

CHAPTER VI

THE WAY OF RATIONAL RELIGION

THE third and concluding book of the *Guide* grapples with the fundamental issues of religion: evil, purpose and providence, the divine commandments and the perfect life; and it opens with an interpretation of the vision of deity contained in the first chapter of Ezekiel which has always both attracted and puzzled religious minds. According to an ancient tradition the divine "chariot" described in it contains a definite cosmology, and Maimonides exerted all his skill and ingenuity (though, as he says repeatedly, his conclusions are only tentative) in order to determine what that cosmology was. Unfortunately, through his fear of revealing it to the unworthy, he himself used such cautious language that all the skill and ingenuity of the commentators have had to be exerted in order to discover exactly what he meant in his turn; and it should be added that if he had meant only what the commentators say he did, it is difficult to understand why he expressed himself so cautiously.

Yet the passage is important at least for the reason that it throws some light on the author and his outlook. He is not a rationalist in the narrow sense. He has interest in the heights of speculation and he is willing to try to penetrate into the upper air. At the same time he is diffident and is not ashamed to confess that his fallible understanding falls short of the higher mysteries. This is too the note of his approach to the problem he proceeds to deal with next, the problem of evil and design.

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The problem of evil has two aspects, the purely theoretical and the practical, and it is characteristic of Maimonides that he strays aside at once (as he notes himself, III, viii, 264) from the theoretical and deals first with certain matters of practical morals: the power of the passions, and the power of man to control them; good and bad in religious behaviour. Indeed,

even when he comes to the metaphysical problem, he says little that is novel: evil for him is negation, a type of non-existence; it is relative, and nothing absolute or positive in itself. His treatment freshens up however as soon as he touches on the issue of pessimism. A well-known Arab physician of the tenth century, Al Razi ("Rhases"), had written a philosophical work in the course of which he had counted up the unpleasant things in the world one by one and come to the conclusion that they outweigh the good: hence on balance the world is evil, and it were better for it and us never to have been created.

Against this statistical pessimism Maimonides lashes out vigorously. Its source, he says, is a narrow parochialism: as if what happens to ourselves, or this, that and the other man we may happen to know, or for that matter even to the whole human race, is of decisive importance in the vastness of things. Our misery may preponderate over our happiness, but we are not the centre of the universe, neither you and I as individuals, nor the whole human race as such. The universe must be considered as one whole of interrelated parts and its purpose is not our puny selves.

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We often ask what this purpose really is, but the question is in Maimonides' view absurd. As we saw before in dealing with the anthropomorphic terms of the Bible, we cannot erect our so-called knowledge (it is really ignorance) into a universal yard-stick with which to measure reality. God has his own nature and his own objects and his own purposes, and "hath made everything for its own end" (Proverbs xvi, 4). It may be, remarks Maimonides (*Guide* III, xii, 274), that the proper rendering of the verse is: "God hath made everything for his own purpose" (so R.V. margin); but it comes to the same thing. The search for an end for the universe as a whole in terms of human experience is as ridiculous as it is useless. In any case, that end is certainly not man.

We return then to Maimonides' vision of the world (above, p.50) as one interconnected system, each part of which is an

articulated portion of the whole and set within a permanent framework of co-ordinated activity. God does not change, and his will is a guarantee of regularity and permanence, however much that regularity and permanence may be self-imposed. God does not contradict himself or perform the impossible; that would be against his nature: his will is, as it were, concretized in law. Yet herein lies not weakness but strength (xv, 280). It is power revealing itself in self-limitation.

Thus the universe is what it is, and our standards are inadequate to the comprehension of its ultimate ends. We cannot take any single portion of it isolated from the rest and ask why it is what it is. Its "why" lies in its connections with all the other portions which all together make up the vast whole, and its meaning lies within the meaning of that whole—a meaning our restricted powers cannot grasp. Our error thus lies in our isolating one single thing (be it even so noble a creature as man) and treating it as a world in itself.

And just as each single thing is not isolated or isolable, so God does not manifest himself directly and immediately in each single thing independently: his interest is in the type or the species, and his providence is for the type alone. Only in man does his providence reach the individual, and that because in man as a rational creature lies the power of knowing God and thus being near to him individually. The more perfect his knowledge, the nearer he comes to God, for his perfection lies in his reason.

