

Twilight of the Islamic Golden Age: Averroes and Maimonides in Spain.

The period 800-1100 is often referred to as the Golden Age of Islamic philosophy, a time when multiple schools of thought, including humanistic rationalism, flourished in the Islamic world. The center of Islamic thought was in Central Asia, including Afghanistan. Thanks to the new technology of paper, in this relatively liberal environment ideas flowed freely throughout the Islamic world, including to Muslim Spain, called by the Muslims Al-Andalus. The culture in Al-Andalus was different from Central Asia, more Christians and Jews, fewer Zoroastrians and Buddhists, but the relatively tolerant spirit was the same.

In the 1100s, for whatever reason, the cultural climate throughout the Islamic world became much more fundamentalist, inclined to allowing only literal interpretation of Islamic scripture. The brilliant Muslim conservative Al-Ghazali was the intellectual leader of this movement, but it was so widespread that it is hard to believe any one person could cause such a major shift.

In Spain, the fundamentalist Almohad Caliphate conquered Al-Andalus around 1150. The Almohads were committed to aggressive persecution of Jews, Christians and liberal Muslims. Two outstanding humanists, the Muslim Ibn-Rushd (called Averroes by Christians) (1126-1198) and the Jew Maimonides (1138-1204) tried to devise ways to preserve the humanist spirit of the Golden Age in the increasingly repressive environment. Both were born in Cordoba, then the capital of Al-Andalus. Both came from established families with a tradition of education. They never met, primarily because Maimonides spent much of his young adulthood in hiding to escape the Almohad Jewish persecution. Interestingly, their arguments for rationalism were almost identical. They believed that God had created human reason and that it followed that God intended humans to use their reason to understand God's creation, that is, to understand everything. Both Averroes and Maimonides had a huge impact on later generations.



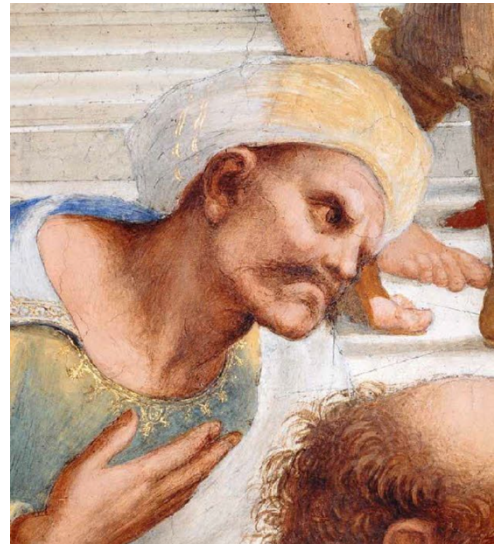
Spain in 1200 anti-

Averroes (Ibn-Rushd) (1126-1198)

A striking thing about Averroes' career is that although he was consistently liberal in a fundamentalist age, he was a favorite of two Almohad Caliphs. Indeed, he was appointed Qadi (judge) in 1169, at age 43. The famous story is that at the job interview the Caliph asked Averroes, who was working as the Caliph's personal physician, if the universe were eternal or created. ("Creationism" was hugely controversial at the time for the same reasons it is controversial in the US today.) Averroes, not sure what the Caliph wanted to hear, waffled. The Caliph exclaimed that Averroes' waffle reflected exactly the Caliph's uncertainty. He got the job. He often had problems with fundamentalists who plotted against him, but Averroes managed to stay mostly in the Caliph's, and his son and successor's, good graces for the next thirty years.

A huge controversy in Islam at this time was whether science, and Greek philosophy generally, were compatible with Islamic Law. Al-Ghazali, had stated that they weren't in his influential book *The Incoherence of the Philosophers* (1092). Averroes directly denounced Ghazali's views in *The Incoherence of the Incoherence* (1180).

Being a judge, Averroes was able to promote his views not only through philosophical argument but by binding legal decisions, called fatwas. In 1178 he did exactly that by promulgating the *Decisive Treatise, Determining the Connection between Law and Wisdom*. It was the equivalent of a Supreme Court decision in the modern US. It was amazing that the chief judge of such a conservative state as the Almohad Caliphate would deliver such an opinion. It certainly did not reflect the consensus of Islamic scholars. Averroes could get away with it only because of his personal relationship with the Caliph.



