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## Reason and Revelation for an Averroist Pursuit of *Convivencia*<sup>[1]</sup> and Intercultural Dialogue

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**ABSTRACT** Throughout medieval thought, a major issue raised was that of the relationship between religion and philosophy. Alternative frameworks see the problem as a conflict between faith and reason, tradition and speculation, mysticism and rationalism. The medieval Muslim philosopher Ibn Rushd, or Averroes, (1126-98), who lived in medieval Spain, attempts in his philosophy to reconcile philosophy with religion. This article probes into an 'Averroist dialogue' through his rationalist philosophy. Meanwhile, al-Ghazali (1058-1111), from Persia, tends towards an Islamic philosophy based on cause and effect and determined by God. Ibn Rushd's retaliation to al-Ghazali was his defence of the primacy of philosophy and reason, and a call for diversity of knowledge. Ibn Rushd explicates the relation between religion and philosophy as two different ways of reaching the same truth, and clarifies the connection between Islamic law and Greek science, striving for a rapprochement between the Islamic 'I' and the European 'Other' through his epistemological principles of dialogue in a time of *convivencia* (coexistence) in medieval Andalusia.

You too! oh palm, are  
Foreign to this soil.  
(Ibn Rushd, quoted in Borges, 1964, p. 154)

### **Introduction: the search for Aristotelian and Islamic horizons of understanding**

The main theme of this article is not to reintroduce Ibn Rushd's philosophical accounts which arose in the Islamic world of the Middle Ages, but rather to discuss the setting within which his philosophy and his persona contributed to the enhancement of intercultural dialogue. The theoretical framework and the structure of the arguments merit some exploration and attention for their philosophical rigour. The article discusses the relations between reason and revelation according to his perspective; his political view is highlighted where the nexus between the two was influential; and some inferences are drawn from his arguments for a multicultural global polity. Some questions that can be asked are: To what extent did his works contribute to the intercultural diversity enrichment of the era in medieval Spain? What are the aspects in his works which underlie intercultural diversity and dialogue? And do they increase our understanding of civilizational and cultural dialogue?

A descendant of an intellectual, Ibn Rushd was the Supreme Judge of Cordoba's grandson, who saw his city as a centre of knowledge and thought for Andalusia and for medieval Europe. The other fields that he excelled in besides philosophy were medicine and jurisprudence, mathematics

and theology. Yet, he was far from welcomed for his vigorous defence in reconciling Greek philosophy with the teachings of Islam. The masses and conservative religious scholars of his time accused him of heresy; the narrow-minded Europeans were suspicious of his philosophy, while the upper classes in Cordoba appreciated his controversial writings. In Marrakesh, before 1159, he commenced his first philosophical work, motivated by the desire to evidence that man is rational and nature is intelligible and its interpretation is a legitimate task of man, and that science and faith are not at odds, which was largely upheld in the West, with the struggle to reconcile both. Later, due to complex political and doctrinal reasons, he was among some of the philosophers to be expelled from the court. Around 1196, he regained favour at the court in Marrakesh, where he stayed until his death in 1198.

Ibn Rushd's commentaries have given new direction to Aristotelian philosophy by putting it in the new intellectual context of a multicultural medieval Spain, which witnessed hot but open debates between religion and philosophy on state issues in the eastern and western parts of the Islamic world. Ibn Rushd aimed to make a clear distinction between philosophical and religious discourse. The Averroist corpus was produced within a context of a unique political agenda and marked a serious moment of rupture from the dominant intellectual tradition of the East that was ruled by the Abbassid dynasty. The Almohads in North Africa and Andalusia wanted to build an independent intellectual tradition in an independent intellectual state. Ibn Rushd was, indeed, important in forming a more liberal intellectual system that enhanced critical thinking. He is placed in his historical and cultural context with an enlightened individualism, free thinking, open-mindedness, tolerance and consistency in multicultural medieval Spain.

This was a crucial historical moment because towards the end of his life, theology got a grip on civic discourse. The writing of his commentaries on Aristotle involved a revolutionary intellectual project launched by the Almohads. In order to achieve this goal, they patronized and sponsored academic works to develop their political, social and economic system in the Islamic West. The cultural uprising stemmed from their aspiration to revitalize Arab-Islamic intellectual tradition and to counter the rise of orthodox Islamic thought in the East led by al-Ghazali. In *Fasl al-Maqal* (On the Harmony of Religions and Philosophy), written in 1190, Ibn Rushd underlines the importance of the universal feature of logic as a tool with no ideology, illustrating metaphorically a sharp knife borrowed from someone else to sacrifice an animal (Leaman, 2001, pp. 46-47). After highlighting the instrumentalist perspective on knowledge, he shows the importance of 'a code of ethics in reading classical texts' and academic honesty (Leaman, 2001, p. 48).