Thus the strands begin slowly to join together. The divine influence; the Intelligences; the Active Intellect; humanity at its highest in the prophet; the watching care of God; the searching mind of man—all are factors in a rational religion in which the self-perfecting of man through knowledge is one with the ascent of man to God and the descent of the divine influence to man.

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Yet that is religion "in *idea*." What of religion as a *fact*, religion as "organized" or "institutional"? What of its practical

demands on the individual, "worship and sacrifice," to quote William James (*Varieties of Religious Experience*, p. 29), "procedures for working on the dispositions of the deity, theology and ceremony and ecclesiastical organization"? We have seen that the teaching of the Bible on theoretical matters is not irreconcilable with modern thought, and have thus shown the admissibility of religion on the intellectual side. But what of the Bible's practical regulation of human life—its fasts and its feasts, its precepts and prohibitions, its commands, positive and negative, in their infinite number and subtleties and ramifications, the whole content in fact of Maimonides' own earlier writings? What has the philosophic *Guide* to say on the subject-matter of the historical learning of the *Commentary* and of the practical legislation of the *Code*? We enter into a discussion of institutional religion, or, according to the traditional name of this classic topic in Jewish religious philosophy, the "reasons for the commandments."

A curious passage in the Talmud referred to by Maimonides asks: "why were the reasons for the commandments not revealed?" and the answer is given: "because the reasons for two¹ of them were given and yet the greatest of men fell therein"—the reference being to the commandments (Deut. xvii, 16-17) that the king should not multiply horses to himself ("lest he cause the people to return to Egypt") nor multiply wives to himself ("that his heart turn not away"), commandments which Solomon himself, as recorded in Holy Writ (I Kings x, 28; xi; II Chron. i, 16; ix, 28), disobeyed to his hurt. As a matter of fact, the Pentateuch was not so reticent as would appear from this Rabbinic passage and gives "reasons for commandments" in at least one hundred and forty-five cases; and later Jewish thinkers, particularly Philo and the medieval philosophers, were not slow in following its lead.²

¹ So the usual text (T.B. *San.* 21b). Maimonides (III, xxvi, 311, and so too the *Book of Precepts*, last paragraph) says "three."

² On the analytical side cf. my "The Reasons for the Commandments" (Ahad Ha'am Lecture, 1936), included in the volume *In Memory of Ahad Ha'am, Lectures on the Philosophy of Judaism* (Hebrew), Jerusalem, 1937. On the historical side, see I. Heinemann, *The Reasons for the Commandments in Jewish Literature* (Hebrew), Jerusalem, 1942, which surveys the treatment of the question in the Jewish sources from Biblical times, through the Hellenistic and Talmudic periods, to the sixteenth century.

Maimonides, therefore, was not alone in his enquiry and differs from his predecessors not in the novelty of his aim but, as ever, in the systematic character of his approach.

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One may lay down one or two general principles (III, xxvi-xxix).

The first is that no explanation can be given, or should be asked, of the *detail* of an institution: "we cannot say why one offering should be a lamb, while another is a ram; and why a fixed number of them should be brought" (311). That is to say, as Aristotle had remarked long before (*Eth. Nic.* V, vii, §1, 1134b), we must distinguish between the "natural" and the "legal": "'natural' is that which everywhere has the same force and does not exist by people's thinking this or that; 'legal' is that which is originally indifferent, but when it has been laid down is not indifferent, e.g. that a prisoner's ransom shall be such and such a definite sum, or that a goat and two sheep shall be sacrificed." After all, if the regulation had been to sacrifice two sheep, one could have asked with equal justice: but why not a goat? An institution is in fact historical, not logical. It cannot be deduced in the abstract from first principles, and "reasons" can be given only for the "general purposes of the commandments" (312).

A similar consideration holds in the wider context. Religions as such are not isolated phenomena, each one rigorously self-contained. On the contrary, they are inter-related; one is often influenced by another. And so a religion may not seldom institute a definite practice not only in order to embody a positive idea of its own, but in order to warn its adherents against wrong ideas of others. And again religions are not of to-day or of yesterday. They are rooted in the past and retain rudimentary observances and ceremonies which may be foreign to their own fuller thinking; and such observances are retained, not however for their intrinsic significance, but because their removal would undermine the structure of the whole. In a word, although we seek a rational religion we must not blink our eyes to the fact that its practical embodiment will be in

concrete historical institutions which have grown slowly and in many cases "just happened."

