

The Philosopher as the Heir of the Prophets: Averroes's Islamic Rationalism

El filósofo como heredero de los profetas:
el racionalismo islámico de Averroes

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This essay argues that, underlying the legal framework of Averroes's *Faṣl al-maqāl*, there appears to be a genuine desire to reconcile the claims of reason with the demands of faith; then, that Averroes based this reconciliation on the acceptance of a hermeneutical theory that sees the divine Word as addressing all human beings according to their intellectual capacities and that, consequently, he did not exclude the learned from the religious duty of assenting to revealed truth. Finally, and contrary to overstated secularist interpretations of his rationalism, it is suggested that there are grounds to defend the view that Averroes conceived of philosophy in quasi-religious terms, as the noblest work to be carried out in the presence of God, making its practitioners the rightful 'heirs of the prophets'.

Key words: Averroes; Islamic Rationalism; *Falsafa*; *Faṣl al-maqāl*.

El presente artículo argumenta que por debajo del marco jurídico del *Faṣl al-maqāl* subyace el deseo de conciliar los requerimientos de la razón con las exigencias de la fe. Averroes basa tal conciliación en la aceptación de una teoría hermenéutica según la cual, la Palabra Divina se dirige a cada ser humano según su capacidad intelectual. Por consiguiente, Averroes no excluye a los sabios del deber religioso de asentir a la verdad revelada. Contrariamente a interpretaciones exageradamente secularizadoras de su racionalismo, el artículo sugiere que Averroes concibió la filosofía en términos cuasi religiosos, como la obra más noble que se puede llevar a cabo en presencia de Dios, cuyo ejercicio convierte a sus practicantes en los legítimos «herederos de los profetas».

Palabras clave: Averroes; racionalismo islámico; *Falsafa*; *Faṣl al-maqāl*.

It is one of those ironies of history that the twelfth-century Andalusian philosopher Averroes (Abū l-Walīd b. Rushd), largely ignored in the Muslim world in the centuries that followed his death in 1198, should stand today at the center of much of the contemporary intellectual debate about secularism in the Arab world. A leading voice in this debate is that of the Egyptian Enlightenment Society, founded in 1987 by a group of scholars and intellectuals for the purpose of counteracting

the increasing Islamist influence. With this aim in view, the Society initiated in 1993 a series of reprints of books representative of the liberal-secularist tradition that developed in Egypt from the mid-nineteenth to the mid-twentieth century, in the wake of Napoleon's Egyptian campaign. Significantly, the first book chosen for reprinting was Farah Anṭūn's (d. 1922) *Ibn Rushd wa-falsafatu-hu* (The Philosophy of Averroes), originally published in Alexandria in 1903.¹ Anṭūn was a Lebanese Christian secularist who spent most of his adult life in Egypt. He embraced to a large extent Ernest Renan's (d. 1892) view that the death of Averroes constituted a central turning-point in Islamic intellectual history: the end of Arabic Aristotelian philosophy and the triumph of the Qur'ān over free thought during the following six centuries.² Anṭūn's presentation of Averroes, however, did not go unchallenged. The influential Egyptian Muslim reformist, Muḥammad Abduh (d. 1905), sought to rehabilitate Averroes as a brilliant example of a Muslim philosopher in a series of articles, reacting against what he saw as Anṭūn's materialistic interpretation of Averroes.³ The Anṭūn-Abduh controversy did not abate with the death of its protagonists. Following the lead of the first, Averroes became the rallying point for several contemporary Arab proponents of secularism and the emancipation of reason from religion. A different group of Arab intellectuals, following the lead of Abduh, have insisted on depicting Averroes as the exemplar of a tradition within Islam which postulates the absolute harmony of revelation and reason, rejecting on this basis the strong secularist views espoused by the first group.⁴

¹ See Daiber, *Bibliography of Islamic Philosophy*, pp. 66-67.

² In effect, Renan's views, which he exposed in his famous *Averroès et l'averroïsme: essai historique* (Paris, 1852), became the reference point for most subsequent scholarship on the famous Cordovan philosopher –Western and Muslim alike. For a presentation of the constitution, reception, and edition of Averroes's corpus, see Endress, "Le projet d'Averroès: Constitution, réception et édition du corpus des oeuvres d'Ibn Rushd." On Anṭūn's interest in Renan, see Puig Montada, "Farah Anṭūn: Active Reception of European Thought," especially pp. 1014-1018.

³ For a brief presentation of this debate, see al-Khoudheiri, "Ibn Rushd et la pensée arabe moderne." See also the bibliography cited in Puig Montada, "Farah Anṭūn," p. 1017, n. 34.

⁴ Among the proponents of the secularist interpretation of Averroes, we can mention Muḥammad 'Āṭif al-'Irāqī (d. 2012), Murād Wahba, Muḥammad 'Ābid al-Jābirī (d. 2010), and Ṭayyib Tizīnī. Among those who favored a reading of Averroes as harmonizing reason and revelation, we can mention Maḥmūd Qāsim (d. 1973), Muḥammad 'Ammāra, and

An external observer might be tempted to think that the strongly divergent views on Averroes put forward by the participants in this debate are, in fact, projections of their different views on what should be the role of religion in contemporary Arab society and of their socio-political preferences. In other words, one might be tempted to believe that the *real* Averroes can be easily discovered by means of a detached and politically neutral reading of his writings. Such an assumption, however, is quickly shattered by even a cursory survey of recent academic scholarship in Western languages, which reveals a wealth of diverse interpretations of the Cordovan philosopher. It is commonly accepted that that relationship between reason and faith was one of the recurring issues of Jewish, Christian, and Islamic medieval philosophy. Likewise, almost everybody concurs that Averroes deserves pride of place in the history of this debate, and there is a general consensus that his work, *Faṣl al-maqāl* (often known as the *Decisive Treatise*), is absolutely crucial in this respect. However, there is considerable disagreement on what exactly his position was.⁵ My aim in what follows is not to review all the literature written on the subject—an impossible task anyway—but instead to engage three particular lines of interpretation of Averroes that I would like to challenge, at least partially. It should be noted, however, that not all the authors mentioned in this essay are necessarily scholars specializing in Averroes, nor are my comments intended to be a judgment on their entire scholarship. The works in question have been chosen because they illustrate with particular clarity

Hasan Hanafi. Accounts of this debate can be found in Kügelgen, “A Call for Rationalism: ‘Arab Averroists’ in the Twentieth Century”; Wild, “Islamic Enlightenment and the Paradox of Averroes”; and Najjar, “Ibn Rushd (Averroes) and the Egyptian Enlightenment Movement.” See also Lahoud, *Political Thought in Islam: A Study in Intellectual Boundaries*, pp. 110-125 on Ibn Rushd’s liberalism.

