

74. Reflections on Random Themes

IBN RUSHD (AVERROES) (1126 - 1198)



The world is divided into men who have wit and no religion, and men who have religion but no wit. – Averroes.

During my three years' stay in Algeria as a UNESCO emissary setting up the Physics Department at the École Polytechnique in El Harrach, I attended some lectures on the intellectual history of Islam while learning some Arabic. It was in this context that I came to know about Islamic scientists and philosophers of Medieval times.

When religions began – no matter which – it was all about God and worship, ethics and the hereafter, fasts and feasts, faith and the seers/prophets. Nobody thought of why one should believe in this or that scripture other than from complete trust in the personages who transmitted revealed knowledge about the Divine.

In the 8th century, many ancient writings of Greek philosophers came to the attention of some Muslim scholars who rendered them into Arabic. When keen minds in the Islamic world studied these, it was another revelation to them. Not unlike European investigators of the 16th and 17th centuries whose science was revolutionized by telescopes and microscopes the writings of Greek philosophers had a major impact on the approach of Islamic scholars to their religion. Aristotelian logic was a new-found toy, as it were, for many keen minds of that time.

Among the thinkers in the Islamic world of that era was the brilliant Persian mystic Al Ghazali (1056 – 1111) who insightfully warned, with due respect to Aristotle and syllogisms, that it would be disastrous to Islam if logic intruded into religion.

A little over a decade after Al Ghazali died was born in Moorish Spain Abu al Walid Muhammad ibn Rushd, known simply as Averroes in Europe. He became an eminent jurist, physician, philosopher. [I remember standing in front of the imposing statue of Averroes in Córdoba in the picture above and meditating on his writings.] He wrote eloquently on the importance of faith and reason. He argued that religion and philosophy (rationality) are equally important. This may be a simple idea for some, but it is beyond the grasp of millions of ardent believers even in the 21st century.

Averroes was one of the first in the second millennium to fully appreciate and value logic and rationality in religion. He seems to have had a sudden awakening from his immersion in Aristotle to the effect that reason has a light that is opaque to religious indoctrination. Once a book attains sacredness in a culture, *honi soit qui mal y pense* (shame on him who thinks ill of it). Averroes wrote impressive and insightful commentaries on the Master's work, and was often referred to as the *Commentator*. He argued that whatever truth can be achieved by the human mind, could be done only through logical thinking (Aristotelianism) and suggested that metaphysics was not the way to go. I describe him as the August Comte of his age.

Averroes realized the importance of religion (Islam). He was in favor of interpreting sacred writings, Qur'anic and Biblical, in rational terms. However, unlike other thinkers, both Christian and Muslim, he could not accept revealed writings (the scripture of his religion) literally. He was of the opinion that any interpretation of the Holy Qur'an must conform to the rules of logic. At the same time he warned that philosophers should not propagate their rationalistic views on religion to the common people. In other words, rationalistic thinking in the context of religion should be an ivory-tower enterprise, not unlike Pythagorean esoteric truths.

But Averroes granted that whenever the human mind encounters a Grand Mystery it must yield to faith and accept the sayings in the revealed book. Herein lay his originality. He recognized that faith has its place, but only in certain contexts. The alternatives were that if we accept revealed truths without respect for reason we will be led to absurdities; and if we rely on faith for temporal problems, we are not likely to get fruitful results. He did not state this in these explicit terms.

Averroes' works were translated from Arabic into Hebrew, thence into Latin. They inspired Thomas of Aquinas in laying his foundations for Christian theology. Whereas Averroes recognized that the marriage between logic and religious doctrines would be like a mixture of oil and water (the two will never mix homogeneously), the goal of Christian theology was/is to formulate and justify the doctrines of Christianity in logical terms. The enterprise has given rise to an impressive body of interesting reading and thinking material. But in the end, the Enlightenment writers of the 17th- and 18th centuries won in Western culture. Rationality began to tone down untenable doctrines as well as extremist religious behavior. This did not happen in the tradition of Averroes. The Islamic world persecuted Averroes, ignored his counsels, and burned his books. This may be why modern science did not emerge in that great civilization.

In any case, to Averroes is largely due many new insights in Islamic theology and the rise of Christian theology. Rich as these fields are they have not always served the cause of religion. Sometimes they have unwittingly taken away the luster from pure religious experience. Injecting logic and rationality in religion is like putting a spoonful of salt and pepper in milkshake. It takes away the refreshing sweetness and leaves a bad taste in the mouth. It is not unlike what happens when one analyzes the notes in Handel's *Messiah* or in a Thyagaraja *keerthanam*. It tends to rob the works of their musical majesty. The serenity in a

hymn or a chant is diluted when one parses its text and considers alternative formulations.

Matters of deep faith cannot stand dissection with the razor of reason. The feet on which faith stands are not supported by logical legs, but sustained through spiritual visions that transcend Euclidean QED.

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