 445–470 [Hebrew].

beliefs, such as reward and punishment, providence, and the afterlife—according to this deterministic position. He was completely aware that the simple meaning of the Bible and other traditional Jewish sources were at odds with his philosophical determinism. In cases of conflict between philosophy and the literal meaning of the Bible, his way of interpretation was very similar to Maimonides,<sup>22</sup> who used the same premise that determinism is a secret of the Torah that was concealed by the prophets and sages for pedagogical reasons. This is the only topic regarding which R. Crescas believed that the Torah holds secrets concealed from the masses and known only by the intellectual elite.<sup>22</sup>

We can conclude this part of the article by noting our estimation that R. Crescas held, regarding most of the subjects covered, a more traditional opinion than Maimonides. However, this traditional opinion, while completely in line with dogmatic religious belief, nevertheless stems from two different philosophical bases: (1) a more skeptical view of philosophy that assigns a limited range of thought where philosophy provides a clear and decisive proof for any given opinion,<sup>23</sup> and (2) a metaphysical opinion that allows for the mutability of God's will.

## **The Reason for Observing the Jewish Commandments**

Another topic that traditional Jewish thinkers take for granted is the need for practicing the ritual commandments. According to them, at least some of the commandments have no philosophical reason behind them. In the next part of the article, we will see that R. Crescas offers some

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<sup>22</sup> On the question of the secret of prayer, which is related to the deterministic opinion of R. Crescas, see A. Stav, "The Secrets of Rabbi Hasdai Crescas: The Meaning of 'Sod HaTefillah' and 'Sod HaBitachon' in the Work *Or Hashem*," *AJS Review* 42 (2018): 16-8.

<sup>23</sup> A skeptical view of philosophy is very popular among religious philosophers. A significant portion of the history of skepticism is, in fact, the history of philosophers who are skeptical about philosophy but truly believe in their religious faith. On the history of skepticism, see R. H. Popkin, *The History of Scepticism: From Savonarola to Bayle* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003). Here it is important to note that the skeptical view of R. Crescas is very moderate: he thinks that we can prove the existence of God and the need for practical commandments.

philosophical proofs in favor of practicing all of the commandments, even those that appear to be purely ritual in nature.

Before summarizing and comparing the various arguments of R. Crescas for the practicing of the Jewish commandments, we have to deal briefly with a methodological problem. One of the major impediments to understanding the philosophical argument in favor of religion lies in the fact that, in general, the writings of medieval philosophers tend to be abstruse. Not infrequently, they formulate their arguments in an indirect fashion that assumes that all of the basic premises are accepted as given. The reason that medieval thinkers did not see a need to delve into a fundamental defense of religion is that, as opposed to the situation in the modern world, in the Middle Ages, religion was not under attack or criticized as being anti-intellectual. Therefore, religious philosophers saw no need to convince anyone that the practice of religious commandments is needed to allow humans to fulfill their highest ethical and philosophical potential. For this reason, their arguments in favor of the practice of the Jewish commandments tend to be just explanations of the reasons for the commandments, with no explicit assertion that without practicing the commandments humans cannot reach their natural purpose in life.

Indeed, even today, religious philosophers tend to take religion as such for granted, only seeing it as obligatory for fellow believers, rather than taking a more ideological stand that religious practice is good for all people. For this reason, their arguments in favor of religion tend to be part of their explanation of the essence of religion, without answering the question of why humanity at large needs it. The fact that R. Crescas and Maimonides put forth some philosophical arguments that try to convince the reader that humans cannot live a good life without the keeping of the Jewish commandments shows their common background as well as their different religious and philosophical opinions.

The major difference between Maimonides's explanations of the commandments and the more traditional explanations described above is that Maimonides used sociological and historical explanations. These kinds of explanations allowed Maimonides to explain commandments

that previously had not been given rational explanations.<sup>24</sup> For example, Maimonides was able to explain that the religious prohibition of shaving off all one's hair derived from the need to be sociologically distinct from the idolators, who regularly employed this kind of haircut. Another well-known example is the diverse commandments regarding sacrifices, which in Maimonides's view stemmed from the need to incorporate into Judaism the conventional way of serving divinities at the time of Moses.<sup>25</sup>

Crescas also employed Maimonides's ethical and political argument, including sociological and historical factors. In his opinion, the practical commandments of the Torah are ideal for establishing personal ethics, improving the rights between the members of households, and perfecting relations among the inhabitants of a city or community. Some of the explanations are, as with Maimonides, also related to the historical situation of the children of Israel in biblical times. However, R. Crescas adds to this Maimonidean style of explanation another kind of argument that differs significantly from the position of Maimonides, and as such represents one of the main areas in which R. Crescas offers a thorough philosophical critique of the Aristotelian basis of Maimonides's position. To wit, in the continuation of II:6:1, while still discussing the Torah's concluding verses, R. Crescas lays out a very thorough critique of the philosophical opinion that knowledge can give eternal life.<sup>26</sup> Following this critique, he develops his opinion on the nature of the soul,<sup>27</sup> which he

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<sup>24</sup> On this subject in Maimonides and the philosophers before him, there is quite a vast amount of academic literature. See S. Sadik, *Natural Law and the Law of the Torah in Medieval Jewish Philosophy*, forthcoming. For Maimonides's explanations of the commandments see *Guide for the Perplexed* III:25-49.