⁵ The complete title of this work is *Kitāb faṣl al-maqāl wa-taqrīr mā bayna al-sharī‘a wa-l-ḥikma min al-ittiṣāl*. Hereafter, references to this work will be taken from Butterworth’s translation (with parallel Arabic text), *The Book of the Decisive Treatise Determining the Connection between the Law and Wisdom* (2008). Other translations of the *Faṣl al-maqāl* mentioned in this article are: Müller, *Harmonie der Religion und Philosophie* (1875); Gauthier, *Accord de la religion et de la philosophie* (1905); Hourani, *On the Harmony of Religion and Philosophy* (1961); Lucchetta, *L’accordo della legge divina con la filosofia* (1994); Campanini, *Il trattato decisivo sull’accordo della religione con la filosofia* (1994) and Geoffroy, *Le livre du discours décisive* (1996). For a readable account of Averroes’s life and times, see Urvoy, *Ibn Rushd (Averroès)*. A detailed analysis of Averroes’s written production can be found in Cruz Hernández, *Abū-l-Walid Ibn Ruṣd (Averroes): Vida, obra, pensamiento, influencia*.

certain views on Averroes that I would like to consider here. After presenting and discussing these views, it will be argued that, underlying the legal framework of *Faṣl al-maqāl*, there appears to be a genuine desire to reconcile the claims of reason with the demands of faith; second, that Averroes based this reconciliation on the acceptance of a hermeneutical theory that sees the divine Word as addressing all human beings according to their intellectual capacities and that, consequently, he did not exclude the learned from the religious duty of assenting to revealed truth. Finally, and contrary to overstated secularist interpretations of his rationalism, I will propound that there are grounds to defend the view that Averroes conceived of philosophy in quasi-religious terms, as the noblest work to be carried out in the presence of God, making its practitioners the rightful ‘heirs of the prophets.’⁶

Philosophy before the Law

A necessary starting-point for any consideration of Averroes’s intention in *Faṣl al-maqāl* is the assertion made by certain scholars that in this treatise Averroes was dealing with an intrinsically Islamic problem which is foreign to medieval Western discussions on the relationship between faith and reason. This is the view, for instance, of Daniel Heller-Roazen, for whom the *Faṣl al-maqāl* epitomizes the challenge raised by Islam to classical philosophy: to justify itself before the Law. For this author, the rescue of the Greek heritage from oblivion, thanks to its translation into Arabic during the ‘Abbāsid era, came at a price: “philosophy was called upon to give reasons for itself in the face of the authority of the Qur’ān and the teaching of its prophet,” an unprecedented demand “which at once threatened it with extinction and promised it the possibility of a new life.”⁷ Heller-Roazen insists on the singularity of this challenge and the differing conditions in which philosophy found itself in Islamic lands and in Christian Europe.

⁶ Reference to the canonical hadith which quotes the Prophet as saying: “The excellence of the learned over the devotee is like that of the full moon over the other stars. The learned (*‘ulamā*) are the heirs of the prophets. The prophets bequeath neither dinar nor dirham but rather knowledge; so he who receives it, obtains an abundant portion” (See Arabic text in Abū Dā’ūd, *English translation of Sunan Abu Dawud*, vol. 4, p. 207).

⁷ Heller-Roazen, “Philosophy before the Law: Averroës’s *Decisive Treatise*,” p. 412.

In the latter, doctrine became the domain in which the differences between Greek thinking and the principles of Christianity were to be reconciled. This could not be the case with Islam,

for the religion announced by Muḥammad, in contrast to Christianity, had its center neither in faith nor dogma but an element at once theological and political: the Law (*sharī'a*), the single revealed body of prescriptions and prohibitions understood by the Islamic tradition to be simultaneously civil and religious, temporal and spiritual.⁸

Within this Law-based order, the vindication of philosophy could only be juridical. Philosophy had to justify itself before jurisprudence, and this is exactly what Averroes attempted in the *Faṣl al-maqāl*, an examination of philosophy in terms of the religious Law of Islam. This would explain, moreover, why this treatise, unlike other writings of Averroes, was never translated into Latin and did not attract the attention of the Christian West before the nineteenth century. That it found more receptivity among Jewish thinkers instead bears witness to the affinity that exists between Judaism and Islam as “religions of the Law.”⁹ The Jewish heirs of Greek philosophy, like their Islamic counterparts, felt the need to justify the study of a pagan science before the rule of the religious law.

A gulf, however, separates both religious traditions from that of the Christian West. There, the schoolmen were engaged in the attempt to justify the study of philosophy by demonstrating its relation, not to law, but to faith.¹⁰

This stark contrast between Christianity, on the one hand, and Judaism and Islam, on the other, leads Heller-Roazen to conclude that the *Faṣl al-maqāl*:

is not a work on the conflict, concordance, or unity of faith and reason; nor is it an elucidation of the relation between the doctrines imposed by one and those dictated by the other. It is, instead, a juridical tract of a specific type, a *fatwā*, a legal *responsum* that seeks to determine the precise status of philosophy before the Law

⁸ Heller-Roazen, “Philosophy before the Law,” p. 413.