Endowed with powerful logic, keen understanding and a sharp mind, he believed in the ability of reason to fathom the utmost secrets of the universe. This task needs allegorical or metaphorical interpretations of the religious text, capable of giving various levels of meaning to a passage, but the understanding should not contradict the affirmative truths in the Quran. He holds that both the allegorical and metaphorical interpretations are based on the same truths: a *double truth* doctrine, one held by the erudite philosopher and the other by common people. He advances that the same truth is represented in both, though their modes of exposition vary. Ian Netton depicts him as 'a proponent of a multivocal expression of truth' through which one can

validly conceive of a universe of intellectual discourse in which contradictions flourish ... and examine the articulation and interrelatedness of those units of contradictions as they contribute towards the global structure of the discourse itself: the actual truth or otherwise of the individual units of such discourse may be left as a matter of faith rather than proof of reason. (Netton, 1989, p. 328)

Ibn Rushd contends that the primacy of reason is unquestioned but is compatible with revelation (Fakhri, 1997, p. 34). The only difference between philosophical and theological truth is in the way to attain it. He advances that if the deep meaning of Quranic verses is understood, then the position of the philosopher agrees with that of the theologian (Fakhri, 1997, pp. 33-34). His contributions became a source of inspiration for scholars and the major mode of social thought in Europe. Averroism was highly influential in modern social thought, and it remained dominant until the end of the sixteenth century, despite orthodox attacks among Muslims in Andalusia and the East, Jewish Talmudists and Christian clergy. Harold Nebelsick (1992, p. 9) mentions the evolution of social thought moving from the South-East to the West, and that the outcome was

'the Renaissance in the 13th century, the Protestant Reformation in the 16th century, and eventually the rise of modern science in the 17th'.

Ibn Rushd confesses that he adheres to Islam and avers the ethical and political necessity of confirming traditional spiritual beliefs, but shows commitment to philosophy by offering a defence of the religious obligation to pursue philosophy. He advocates that revelation can be guided by reason. Al-Ghazali contends that everything is the outcome of ongoing divine will, while any causal relation is secondary. Ibn Rushd retorts that if the divine will can be the cause, 'to deny the existence of efficient causes which are observed in sensible things is sophistry ... denial of cause implies the denial of knowledge and denial of knowledge implies that nothing in the world can really be known' (Hoodbhoy, 1991, p. 114).

It might be, as Ivry (1998, p. 52) maintains, that he was just employing a similar criterion to religion as he employed to other areas of investigation – that it had proper premises which were not self-evident. Furthermore, he knew that the specific nature of the contention made in Islam based on a belief in miracles did not conform to natural and empirical bases, which he saw as necessary for rational discourse. In this regard, his theology is philosophical, where his assertions of Islam are appropriate on the universal and impersonal scales, such as the existence and nature of God, creation and providence. Therefore, his God is the philosopher's God with no ethnic or historical background. Yet, for him, God relates to the universe more directly and affectedly. This is how Ibn Rushd of the twelfth century pondered with logic and political purposes on such questions. He had more affinity for rhetoric than poetics to express truth, acknowledging the importance of rhetoric in religious discourse (Butterworth, 1977, pp. 73, 84).

His commentaries on classical thinkers are not to be seen as derivative but rather as original perceptive works compared with the original works of Aristotle or Plato. His work on Plato's *Republic* is important, with the idea that society is perfectible and develops and changes, contrary to the view of Muslim and Christian theologians who believed the order of the world was preordained and immutable (Butterworth, 1985, pp. 17-45). The political tensions during the rule of the Almohads in his lifetime did not seem to affect his productive appetite and relative peace and prosperity. His version of criticism applied Plato's theories to his own time, discussing the areas where the system in Cordoba failed. He considered, at some point, that it was tyrannical from 1145 onwards during the reign of his patron, the sultan. The corollary was his arrest and exile to Marrakesh, while his books were burned. The reason why he gained disfavour is probably owing to his pledge to rationalism and frank social criticism.

### **Is Inter-philosophical Dialogue Possible?**

Philosophical renderings in Andalusia and North Africa, according to Dussel (2009, p. 513), inspired by scientific empiricism and strictly Aristotelian thought, with the characteristic indoctrination of intellectualism by the ruling Almohads dynasty, produced an enlightened rationalist thinker, Ibn Rushd, who would contribute to the emergence of Latin-Germanic philosophy by the thirteenth century onward that was, at the same time, the foundational moment of the modern European philosophy. Ibn Rushd perfectly defines what inter-philosophical dialogue should be:

Undoubtedly we should build upon and take from the contributions resulting from the research of all who have preceded us (the Greeks, the Christians), as sources of assistance in our process of rational study ... Given that this is so, and since the ancient philosophers already studied with great diligence the rules of reasoning (logic, method), it will be appropriate for us to dedicate our labors to the study of the works of these ancient philosophers, and if everything we find in them is reasonable, we can accept it, *and if not, those things that are not reasonable can serve as a warning and a basis for precaution.* (Al-Jabri, 2001, pp. 157-158; original emphasis)

The new enlightenment with the primacy of reason in pursuing human affairs brought a 'confidence in the power of reason and that faith in rationality of the universe without which science will have been impossible' (Dawson, 1967, p. 230). Rationalism emerged to counter the authority of the church. Ibn Rushd produced an unprecedented intellectual upheaval which developed social thought in medieval Islam and the Christian West. Intellectual creativity was at its peak and learned men were in search of common ground to face the conservatism and rigidity of

competing parties. Thus, there were increasing numbers of translations and scientific and artistic works in Andalusia fusing the efforts of Muslim, Christian and Jewish people. New intellectual endeavours and productions were encouraged with scientific and cultural richness, paving the way for the forthcoming Renaissance, which began in southern Europe.