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In our day we are accustomed to this point of view. It is that which has been developed and illustrated so richly in what has been called the "Covent Garden School" of cultural and social anthropology; and the classic work of Frazer, following closely on the pioneer labours of Robertson Smith, has given it its best known expression. Robertson Smith himself wrote (in the Preface to the *Religion of the Semites*) that

"the doctrines and ordinances of the Old Testament cannot be thoroughly comprehended until they are put into comparison with the religions of the nations akin to the Israelites";

and then goes on to say:

"The value of comparative studies for the study of the religion of the Bible was brought out very clearly, two hundred years ago, by one of the greatest of English theologians, Dr. John Spencer, Master of Corpus Christi College in Cambridge, whose Latin work on the ritual laws of the Hebrews may justly be said to have laid the foundations of the science of Comparative Religion, and in its special subject, in spite of certain defects that could hardly have been avoided at the time when it was composed, still remains by far the most important book on the religious antiquities of the Hebrews. But Spencer was so much before his time that his work was not followed up."

If one turns to Spencer's book itself one sees, as Prof. Guttman has pointed out¹, that it is in essence a detailed working out of these chapters of Maimonides in the *Guide*. Nor did Spencer conceal the debt. Apart from his constant references to the "great Maimonides" and his "golden book" he says specifically in his Introduction (Prolog. III, §4) that Maimonides was the only previous worker in this field, and that those who follow only gather his harvest.

¹ *Festskrift Simonsens* (København, 1923), pp. 258-276.

I mention this historical chain in order to make clear the general line of thought followed by Maimonides. The principle once established, the actual detail of Maimonides' own working of it out becomes relatively unimportant. What matter to us, for example, his references to the mysterious (and possibly mythical) Sabaeans and the apocryphal book on the Nabatean Agriculture, so long as we hold fast to the key that Pentateuchal enactments reflect negatively as well as positively (and the negative aspect is possibly more important than the positive) the Pentateuchal environment. Indeed, Maimonides himself does not insist on the accuracy of his own explanations in detail. It is their setting which is important:

“If we knew all the particulars of the Sabaeen worship and were informed of all the detail of those doctrines, we should clearly see the reason and wisdom of every detail in the sacrificial service, in the laws concerning things that are unclean, and in other laws the object of which I am unable to state.” (III, xlix, 380)

And again:

“What I remarked in reference to our ignorance of the Sabaeen worship, applies also to the history of those days. If the religious rules of the Sabaeans and the events of those days were known to us, we should be able to see plainly the reason for most of the things mentioned in the Pentateuch” (I, 382).

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Thus institutions grow and the actual shape they assume is a matter for the sociologist and historian. Institutional religion is therefore *intellectually admissible*. We may now go further and say that it is *not only* intellectually admissible but also *morally necessary*.

We need say nothing about that side of Biblical legislation (or the Bible narrative) which is plainly moral or patently directed to moral ends. But there is a good deal more in the Pentateuch than that, and the Talmud already (T.B. *Yoma*,

67b) distinguished between the "statutes" and "judgments" of Scripture (e.g. Lev. xviii, 4): "Judgments" are the universal moral laws which "if they had not been written down, would have had to be written down," i.e. laws the validity of which is not *merely* legal; "statutes" are the seemingly arbitrary points of ceremonial. But the "statutes" too, Maimonides finds, have a moral significance, be it only from the disciplinary aspect: they inculcate habits of life which generate sturdiness of character. And so we find, as we go through these chapters of Maimonides on the reasons for the commandments, one point standing out constantly, his insistence on their educational value. Be their purpose what it may—to wean a crooked generation from idolatry; to implant in them ways of moral and social living; to improve family and tribal relations and inter-relations—"it is not a vain thing for you, it is your *life*" (Deut. xxxii, 47); and as the Rabbinic comment, quoted by Maimonides twice (xxvi, 310; I, 384) would have it: "*if* it is vain, it is only so because of *you*." The Bible for Maimonides here too, as before in connection with its use of pictorial terms for the deity, is the great educator, impressing on the ordinary man the evil of his ways and setting before him a practical norm of individual and social life which would slowly train him and lift him up to higher things.