⁹ Heller-Roazen, “Philosophy before the Law,” p. 418. On the Jewish reception of the *Faṣl al-maqāl*, see Golb, “The Hebrew Translation of Averroës’ *Faṣl al-maqāl*,” and Harvey, *Falaquera’s ‘Epistle of the Debate’: An Introduction to Jewish Philosophy*. For a concise account of the impact of Averroes on the Jewish world more generally, see Leaman, “Averroism, Jewish.”

¹⁰ Heller-Roazen, “Philosophy before the Law,” p. 418.

... Carried out according to the protocols of the juridical examination, the judgment announced at the opening of the *Decisive Treatise* promises to settle, in this way, the vexed question of the legal status of philosophy. For such a judgment alone, resting on an identification of the specific juridical qualifications of philosophy, can ‘decisively’ determine the ‘relation between wisdom and the Law.’¹¹

What can we say about such an analysis of the *Faṣl al-maqāl*, which is by no means exclusive of this author?¹² Averroes was indeed an accomplished legal scholar who served as judge at Seville and Cordoba, and it is undeniable that his defense of philosophy in the *Faṣl al-maqāl* takes the form of a legal opinion, a fact that would have been puzzling to Western readers unfamiliar with Islamic jurisprudence. The opening terms of the *Faṣl al-maqāl* are clear in this sense:

Now, the goal of this statement is for us to investigate, from the perspective of Law-based reflection, whether reflection upon philosophy and the sciences of logic is permitted, prohibited, or commanded –and this as a recommendation or as an obligation– by the Law (§ 1).

It is likewise indisputable that Islam (and Judaism, for that matter) has its own historical characteristics and that one should not rush to establish easy parallels with Christianity. However, it would be unwarranted to conclude that the *Faṣl al-maqāl* has nothing to do with the conflict between faith and reason as it developed in the Christian West. Heller-Roazen fails to notice that the word *sharī‘a* and its cognate *shar‘* are not always (not even primarily) used in the *Faṣl al-maqāl* in the legal sense of Islamic jurisprudence. Both terms have a more basic meaning that points to the prescribed character of religion as such, that

¹¹ Heller-Roazen, “Philosophy before the Law,” pp. 419- 420.

¹² See, for instance, Bonin, “A Muslim Perspective on Philosophy & Religion: The ‘Decisive Treatise’ of Averroes.” In the concluding part of this talk presented at the Franciscan University of Steubenville on November 4, 2006, Bonin addresses the question of why the *Faṣl al-maqāl* failed to attract the attention of Christian Europe. She finds this lack of attention surprising, given the abundance of “heterodox philosophers” in thirteenth-century Paris who, to her mind, would have found in it a “source and support for their musings” (p. 22). She goes on to say that, in fact, this lack of attention is not so surprising if we notice that the problem facing philosophers in the Islamic world differed from that facing their counterparts in the Christian world. Like Heller-Roazen, Bonin sees the *Faṣl al-maqāl* as an attempt to determine the relation not between faith and reason but between religion and philosophy –where “religion” translates *sharī‘a*, that is, religious law. She writes: “Faith is the keynote in Christianity, but not in Islam, where law and submission to law are primary” (p. 23).

is, to the fact that Islam does not understand itself as an expression of the human quest for God, but as a religious system entirely based on the prophetic transmission of the divine Word.¹³ In this sense, *sharī'a* includes all the teachings on every level that can be said to be Islamic, and not merely the juridical status of particular actions.¹⁴ Thus, even if the *Faṣl al-maqāl* has the external form of a legal opinion, Averroes is very much aware that the entire edifice of Islamic law rests upon the acceptance *by faith* of the Qur'ān and the Sunna as the revealed Word of God. In Averroes's own words:

Since all of this has been determined and we, the Muslim community, believe that this divine Law of ours (*sharī'atanā hādīhi l-ilāhiyya*) is true and is the one alerting to and calling for this happiness –which is cognizance of God (Mighty and Magnificent) and of His creation... (§ 11).

Moreover, the *fatwā* properly speaking, establishing the legal status of the study of philosophy and the sciences of logic, occupies approximately one fifth of the entire treatise (§ 1-11). The rest of the treatise (§ 12-60) is mainly devoted to addressing the *theological* objection that had led Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī (d. 1111) to condemn certain philosophical doctrines, namely, their apparent contradiction of the revealed text. In fact, it would not be an overstatement to say that the fundamental question addressed by Averroes in *Faṣl al-maqāl* is precisely the “reconciling of what is intellectuated with what is transmitted” (*al-jam' bayna al-ma'qūl wa-l-manqūl*) (§ 14). Averroes will defend that such a reconciliation is indeed possible by positing the need of interpreting figuratively “the apparent sense of a pronouncement about something in the Law [that] differs from what demonstration leads to” (§ 14). In addressing this question, Averroes uses *shar'īa* and *shar'* to refer first and foremost to the Qur'ān itself, the revealed Word of God accepted by faith:

¹³ See, for instance, Qur'ān 42:13: “He has ordained for you of religion (*shara'a lakum min al-dīn*) that He enjoined upon Noah and that which We have revealed to you, [O Muḥammad], and what We enjoined upon Abraham and Moses and Jesus – to establish the religion and not be divided therein” (Saheeh International Translation).

¹⁴ For the range of meanings in relation to religion and religious law associated with the word *sharī'a*, see Calder, “Sharī'a,” in *EP*. The difficulty of translating the term *sharī'a* in the *Faṣl al-maqāl* can be seen in the many different ways in which translators have rendered the title of this treatise into Western languages: “religion” (Müller, 1875; Gauthier, 1905; Hourani, 1961; Campanini, 1994), “revelation” (Geoffroy, 1996), “divine Law” (Lucchetta, 1994); and “Law” (Butterworth, 2008), to give but a few examples.

It has been transmitted that many in the early days [of Islam] used to be of the opinion that the Law (*al-shar'*) has both an apparent and an inner sense and that it is not obligatory for someone to know about the inner sense if he is not an adept in knowledge of it nor capable of understanding it (§ 15).