Averroes as painted by Raphael in 1511

Averroes believed that since scientific results are directly observed and can be independently verified by other scientists, they are information directly derived from God. Therefore if they conflict with someone's religious ideas, the religious ideas must be wrong, based on an erroneous interpretation of scripture.

We, the Muslim community, believe that this divine Law of ours is true and that we are called to the happiness, which is knowledge of God and His creation, with the method of assent each person's temperament and nature require.

People's natures vary in excellence with respect to assent. Thus some assent by demonstration [rational thought], some assent by dialectics [theology], and some assent by rhetoric [popular beliefs].

Since this law is true and calls to the reflection leading to cognizance of the truth, we, the Muslim community, know firmly that demonstrative reflection does not lead to differing from what is set down in the Law. For truth does not oppose truth, rather it agrees with and bears witness to it.

When comparing scientific observation to what is apparently written in scripture:

If it is in agreement, there is no argument here. And, if it is different, that is where an interpretation [of the scripture] is pursued. The meaning of interpretation is: drawing out the figurative significance of an utterance...such as calling a thing by what resembles it.

Because of this Muslims have formed a consensus that it is not obligatory for all the utterances of the Law to be taken in their apparent sense...

Averroes' point is that if science and scripture appear to be different, the error must be in the interpretation of the scripture.

The above text was a court decision Averroes issued under his authority as a judge. He misrepresented how established his unusual opinion was. There was no Muslim "consensus" behind his view. Al-Ghazali, for example, emphatically disagreed, as do most Islamic clerics today.

In his philosophical, non-judicial writings Averroes expressed himself more freely. In general he supported and advocated for the views of his hero Aristotle, whose work he extensively analyzed. On the issue of gender, however, Averroes' took a view closer to that of Plato, who, unlike Aristotle, argued for women's fundamental equality.

Our society allows no scope for the development of women's talents. They seem to be destined exclusively to childbirth and the care of children, and this State of servility has destroyed their capacity for larger matters. It is thus that we see no women endowed with moral virtues; they live their lives like vegetables, devoting themselves to their husbands. From this stems the misery that pervades our cities, for women outnumber men by more than double and cannot procure the necessities of life by their own labors.

Females must join males in wars and combat. And it is apt that as we select, to choose women with qualities that are comparable with males. And this can merely be attained if females learn, concurrently with males, music and sports. Likewise, Plato has revealed that consequently there is nothing to dread from them (females) even if they practice sports naked (uncovered) with men, as long as they are endowed with virtue.

This did not fit at all with any known school of Medieval thought. One modern Muslim writer suggests,

"A person, who is decent enough to be a free thinker, cannot be trapped inside ideas that help deteriorate the status of those who form half the making of a society."

That is a nice thought, but unfortunately it is not too hard to think of freethinkers with a blind spot on gender. The fact that Averroes wrote what he did, for whatever reason, makes him a natural hero for modern, progressive Muslims.

Maimonides (1138-1204)

Born twelve years after Averroes and also having a good education, Maimonides, being Jewish, had zero chance of a good government job under the Almohads. Indeed, in 1148, his family went into hiding to avoid Almohad persecution. In 1168, Maimonides moved permanently to Egypt, where the ruler, Saladin, the same Saladin who later conquered/liberated Jerusalem from the Crusaders, tolerated Jews. Maimonides eventually became Saladin's personal physician.



In addition to his medical training, Maimonides had a vast knowledge of astronomy and mathematics, Jewish law, and Aristotelian philosophy, publishing important works in all these fields. His book of Jewish law, the *Mishneh Torah* (1180) continues to be enormously important.

Maimonides' best known work is *The Guide for the Perplexed* (1190). He addresses the same subject Averroes had addressed in the *Decisive Treatise* twelve years earlier, using much the same argument. The similarity isn't surprising, Maimonides and Averroes were part of the same Arabic-speaking intellectual culture.