From this point of view there are many ingenious explanations and striking comments in these chapters of the *Guide* which will repay the attention of the reader. The rule to spend the "second tithe" on charity in Jerusalem "brought multitudes together in one place and strengthened the bond of love and brotherhood among them" (xxxix, 339), and such indeed was the general purpose of the country-wide pilgrimages on the occasion of the various festivals. The reciting of a certain portion of the Law when the first fruits are brought to the temple is meant to create humility (ib.). The taking of a murderer from the altar is enacted because mercy on such an individual is cruelty to society (xxxvii, 341). The killing of an animal that has killed a human being (Exod. xxi, 28, 29) is not a punishment to the animal but a fine imposed upon the owner, and it is for this reason that the flesh of the dead animal is prohibited as food (xl, 342). The breaking of the

neck of the heifer, and other ceremonies ordained in the case of "one found slain and it is not known who hath slain him" (Deut. xxi, 1-8) are calculated to make talk and thus lead to the discovery of the origin of the crime; and the fact that the land on which the heifer is killed is not allowed to be cultivated is a stimulus to the owner to find the murderer (343). It is indeed remarkable how keen the eye of Maimonides is for possible social effects of apparently irrational enactments. Many of them are referred to the "main purpose of the Law," the weaning away of the people from idolatry; and at least one whole large and important class, that of animal sacrifice, is calmly relegated by Maimonides (to the great scandal of his contemporaries, although he could quote good Rabbinic authority for the idea) to the sphere of the rudimentary: the people had become used to animal sacrifice and could not be broken away from it entirely; it was therefore not prohibited completely but restricted and brought under control. Thus the divine legislation in its care for mankind did not disdain to take account of human weakness. God could have changed the character of the Israelites by miracle, but that is not his way; if it had been, there would have been no point in human struggle and the Law would have been superfluous (xxxii, 325). Here, as always, God works *through* nature.

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Institutional religion has thus a definite purpose, the promotion of the moral and social well-being of mankind, and it pursues this educational end by the instilling, through precept and ceremony, of habits of right living. Yet (and here we have repeated in the *Guide* what constituted, implicitly in the *Commentary* and explicitly in the *Book of Precepts* and the *Code*, the great novelty of Maimonides' treatment of Jewish religious law as such) there is a whole class of commandments which are by nature *not institutional* at all, and these commandments are not incidental to the rest or of the same standing as them. They are in the full sense of the word primary. Institutional religion may be regarded summarily as caring for the well-being of the *body*; it trains us for the healthy

regulation of individual and social living. But while this is an essential condition of the perfect life, it is far from being its all. There is also the well-being of the *soul*.

We come to a decisive point. For Maimonides the well-being of the soul consists in "correct *thinking*" and is promoted by "correct *opinions*," and these alone are the source of "eternal life" (xxvii, 313).

We may thrust aside at once all cavil attaching to a possible absolute opposition between "thinking" and "doing." Maimonides demanded both from his perfect man. Nor should we be disturbed overmuch by the interpretation which Maimonides gives of what constitutes "correct" thinking. Maimonides was an Aristotelian and his doctrine of God is Aristotelian: God is for him not only the "unmoved mover"; he is also (I, lviii, 100) the unity of "intellectus," "intelligens" and "intelligibile," and for the very reasons advanced by Aristotle. But even granting another doctrine of God and other content to "correct thoughts" and opinions, it yet remains that he declared knowledge, sheer knowledge, to be the highest element in the religious life, and dismissed the ignorant and uninformed to the outer darkness. The true worship of God, he says (li, 385), is only possible if correct *notions* of him have been attained.

Nor is there any doubt left as to his meaning:

"My son, so long as you are engaged in studying the mathematical sciences and logic, you belong to those who go round about the palace in search of the gate. When you understand physics, you have entered the hall; and when, after completing the study of natural philosophy, you master metaphysics, you have entered the innermost court and are with the king in the same palace."

And just before:

"Those who have succeeded in finding a proof for everything that can be proved, who have a true knowledge of God so far as a true knowledge can be attained, and are near the truth wherever an approach to the truth is possible, they have reached the goal, and are in the palace in which the king lives."