To recapitulate, Averroes's central concern in *Faṣl al-maqāl* is that of responding to al-Ghazālī's accusation that the philosophers should be charged with unbelief on account of their denial of what he considers three explicitly revealed doctrines: the eternity of the world, God's knowledge of particulars, and the resurrection of bodies in the hereafter. These were doctrinal questions on the same theoretical level of those debated by philosophers and theologians in the Christian West. These were not, as Heller-Roazen puts it, "cases of a seeming conflict between demonstration and *legal doctrine*."¹⁵ Put differently, Averroes is concerned with the relation between what religion asks the *believing* philosopher to accept by faith (that is, that the Qur'ān is the revealed Word of God dispensing divine truth to humanity), and the conclusions the exercise of his rationality may lead him to. In other words, Averroes is concerned with the relation between faith and reason, and it is crucial that the legal frame of Averroes's treatise should not cause us to miss this point.¹⁶

Reading between the Lines

Differing interpretations of the *Faṣl al-maqāl* are reflected in the way in which scholars interpret the treatise's title: *Faṣl al-maqāl wa-taqrīr mā bayna al-sharī'a wa-l-hikma min al-ittiṣāl*. I have already mentioned the difficulty of translating *sharī'a*. Other key words in the title are *faṣl* and *ittiṣāl*. With respect to the first term, the 1905 French translation by

¹⁵ Heller-Roazen, "Philosophy before the Law," p. 424, emphasis added.

¹⁶ I share for the most part Joseph Buijs's view that the conflict between faith and reason, tradition and speculation, mysticism and rationalism –and even religion and science, to mention its more recent version– are alternative formulations of a central problem throughout medieval thought, that of the relationship between religion and philosophy. "In this sense," writes Buijs, "faith involves a way of holding and justifying beliefs on the basis of divine revelation, which manifests itself through such diverse channels as sacred scriptures, prophecy, or tradition. It is the purported truth-claims of these beliefs that generate the problem of faith and reason and of the relationship between religion and philosophy, or between religion and science" (Buijs, "Religion and Philosophy in Maimonides, Averroes, and Aquinas," pp. 161-162).

Léon Gauthier, who rendered the title as “*Traité décisif sur l'accord de la religion et de la philosophie*,” seems to have influenced most translations thereafter, all of which use the adjective ‘decisive’ (Hourani, 1961; Campanini, 1994; Butterworth, 2008). This interpretation is based on the second meaning of the verb *faṣala yaḥsilu*, to render a decisive judgment thereby putting an end to a dispute. As for *ittiṣāl*, while Gauthier, followed by Campanini, translates it as ‘accord,’ Hourani and Butterworth prefer the more neutral and more literal ‘connection.’¹⁷

A radically different interpretation of the title, and consequently of Averroes's aim in this treatise, is offered by Abdelmajid El-Ghannouchi. He ascribes to Gauthier (and indirectly to Marcus Müller, author of the 1875 German translation of the *Faṣl al-maqāl*) the theory that Averroes was proposing the accord between religion and philosophy, a theory that set the tone for many of the ensuing interpretations of this work. “Or nous découvrons chez Averroès,” protests El-Ghannouchi,

non pas une théorie de l'accord entre la religion et la philosophie, comme l'a soutenu Léon Gauthier, mais une distinction claire et nette entre deux ordres de vérité, le premier étant fondé sur la croyance, le second établi sur la démonstration.¹⁸

For this author, Gauthier's translation of the treatise's title was tendentious insofar as he translated *Faṣl al-maqāl* as ‘decisive treatise,’ instead of ‘distinction of discourse,’ and *ittiṣāl* as ‘accord,’ instead of ‘relation,’ ‘connection,’ or ‘link.’ In so doing, he obscured Averroes's real intention, namely, that of distinguishing between the religious discourse and the philosophical discourse, while affirming a relation between the two (i.e., their common aim of promoting virtuous life). According to El-Ghannouchi, Gauthier based his thesis on the uncritical reading of two assertions of Averroes in the *Faṣl al-maqāl*. The first is his teleological definition of philosophy as the “reflection upon existing things and consideration of them insofar as they are an

¹⁷ “*Traité décisif sur l'accord de la religion et de la philosophie*” (Gauthier, 1905); “The decisive treatise, determining the nature of the connection between religion and philosophy” (Hourani, 1961); “Il trattato decisivo sull'accordo della religione con la filosofia” (Campanini, 1994); “The book of the decisive treatise, determining the connection between the Law and wisdom” (Butterworth, 2008).

¹⁸ El-Ghannouchi, “Ibn Rushd et la double vérité: La séparation du discours religieux du discours philosophique et l'établissement du rapport entre les deux,” p. 107. For El-Ghannouchi's views on the question, see also his “Distinction et relation des discours philosophiques et religieux chez Ibn Rushd: *Faṣl al-maqāl* ou la double vérité.”

indication of the Artisan” (§ 2), a significant departure from Aristotle’s definition of philosophy in *Metaphysics* as the study of being *qua* being. For El-Ghannouchi, this “specious” definition of philosophy was only a concession made by Averroes for the sake of legitimizing the study of philosophy from the religious viewpoint so as to be able to pursue the philosophical study undisturbed:

Par une définition spécieuse, *Faṣl al-maqāl* réduit la philosophie à la théologie religieuse, c’est-à-dire à l’anti-philosophie, pour légitimer ici même l’étude philosophique par la religion et obtenir le titre et le droit de s’y adonner.¹⁹

As for the second assertion from *Faṣl al-maqāl* that, according to El-Ghannouchi, Gauthier accepted uncritically, that is, without applying a hermeneutic of suspicion that reads between the lines, it is Averroes’s famous declaration that,

Since the Law (*sharī’a*) 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 with what is set down in the Law. For truth does not oppose truth; rather, it agrees with and bears witness to it (§ 12).