<sup>25</sup> *Guide for the Perplexed* III:32.

<sup>26</sup> *Light of the Lord* II.VI.1, 210-214. On this critique, see Z. Harvey, "Hasdai Crescas's Critique of the Theory of the Acquired Intellect," PhD diss. (Columbia University, 1973).

<sup>27</sup> *Light of the Lord* II.VI, 215-225.

defines as "[A] substance that is spiritual, that is disposed to intellection, yet that does not intellect in actuality in itself."<sup>28</sup>

In the pages that follow, R. Crescas develops this definition of the human soul, explaining that the soul exists as a substance even after death. In addition, intellection is not the prime function of the soul, but rather the assertion of the will (רצון). The main perfection of human will is to love, while the perfection of love depends on the perfection of that which is the object of the love. Because God is the most perfect object of love, the perfection of the human soul can only be attained via love of God.<sup>29</sup>

Crescas also maintains that love of God has to exist with no other end other than itself:

Now that this has been established regarding this love [of God], I assert that it is necessary that it have no other end outside itself. For if it had another end, that end would be more loved, and therefore this love, which was posited as being the strongest one conceivable, would not be strong in the way described.<sup>30</sup>

In the next chapter,<sup>31</sup> R. Crescas explains why the Torah is the best way to attain true love of God. R. Crescas opens here with a rhetorical question: had the Torah only commanded us to pray once a week, would it not be the case that more people would love God than when there are so many difficult commandments to fulfill? Implicit in the question is R. Crescas's belief that the only way to truly love God is to practice the divine commandments. In his answer to this question, we can understand why:

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<sup>28</sup> This and all further English quotations from the text of *Light of the Lord* are from Roslyn Weiss's translation (Oxford University Press, 2018). This passage is found on page 215. Original Hebrew:

עצם רוחני מוכן אל ההשכלה ובלתי משכיל בפועל (אור השם עמ' רלט)

<sup>29</sup> *Light of the Lord* II.VI, 215-225.

<sup>30</sup> *Light of the Lord* II.VI.1, 224. Original Hebrew:

ואחר שהתבאר זה מענין זאת האהבה, אומר, שהוא מחויב שלא תהיה לתכלית אחר חוץ ממנה. וזה, שאם הייתה לתכלית אחר, היה התכלית ההוא יותר אהוב, ולזה, האהבה שהונחה היותר חזקה שאפשר שיצויר – בלתי חזקה בתואר ההוא. (אור השם עמ' רנ)

<sup>31</sup> *Light of the Lord* II.VI.2, 226-235.

“Since the nature of service requires steadfastness in attachment to God, and a connection that is not severed, the Torah was therefore clever with a wondrous cleverness, in the proliferation of its commandments, in setting principles of faith.”<sup>32</sup>

We see in both this and the previous passage that the true love of God requires persistence and dedication. Indeed, love of God must permeate the devotee’s entire life. For this reason, having many commandments that obligate the believer to direct his passion towards God provides the best possibility of attaining love of God and hence perfection of the soul.<sup>33</sup>

Crescas sets forth in these passages yet another argument for the necessity of practicing the commandments: the nature of the human soul. According to R. Crescas, we can understand the necessity of the commandments, which allow us to love God in a true and perfect way, from an analysis of the human soul. This love, he explains, is itself the core aim of the commandments, even if there are other, ancillary reasons such as personal happiness, society’s rectification, and sublime happiness in the afterlife. R. Crescas explains that all these latter reasons for the commandments are actually secondary benefits of the perfection of love of God.

This argument regarding the soul’s need for religion has a similarity with some existentialist arguments for God’s existence: without God’s existence, humans cannot attain any happiness in their lives. The main part of the argument, however, is more empirical: to perceive in the human soul the necessity for both God’s existence and his

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<sup>32</sup> *Light of the Lord* II.VI.2, 226. Original Hebrew:

ואולם להיות טבע העבודה תחייב התמדה בדבקות, ושלא יותר הקשר בעבור זה התחכמה התורה התחכמות-פלא, ברבוי מצוותיה, ובשרשי האמונה (אור השם עמ' רנג)

<sup>33</sup> R. Crescas mentions the case of Abraham (*Light of the Lord* II.II.6, 160). Abraham achieved a sufficient degree of love for God via only one obligation, but this success was possible only because of the perfection of Abraham. For regular humans, more commandments are needed to fill their life with love of God.

commandments.<sup>34</sup> Probably one of the main obstacles to convincing modern philosophers with this argument would be their different definition of the soul, especially in the case of those who maintain a materialist definition of the brain that cancels all possibility of immortality. It is simply not feasible in the context of this article to argue for R. Crescas's definition of the soul in modern terms, nor do I consider myself qualified to present such an argument. However, Crescas's original argument for justifying the practice of the commandments is important for understanding the relation of philosophy and religion in his thought.