This is the "intellectual worship of God" (387) to which the *Guide* calls, and it is in full accord with all that has gone before. "The intellect which emanates from God to us is the link that joins us to God, and it is in our power to strengthen that bond, or, if we prefer it, to weaken it gradually until it breaks" (386). But if we prefer to strengthen it—and therein lies the striving of religion—the bond becomes so fast as never to break at all and we pass over into immortality. This is the death "by the mouth,"¹ i.e., by the kiss, "of God," told of the greatest of the sons of man, and in principle it is open to all. As Maimonides quotes in conclusion: "thy righteousness shall go before thee; the glory of the Lord shall be thy rearward," and explains: "the knowledge of God is strengthened when death approaches; the intellect then remains constantly in that same condition, since the obstacle [i.e. the body] is removed that at times had intervened between the intellect and the object of its action, and it continues for ever in that great delight" (391).

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We should have expected the *Guide* to end here. Its message would seem to be complete. The very first chapter of its first book is a discussion of the word *Zelem* ("image") in which the Biblical revelation expressed the relationship between God and man ("in the image of God created He him"), and the word was declared to mean not the material shape but the incorporeal reason which is the divine element in man. This divine element is now re-united with its source. The individual has found his goal. In the vision of truth we have attained our true being; "in thy light shall we see light." And whether or no we retain the intimacies of selfhood,² we are at least freed from its restrictions.

And yet Maimonides goes on. He has spoken so far of man

¹ Deut. xxxiv, 5 in the Hebrew; for the "kiss" see *Song of Songs*, i, 2. The interpretation is Talmudic (T.B. *Baba Bathra*, 17a).

² On this and other specifically philosophical points I may be permitted to refer to my *Spinoza, Descartes and Maimonides* (Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1924).

and his strivings towards God. But God has his requirements of man. The man who has reached up to the thought of God should never forget that the earth is filled with His glory, and he will behave before the King of Kings with infinite reverence, that is, with piety, modesty, decency and, Maimonides adds characteristically (quoting Ecclesiastes v, 1), silence. This is the *fear* of God, the inculcation of which is the final purpose of the *institutions* of the Law; and it goes hand in hand with the *love* of God which is the final purpose of the *truths* of the Law. Thus ceremony and belief, institution and opinion, are the divine gift to man to help him to reach his perfection; and they are given him in the revelation from on high which is the Bible.

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This then is the real end of the whole discussion, not the philosophical theory of intellectual immortality. We are now at the last two chapters. The first of these (liii) examines the Biblical terms loving-kindness, judgment and righteousness, and shows that they connote moral attributes in man; when attributed to God, as they are in the Pentateuch, they are intended as attributes of his actions. The last chapter opens with a discussion of the word "hohmah" (wisdom) and shows that it includes within itself both moral and intellectual knowledge. The final conclusion now emerges. There are four kinds of "perfection" recognized by man—acquisitive, bodily, moral, and intellectual; and they correspond to the four objects which comprise human ends—property, health, moral virtue and intellectual wisdom. The first is completely extrinsic and accidental; the second, although "ours" in a sense, is relative; the third, being social, depends upon the existence of others and is thus not an intrinsic good; only the fourth is an intrinsic good and truly ours. Therein then lies the true perfection of man, in the possession of intellectual wisdom. This is the "knowledge of God" of the prophets, and Maimonides quotes the passage of Jeremiah which seems to foreshadow his own fourfold division of goods and declares which of them is real: "let not the [morally] wise man glory in his [moral]

wisdom; nor let the mighty man glory in his might; and let not the rich man glory in his riches; but let him that glorieth glory in this, that he *understandeth and knoweth me.*" The highest good for man thus lies in understanding and knowledge, and this it is that is declared by the prophets.

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It is true that Aristotle said the same thing. It is not irrelevant, however, to point out that Jeremiah lived before Aristotle. The message of the Bible is original, and it carries its own authority for the believer. Indeed, it gives the believer in simple language what the philosophers discovered only by dint of much labour. And so the *Guide* can end with a Hebrew couplet, added, it is said, by the hand of the Master himself to the Arabic original: "God is very near to everyone who calls if he calls in truth and turns to Him; He is found by everyone who enquires and seeks for Him if he walk straight and turn not aside."

Thus the culmination of the argument is, after all, only a return to its starting point. The perplexed have been given the key: all they have to do is to open the door. But there is nothing concealed behind the door that was not fully known already. There is only the old faith of the prophets which Biblical texts, theological apologetics, and the new scientific knowledge, would seem to have barred us from. But the texts can be explained and the theologians dismissed, while science is not irreconcilable. Indeed, the best science has reached the same conclusions as the highest teachings of religion. The "eyes of the blind can be opened" therefore and the "ears of the deaf unstopped."