To derive from this that Averroes defends the accord or harmony between religion and philosophy is, for this author, an erroneous conclusion, which is not only incongruent with Averroes’s entire philosophical writings, but which also fails to notice the conditional character of the Arabic sentence: “Since this Law is true...” (*wa-idhā kānat hādīhi l-sharī’a ḥaqqan...*). For El-Ghannouchi, this should be taken to mean that the truth of religion would not oppose the truth of philosophy only if religion could be proved to be philosophically true, something which is not possible. According to this reading, Averroes holds the existence of two orders of truth: on the one hand, philosophical truth, established by demonstrative reason, and, on the other hand, religious truth, based on prophetic revelation. These two orders of truth are heterogeneous, not exchangeable, and irreducible to one another:

Il est indéniable que le vrai ne s’oppose pas au vrai, mais à la condition *sine qua non* qu’ils appartiennent tous deux au même système de référence dans lequel ils seraient interchangeable. *En dehors de ce même système, on aurait une vérité selon la foi et une autre selon la science et la philosophie.*²⁰

¹⁹ El-Ghannouchi, “Ibn Rushd et la double vérité,” p. 108.

²⁰ El-Ghannouchi, “Ibn Rushd et la double vérité,” p. 109.

Religious truth is based on revelation and accepted by faith. The salvation of the common people resides in the literal acceptance of this truth, which therefore must be constantly purified from the accretions and misleading interpretations of theologians. Philosophical truth, however, is reserved for the elite, and it is to be found in the demonstrative books that examine philosophical questions such as God's existence, the eternity of the world, the divine decree and predestination, the immortality of the intellect, etc. This truth must be kept away from the common person, who, unable to understand it, would either ridicule it or be led into confusion.

For El-Ghannouchi, the Western separation between religion and philosophy and between the spiritual and the secular rests upon this distinction between the religious and philosophical discourses which was first formulated in Arabic by Averroes and later confirmed by the philosophers in thirteenth-century Paris, a path that the Islamic world was unable to take:

Le monde occidental se détacha définitivement alors de tout syncrétisme entre la religion et la philosophie, entre le spirituel et le temporel, laissant le monde islamique maintenu entre les deux, se débattant dans l'indécision.²¹

Rémi Brague qualifies Averroes's teleological definition of philosophy in *Faṣl al-maqāl* as "an ad hoc definition," part of a strategy aimed at rendering the study of nature acceptable to religious Law. According to him, Islamic philosophers could either focus on drawing a connection between the content of philosophical truth and the prophetic message—the strategy of Ya'qūb b. Ishāq al-Kindī (d. ca. 870); or they could claim that the Qur'ān itself made the study of nature obligatory for believers, quoting the numerous verses that encourage human beings to reflect on the marvels of creation as pointers to the Creator—the strategy of Muḥammad b. Yūsuf al-'Āmirī (d. 992); or else they could combine both arguments, as Averroes did in *Faṣl al-maqāl*.²² Brague, nonetheless, is much more circumspect in inferring non-stated intentions. In fact, we have no reason to assert categorically, as El-Ghannouchi does, that Averroes's definition of philosophy in *Faṣl al-maqāl* is fallacious

²¹ El-Ghannouchi, "Ibn Rushd et la double vérité," p. 112.

²² Brague, "Is Physics Interesting? Some Responses from Late Antiquity and the Middle Ages," pp. 80-83. See also Harvey, "The Quiddity of Philosophy according to Averroes and Falaquera, a Muslim Philosopher and his Jewish Interpreter."

and purposely deceptive, thereby ruling out the possibility that the Cordovan philosopher did in fact believe that existing things could be indications of the Artisan

insofar as they are artifacts, for existing things indicate the Artisan only through cognizance of the art in them, and the more complete cognizance of the art in them is, the more complete is cognizance of the Artisan (§ 2).

By denying this possibility from the onset, El-Ghannouchi is obliged to carry out an esoteric reading of the *Faṣl al-maqāl*, which leads him to the conclusion that Averroes is upholding two independent orders of truth, one for the masses and one for the philosophical elite.²³ As it turns out, we have good reason to think that Averroes did believe that existing beings could serve as signs pointing to God. In the first chapter of his book, *al-Kashf ‘an manāhij al-adilla fi ‘aqā'id al-milla* (Uncovering the Methods of Proof with Respect to the Beliefs of the Religious Community),²⁴ Averroes dismisses the two arguments most commonly advanced by the Islamic dialectical theologians to prove God’s existence –the argument from the temporality of the universe and the argument from contingency– as neither demonstrative for the philosophically trained mind nor comprehensible for the populace. In lieu of these arguments, Averroes commends the two arguments proposed by the Qur’ān itself: the argument from providence (*dalīl al-‘ināya*) and the argument from

²³ For a critical analysis of the esoteric interpretation of Islamic philosophy in general, see Leaman, *An Introduction to Classical Islamic Philosophy*, pp. 205-236. On the question of the “double truth” in the *Faṣl al-maqāl*, see Taylor, “‘Truth Does Not Contradict Truth’: Averroes and the Unity of Truth.”

²⁴ This book is a sequel to *Faṣl al-maqāl*, as Averroes himself states at the beginning of *al-Kashf*. For the relationship between these two books, which are part of a trilogy, see Mahdi, “Averroes on Divine Law and Human Wisdom.” Hereafter, all references to *al-Kashf* will be taken from Najjar’s translation, *Faith and Reason in Islam: Averroes’ Exposition of Religious Arguments* (2001). For the Arabic text, I rely on al-Jābirī’s edition (Beirut, 1998).