Crescas's conclusion that humans can attain paradise only through love of God, and that to properly love God we need religious commandments, stems not only from his interpretation of the Bible, but from a deep philosophical critique of Aristotelian thought and an objective analysis of the human soul. Some readers may ask how I can be so sure that R. Crescas did not simply hold this position because of the influence of his religious tradition, and only in an *ad hoc, a posteriori* fashion came to argue against the philosophical opinion of Maimonides.

The answer is that, given his deterministic opinion, we can see that if R. Crescas had reached a philosophical conclusion that opposed the traditional viewpoint, he would be able to abandon the plain meaning of the Bible and of other traditional texts such as the Talmud, and to adopt an alternative opinion that it is opposed to the traditional view. This shows that for R. Crescas, as for Maimonides, the first authority is philosophy, which is to say that only when philosophy allows him, he maintains a traditional religious opinion.<sup>35</sup> With this last statement I am not arguing that R. Crescas (or Maimonides) is more philosopher than

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<sup>34</sup> Despite being based on the human soul, this argument is very different from all of the ontological arguments. These arguments are based more on the definition of God by humans, with no empirical definition of the human soul.

<sup>35</sup> This is also the opinion of another important Jewish traditional philosopher, R. Yehuda Halevi. On the relation between philosophy and religion in his thought, see D. Lasker, "Judah Halevi as a Philosopher: Some Preliminary Comments," in *Judeo-Arabic Culture in al-Andalus*, ed. Amir Ashur (Cordoba, 2013), 99-109.

religious adherent (as per the modern opinion that religion and philosophy are always in opposition to one another). Rather, what I mean is that they both see philosophy as the main tool for attaining truths about the essence and definition of religious terms like God, providence, and prophecy. The main difference is that Maimonides<sup>36</sup> saw philosophy as the only tool for determining metaphysical opinions, while R. Crescas was of the opinion that scripture can help us to attain truths that philosophy cannot, though with the crucial proviso that these religious or even prophetic truths not be contradictory to truths attained via philosophical inquiry. Indeed, even this opinion of R. Crescas was derived from a purely philosophical inquiry, and not from a perspective on the relation of philosophy and religion that fundamentally differs from that of Maimonides. Thus, the only difference between them is that R. Crescas believed—for philosophical reasons—that there are some truths that cannot be attained via philosophy, but only via divine revelation.

## Conclusion

We can now see how the philosophical path of R. Crescas could be attractive to the modern religious philosopher. Moreover, R. Crescas's knowledge of natural science was quite extensive, and this aided him in developing his important and novel ideas about such concepts as matter, space, and infinity, which he incorporated into his unique brand of religious philosophy. Along with this scientific bent, R. Crescas remained relatively skeptical concerning the possibility of acquiring metaphysical knowledge via philosophical inquiry, and as a rule he held traditional opinions on religious subjects like revelation, miracles, and providence.<sup>37</sup> Yet as much as he valued religious texts for metaphysics, whenever he felt that he had a clear philosophical proof for any religious subject, R. Crescas was ready to interpret all religious opinions according to philosophy. His interweaving of science, philosophy, relative skepticism, traditional

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<sup>36</sup> Again, according to my naturalist understanding of the esoteric meaning of his writings.

<sup>37</sup> Both of these trends in his thought, it is important to note, are popular in modern religious philosophy.



religious interpretation, causal determinism, and, perhaps foremost, intellectual honesty can be a source of inspiration for modern religious philosophers.

Crescas was without doubt one of the key philosophers in the disruption of the notion that philosophy and religion cannot live in harmony. In his major philosophical work, *Light of the Lord*, R. Crescas demonstrated that an intelligent person can be an objective scientist, a true philosopher, and deeply religious, all at the same time. R. Crescas's analysis and exemplification of what it means to be a religious philosopher, and the profundity of such a position, represent a timely message for current thinkers. Therefore, it is my sincere hope that *Light of the Lord*, now available to the English-reading public thanks to the brilliant translation of Prof. Roslyn Weiss, can provide a new stimulus for religious Jewish philosophy.<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> In this article, I have spoken almost entirely in terms of religious philosophy and not of Jewish philosophy. In my opinion, Jewish philosophy does not have any specific character apart from the fact that certain religious philosophers are identified by themselves or by others as Jewish. On this question, see the introduction and the conclusion of S. Sadik, *The Essence of Choice in Medieval Jewish Philosophy* (Jerusalem: Magnes Press and Van Leer, 2017) [Hebrew].