From Chapter LI of the Guide:

I will begin the subject of this chapter with a simile. A king is in a palace and all the subjects are partly in the country, and partly abroad. Of the former, some have their backs turned towards the king's palace, and their faces in another direction; and some are desirous and zealous to go to the palace, seeking "to inquire in the temple", and to minister before the king, but have not yet seen even the face of the wall of the house. Of those that desire to go to the palace, some reach it, and go round about in search of the entrance gate; others have passed through the gate and walk about in the ante-chamber; and others have succeeded in entering into the inner part of the palace, and being in the same room with the king in the royal palace. But even the latter do not immediately on entering the palace see the king, or speak to the king; for, after having entered the inner part of the palace, another effort is required before they can stand before the king - at a distance, or close by - hear his words or speak to him. I will now explain the simile which I have made.

The people who are abroad are all those who have no religion, neither one based on speculation nor one received by tradition...

Those who desire to arrive at the palace, and to enter it, but have never yet seen it, are the mass of religious people; the multitude that observe the divine commandments but are ignorant....

My child, as long as you are engaged in studying the Mathematical Sciences and Logic, you belong to those who go about the palace in search of the gate. When you understand Physics, you will 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. You have attained the degree of the wise.

Those, however, who think of God, and frequently mention His name, without any correct notion of Him, but merely following some imagination, or some theory received from another person, are, in my opinion, like those who remain outside the palace and distant from it....That which they imagine and mention does not correspond to any being in existence; it is a thing invented by their imagination...

The true worship of God is possible only when correct notions of Him have previously been conceived. When you have arrived by way of intellectual research at a knowledge of God and His

works, then commence to devote yourself to Him, try to approach Him, and strengthen the intellect, which is the link that joins you to Him.

Both Averroes and Maimonides are well aware that a doctrine which emphasizes knowledge as the path to knowing God is unacceptably elitist. Maimonides states that knowing God requires knowledge only a small percentage of the population will ever have a chance to acquire.

Both are clear that people who lack the means or talent for advanced study are not cut off from God. They will just know God in a different, less desirable way. Ghazali and other fundamentalists made the point that authoritarian fundamentalism is more egalitarian. If no one has any rights, then everyone is equal.

Legacy:

Maimonides was immediately and permanently successful in his goal of shaping Judaism. He was enormously respected by the Jewish community in his lifetime and continues to be a major influence. In 1190 he wrote that becoming close to God required studying physics. Today, Jews, who are 0.2% of the world's population have won 25% of all physics Nobel prizes. Maimonides would be pleased.

Averroes was an immediate failure in his attempt to shape the Islamic community. His books were largely ignored for centuries by Muslim scholars. Al-Ghazali won.

Averroes, however, had a large influence on late Medieval Christianity. He was an important conduit of Greek and Islamic ideas into Europe leading directly to what Europeans call the "Renaissance".

Averroes Today

Although rejected by the Islamic world in his own time and for centuries that followed, Averroes has in recent years become a major hero for Muslim liberals. Lots of schools and other liberal Islamic institutions are named for him.

A striking example is the Ibn Rushd-Goethe Mosque in Berlin. (Ibn Rushd is Averroes' name in Arabic, and the name by which he was known in his lifetime.) The Ibn Rushd-Goethe mosque does not practice sex segregation and is, to my knowledge, the only mosque in the world to fly a rainbow flag.

When the mosque was founded in 2017, it was explicitly denounced by a fatwa from Al-Azhar university in Cairo, the leading authority in Sunni Islam. This resulted in the mosque's Imam receiving 3,000 hostile emails a day, including many death threats.



■ Berlin Mosque Sparks Outrage for Raising Rainbow Flag In Support of LGBTQ+

In the picture the woman in white on the right side of the flag, Seyran Ateş, is the Imam of Ibn Rushd-Goethe mosque. Born in Istanbul, Ateş is a practicing lawyer in Berlin when she is not attending to her religious duties. Despite being shot in the neck as a student legal counselor in 1984 and the thousands of death threats since, she is still going strong as of now. "Liebe ist halal", equivalent to "love is kosher", is a motto for activist gay Muslims in Germany.