²⁵ “The former,” explains Majid Fakhry, “rests on the premise that all existent entities here below have come to exist in order to subserve the interests of mankind and for this reason are necessarily due to a willing and intending Agent and cannot be the product of chance. The other argument rests on the premise that everything in the world is ‘invented’ or made by an Inventor or Maker, who is God” (Fakhry, Introduction to *Faith and Reason in Islam*, p. 6, 2005 repr. Ed.). On these two arguments, see also Najjar, “Ibn Rushd’s Theory of Rationality,” and especially Kukkonen, “Averroes and the Teleological Argument.” For Kukkonen, the substance of both arguments is teleological rather than cosmological and they can be thought of as “macrocosmic and microcosmic variations on the argument from design” (p. 408). He then goes on to argue that, although the arguments in *al-Kashf*

invention/creation (*dalīl al-ikhtirā'*).²⁵ It is beyond the scope of this essay to decide on the actual validity of these arguments as proofs of the existence of God. What I would like to underline, however, is the fact that Averroes explicitly considers these two Qur'ānic arguments to be valid both for the learned and for the masses, while acknowledging that the first are capable, by means of their mastery of the demonstrative arts, of a deeper grasp of the natural and divine orders:

The evidence for the existence of the Artisan is confined to these two types; namely, the argument from providence and the argument from invention. It has also become clear that these two methods correspond exactly to the method used by the select (meaning the learned), and that of the general public. Where the two types of knowledge differ is in the details... All they [the general public] know is that [the existing entities] are manufactured and that they have an existing maker. By contrast the learned are those who theorize about the manufactured objects on the basis of their knowledge of how such objects are made and the wisdom behind making them. There is no doubt that whoever possesses this kind of knowledge of manufactured objects knows the Artisan, *qua* Artisan, better than those who merely know that these objects are manufactured (pp. 37-38).

In other words, Averroes is perfectly consistent with his definition of philosophy in the *Faṣl al-maqāl* and with his contention that the Qur'ān commands human beings –the learned as much as the masses– to consider the existing beings as indications of the Artisan.²⁶ It seems to me that Averroes is not upholding two orders of truth –one religious for the masses and one philosophical for the learned–, but rather a single order of truth and reality which admits, however, of different levels of intellectual grasp. More about this will be said below. We need first to address, even if succinctly, the question of Averroes's stand in relation to Abū Naṣr al-Fārābī (d. *ca.* 950), who was recognized within the Islamic philosophical tradition as the 'Second Teacher' after Aristotle.

are non-technical (i.e., not written for metaphysicians), Averroes nevertheless takes all the possible care not to speak against his philosophical convictions as expressed in his more technical works. In Kukkonen's view, we can glimpse in *al-Kaṣḥfa* "properly philosophical vision of teleology and providence" (p. 418).

²⁶ In her recent book, Avital Wohlman argues that Averroes is an original philosopher precisely "in that the profound impetus of his thought proceeds from his faith," and that his convictions as a believer lead him to diverge from Aristotle (Wohlman, *Al-Ghazali, Averroës and the Interpretation of the Qur'an: Common Sense and Philosophy in Islam*, p. 70). For Wohlman, Averroes's "certain faith in the existence of the Artisan coheres with realigning the major concepts of Aristotelian metaphysics: nature, being, and matter," a new alignment shaped by the light of faith in which "philosophical questions like the goodness of the world and its order become theological issues" (p. 5).

Averroes and the Farabian Legacy

In a recent article, Deborah Black argues that all three main Aristotelian Islamic philosophers –Alfarabi, Avicenna and Averroes– shared “a view of the essential nature of religion that made it entirely subordinate to rational understanding,” and that, in this view, “one could legitimately and sincerely claim full adherence to a religious tradition even if one’s rational belief contravened the external teachings of that tradition.”²⁷ According to Black, this shared understanding of the relations between philosophy and religion was first put forward by Alfarabi and is best articulated in his *Kitāb al-Ḥurūf* (Book of Letters), where he argued for the natural subordination of religion to philosophy. In effect, in this book, Alfarabi presents religion as the work of a philosopher-prophet who is also a gifted orator and poet, and who crafts a religion designed to utilize poetics and rhetoric as the means to communicate the truths discovered by philosophy to the non-philosophical masses.²⁸ Black summarizes Alfarabi’s picture of the relationship between philosophy and religion in two crucial but implicit assumptions that are operative throughout the Farabian system:

The first is an extreme and optimistic rationalism according to which there is nothing in the world so mysterious as to be impenetrable to the unaided human intellect. Humans are capable of attaining complete, certain, demonstrative knowledge in all practical and theoretical matters. It is the attainment of this certitude that constitutes the goal and aim of philosophy. The second assumption, by contrast, is a deeply pessimistic view of the distribution of rationality amongst individual humans. While all human beings are essentially rational in some measure, their rationality admits of rather marked degrees. Thus humans can be divided into an intellectual elite, the philosophers, who are capable of discovering and comprehending the unadulterated truth; and the masses, who in some measure fall short of the philosophical ideal.²⁹

It is the second assumption that explains Alfarabi’s view of religion as imitation of philosophy, tailored to fit the people of a particular culture and to compensate for the intellectual deficiency of the masses. For Black, Alfarabi’s picture of the nature of philosophy and its relation

²⁷ Black, “Reason Reflecting on Reason: Philosophy, Rationality, and the Intellect in the Medieval Islamic and Christian Traditions,” pp. 41-42.

²⁸ For an in-depth study of Alfarabi’s views on religion, see Mahdi, *Alfarabi and the Foundation of Islamic Political Philosophy*.

²⁹ Black, “Reason Reflecting on Reason,” p. 43.

to religion “was embraced with little modification by his chief successors among the *falāsifa*, Avicenna and Averroes.”³⁰ Referring to the *Faṣl al-maqāl* in particular, she writes:

I do want to note the degree to which this Averroist text depends upon the Fārābian theses I have just outlined. The *Decisive Treatise* offers a legal opinion that, in effect, it is the philosopher who is the ultimate judge and adjudicator of the truth.³¹

Before addressing some aspects of Black’s views that I find problematic, it is important to realize how her position differs from those of Heller-Roazen and El-Ghannouchi. Against the latter, Black thinks that Averroes upheld only *one* order of truth: the truth of reason. Against the former, she sees Averroes as addressing the same concern of his counterparts in the Christian West, namely, the relationship between faith and reason, only that Averroes upheld a fundamentally different position:

Islamic philosophers have no trouble in explaining why Scripture is predominantly metaphorical and narrative—its sole function is to communicate to common people. In contrast to Aquinas and his Christian counterparts, for Islamic philosophers there is no further theological science for which revealed texts must provide some analogue of demonstrative first principles.³² That is, the Islamic philosophers would not have accepted the possibility of a demonstrative science like *sacra doctrina* as proposed by Aquinas... nor would have they accepted the idea of revealed truths that exceed the bounds of reason.³³

That Averroes shared Alfarabi’s assumption of the unequal distribution of rationality amongst individual humans, I have no doubt. In this sense, both of them are heirs to what Jonathan Brown calls “an elitist strain in Islamic social and intellectual history that has its origins in the late Umayyad and early Abbasid times,” and which was by no means restricted to the philosophers.³⁴ I’m not sure, however, if I share Black’s contention that Averroes embraced to any large extent Alfarabi’s view of religion as *imitation* of philosophy. Granted that, for Averroes, it is only the philosopher trained in the logical sciences who

³⁰ Black, “Reason Reflecting on Reason,” p. 44.

³¹ Black, “Reason Reflecting on Reason,” p. 44.

³² Black, “Reason Reflecting on Reason,” p. 46.

³³ Black, “Reason Reflecting on Reason,” p. 55, n. 23.

³⁴ Brown, “The Last Days of al-Ghazzālī and the Tripartite Division of the Sufi World: Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazzālī’s Letter to the Seljuq Vizier and Commentary,” p. 97.

can truly understand the logic and language of Scripture and determine how to interpret disputed passages in it. This is indeed an enormous claim on the part of Averroes, of itself enough to earn him the antagonism of the more traditional religious establishment. It does not necessarily follow, however, that Averroes was of a mind that the philosopher could do without religion altogether, as implied in Black's assertion that Averroes thought the *sole* function of Scripture is to communicate to common people. On the contrary, Averroes is quite explicit in saying that the Law is addressed to all human beings, philosophers included. Furthermore, in the closing remarks of the *Faṣl al-maqāl*, Averroes chooses to define the relationship between philosophy and religion in terms that stress equality, not subordination, and this after admitting with sorrow that part of the harm that has afflicted religion has come from those associated with philosophy:

Now our soul is in utmost sorrow and pain due to the corrupt dissensions and distorted beliefs that have permeated this Law (*sharī'a*), especially those that have occurred to it from among people linking themselves to wisdom (*ḥikma*). For injuries from a friend are graver than injuries from an enemy—I mean that wisdom is the companion of the Law and its milk sister (§ 59).

What can we say then about Averroes's position regarding the relationship between reason and faith?

The Learned as the Heir of the Prophets

Averroes's rationalism is seen, first of all, in his insistence that all Muslims are called to give their assent to revelation, each one "in accordance with the method of assent his temperament and nature require":

This is because people's natures vary in excellence with respect to assent (*ṭibā' al-nās mutaḥādīla fī l-taṣḍīq*). Thus, some assent by means of demonstration; some assent by means of dialectical statements in the same way of one adhering to demonstration assents by means of demonstration, there being nothing greater in their natures; as some assent by means of rhetorical statements, just as the one adhering to demonstration assents by means of demonstrative statements (§ 11).

In extending its message to humankind, the "divine Law" assumes this diversity of people's intellectual predispositions, thus including all three methods of calling on God. It is in this sense, and not in racial

terms, that Averroes interprets the hadith according to which the Prophet was sent to “the red and to the black,” that is, to all humanity as being capable of giving rational assent to the prophetic message, each individual according to his or her intellectual capabilities. Averroes sees the Qur’ān itself as referring to this triple path of assent when it says, “Call to the path of your Lord by wisdom, fine preaching, and arguing with them by means of what is finest” (Q 16:125) –where “wisdom” stands for philosophy, “preaching” for rhetorics, and “arguing” for dialectics.

Commentators sometimes fail to notice two important implications of Averroes’s claim here: firstly, his insistence that rational assent is part and parcel of the act of faith; secondly, that the “divine Law” is not only an alternative to philosophy for the uneducated masses, but it addresses all human beings, including those capable of demonstrative knowledge. As for the first point, the real import of Averroes’s claim can perhaps be better seen if we contrast it with the views of one of his contemporaries from the other side of the Islamic world, the Hanbalite jurist Muwaffaq al-Dīn b. Qudāma (d. 1223), who argued that certain parts of the Qur’ān –in particular those passages which speak of God’s attributes– have no obligation attached to them except belief, and that belief in them is possible without knowledge of their intended meaning, “for indeed faith, with ignorance, is sound.”³⁵ This *sacrificium intellectus*, I believe, would be abhorrent to Averroes, who held in great esteem the rational nature of human beings, notwithstanding their different degrees of intellectual reach. In this regard, it is noteworthy that in the above-mentioned chapter of *al-Kashf*, devoted to proving God’s existence, Averroes insists that the Qur’ānic arguments from providence and from invention/creation are universal precisely because they correspond with “what He implanted in their primitive natures of [capacities to] understand this meaning” (p. 37), that is, because they appeal to the innate rationality with which God has endowed human beings. In what I find to be a remarkable statement on his part, given the pervasive intellectual elitism that dominated the culture and which he himself shared, Averroes goes on to say that whoever comes to acknowledge God’s existence by means of these arguments proposed by Scripture

³⁵ Ibn Qudāma, *Censure of Speculative Theology: An Edition and Translation of Ibn Qudāma’s Tahrim an-Nazr fi Kutub ahl al-Kalām*, 21.

becomes one of the learned scholars who testify to God's lordship, along with His own testimony and that of His angels, as the Almighty says: "Allah bears witness that there is no god but He, and so do the angels and men of learning" (Qur'ān 3:18) (p. 37).

As for the second point, once more it is the fact that Averroes insists explicitly that the divine Law is addressed to all humankind, including the people of demonstration. This is the reason it contains both an apparent and an inner meaning, inviting them to exert their intelligence and knowledge in order to reconcile the apparent contradictory meanings of Scripture:

The reason an apparent and an inner sense are set down in the Law is the difference in people's innate dispositions and the variance in their innate capacities for assent. The reason contradictory apparent senses are set down in it is to alert "those well-grounded in science" to the interpretation that reconciles them (§ 14).

There are details in the *Faṣl al-maqāl* and elsewhere in Averroes's writings that seem to indicate that he understood the role of the philosopher in quasi-religious terms. Already at the beginning of the treatise, after having established that the study of the books of the Ancients is obligatory according to the Law, "for their aim and intention in their books is the very intention to which the Law urges us" (§ 10), that is, reflection upon existent beings insofar as they are indications of the Artisan, Averroes establishes two conditions that must be fulfilled by anyone intending to study these books: "the first being innate intelligence and the second Law-based justice and moral virtue" (§ 10). In other words, the would-be student of Ancient philosophy must unite theoretical virtue with specifically Islamic practical and moral virtue. Notice that "Law-based justice" (*al-'adāla l-shar'iyya*) implies compliance with all that Islamic Law declares obligatory and recommended. A strange burden indeed to place as a condition for the study of Greek philosophy if we suppose that Averroes upheld the subordination of religion to philosophy! Later in the *Faṣl al-maqāl*, Averroes will refer to the philosophically trained scholars, as opposed to the dialectical theologians, as the judges "whom God has selected for interpretation" (§ 23) of the recondite passages of Scripture. The most remarkable statement by Averroes about the 'religious' vocation of the philosopher is found, however, in his *Long Commentary on the Metaphysics of Aristotle*, where he

speaks of philosophical reflection as a form, indeed the noblest form, of divine worship:

The *sharī'ah* specific to the philosophers (*al-ḥukamā'*) is the investigation of all beings, since the Creator is not worshipped by a worship more noble than the knowledge of those things that He produced which lead to the knowledge in truth of His essence—may He be exalted! That [investigation philosophers undertake] is the most noble of the works belonging to Him and the most favored of them that we do in God's presence. How great is it to perform this service which is the most noble of services and to take it on with this compliant obedience which is the most sublime of obediences!³⁶

Also rather extraordinary in this respect is Averroes's *en passant* statement in *al-Kashf*, in the pages devoted to God's attribute of speech, that the learned (*al-'ulamā'*) are the heirs of the prophets by reason of what God imparts to them through the intermediary of demonstrations (*bi-wāsiṭati l-barāhīn*). Commenting on Qur'ān 42:50, a verse which mentions three ways in which God addresses human beings (by revelation, from behind a veil, and by means of a messenger), Averroes explains:

Revelation, then, is the creation of that meaning [intended by God] in the soul of the person receiving it without the intermediary of utterance ... And "from behind the veil" refers to the speech that takes place through utterances created by [God] in the soul of the one He favors with His speech ... As for His saying: "Otherwise, He sends forth a messenger," it is the third way that occurs through the intermediary of an angel. God's speech might also include that which He imparts to the learned who are the heirs of the prophets through the intermediary of demonstrations (pp. 48-49).

Concluding Remarks

To summarize and conclude, I have suggested that Averroes's *Faṣl al-maqāl* is not merely a juridical defense of the practice of philosophy in terms of Islamic law, but that underneath this legal framework there is a real concern to reconcile the findings of reason with the revealed Word of God accepted by faith. That Averroes gave absolute prepon-

³⁶ Averroes, *Long Commentary of the Metaphysics*, 1:10.11–16 (Bouyges, 1952), translated in Taylor, "Ibn Rushd/Averroes and 'Islamic' Rationalism," 232. See also Taylor, "Averroes on the Sharī'ah of the Philosophers."

derance to demonstrative reason over the literal wordings of Scripture in solving any possible conflict between the two is beyond doubt. As said earlier, that was enough of itself to earn him the hostility of a great part of the traditional religious establishment. However, to infer from this that Averroes saw the “divine Law” in Farabian terms, that is, as the work of a gifted orator and poet intended to convey philosophical truth to the masses under the guise of images and metaphors, is, to my mind, an unwarranted conclusion. Unquestionably, Averroes had an exalted view of philosophy as being far above any other traditional religious science, but it is significant that he conceived “the art of arts” in teleological terms, leading to “true cognizance” of the Divine Artisan. The study of philosophy required not only intellectual and moral integrity, but also legal integrity from the viewpoint of Islamic law. Philosophy was indeed a form of worship in itself, the noblest work to be carried out in God’s presence. In addition to investigating all existing beings, philosophers had been chosen by God to exert their minds in reconciling the apparent conflicts in the revealed text, addressed to the entire human race. God had made the learned the heirs of the prophets by granting them a share in God’s speech through the intermediary of demonstration.

Of course, one can always decide that what Averroes wrote and what he *really* meant are two different things. It is surely preferable to tread carefully, following Bonin’s counsel, for “we cannot have full and certain knowledge of the inward dispositions of another human being, especially not across a distance of centuries.”³⁷ Did Averroes intend to reconcile philosophy and religion in the *Faṣl al-maqāl* or was he only setting up clear boundaries between the two in order to protect philosophy from religion? Who can say for sure? It seems a good idea, therefore, to give the last word to Averroes himself, who, in a passage of *al-Kashf*, explains as follows his motivation for writing these two treatises:

The right course for [al-Ghazālī] to follow would have been not to divulge philosophy (*al-ḥikma*) to the general public, but once this divulgence was done, the right thing now was for that group of the public who believes that religion (*al-sharīʿa*) contradicts philosophy, to know that it does not contradict it ... For this reason, we were forced in the present work to define the fundamental principles

³⁷ Bonin, “A Muslim Perspective on Philosophy & Religion,” pp. 4-5.

of religion (*uṣūl al-sharī'a*). For, if its principles are carefully examined, they would be found to be more compatible with philosophy than its interpretations. The same is true of the opinion of those who believe that philosophy contradicts religion. They should know that the reason is that they did not fully comprehend philosophy or religion. That is why we were compelled to write our book *Faṣl al-maqāl* on the accord of philosophy and religion (*fi muwāfaqati l-ḥikma lil-sharī'a*) (pp. 70-71, edited).³⁸

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³⁸ Arabic text in Averroes, *al-Kashf 'an manāhij al-adilla fi 'aqā'id al-milla*, pp. 152-153.

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Recibido: 13/02/2012

Aceptado: 10/10/2013