There is the possibility of 'civilizational dialogue'. Ibn Rushd lived during the twelfth century in the Andalusian city of Cordoba, where Muslim rule began in 711. His writings on Plato and Aristotle elegantly combined Aristotelian conceptions of theoretical reason and nature with the Islamic requirements of faith and socio-religious consensus. Being a member of the elite community, he emphasized the relentlessly critical component of the Cordoban intellectual project, particularly the manner in which it would remove the bad faith in mysticism, clericalism and fideism. In so doing, Ibn Rushd exemplifies how reason and revelation can operate in a symbiotic relationship, rendering him an advocate for liberal toleration.

### **A Symbiosis between Reason and Revelation for a Common Horizon of Truth**

Before and during his epoch, philosophy as a discipline faced much constraint, attack and suspicion. Philosophy as a new field in the Islamic world was no longer rigorously classical but had rather a late Hellenistic Neoplatonic character, with some mystical speculation. Ibn Rushd appeared on the scene within this contextual framework. Being aware of the situation, he committed much time to saving the legitimacy and integrity of human thought and reason against the backdrop of various attacks. His main task in order to achieve his goal was to strip Greek philosophy of later accretions and reread it in the light of the Islamic context of the time. He sought to safeguard Aristotle's heritage from intrusive illuminationist and mystical trends of thought which were popular in the Islamic East. In addition to his vehement critique of the East's strand of thinking, Ibn Rushd aimed to invalidate the legal and political charges against philosophy regarding intrinsic heresy and possible disbelief. In his treatise *Fasl al-Maqal* (see Hourani, 1967), he believes that although humans follow different paths, they eventually reach a uniform or identical formulation of transcendental 'truth'. Although venerating a common horizon of truth, human articulations of truth are essentially distinct, owing to the diversity of human aptitudes and available linguistic or discursive genres. Ibn Rushd differentiates between three genres of discourse (reasoning), which are basically Aristotelian in nature: demonstrative, dialectical and rhetorical modes of speech (Buijs, 2002, p. 161). *Burhan*, the first genre, is logical-deductive and proceeds from valid premises to valid conclusions. The dialectical genre depends on approximate or probable assumptions, while the rhetorical genre relies on daily common-sense assumptions. Ibn Rushd strived to relate these kinds of discourse to different groups of people by declaring demonstration to be the province of philosophers, dialectical assumption to be the activity of clerics and theologians, and rhetorical speech to be the customary genre of ordinary individuals. He refers to the Quran, which states that the scripture is addressed to all humankind, regardless of their aptitudes and capacity of understanding, and hence its interpretation must not be dominated by one group or discursive genre (see Hourani, 1967).

If Ibn Rushd made reference to non-Muslim cultures and civilizations, he did not intend to position himself outside his social and societal confines. He was deeply devoted to a shared horizon of a social and political praxis, a horizon connecting people with the largest diversity of aptitudes (Leaman, 2001, p. 16). He strove in developing virtue in his daily practical life, mainly enhancing fair judgment and commitment to justice, following Aristotelian ethics. These ethical stands are maintained by Islamic religious texts. The role of the philosopher is not that of an iconoclast or conceited scholar, but an engaged and humble thinker and advisor for the pursuit of good and happiness and the prevention of extreme and destructive excesses. His commitment to a shared horizon of praxis is obvious in his *Fasl al-Maqal*, wherein he mentions, concerning practical matters, that people concur 'truth about them should be disclosed to all people alike' and 'to reach concurrence in these matters we consider it sufficient that the question at issue should have been widely discussed' and that 'no report of controversy should have been handed down to us' (see Dallmayr, 2002, p. 128) The same commitment is apparent in demanding that a typical philosopher must embody two important qualities: (1) natural intelligence and (2) 'religious integrity and

practical virtue', a disposition which normally any Muslim must be endowed with (see Dallmayr, 2002, p. 128).

### From Social Order to a World Order of Diversity in Unity

Ibn Rushd, in his *Tahafut al-Tahafut* (The Incoherence of the Incoherence), discussed the distinctions between various religions, claiming that there is no fundamental difference between Judaism, Christianity and Islam. He argued that they are all popular versions of eternal truths which are best articulated by rationalistic philosophy (Wolfson, 1973, p. 583). He encouraged philosophers to be involved within the community. Philosophers were therefore directed to consciously choose a religion which would be most beneficial to them, since there was no real difference between religions; it was just historical circumstances which caused them to reach their golden age in different periods (Bouyges, 1930, p. 462, in Van den Bergh, 1969, pp. 360-361). Thus, Ibn Rushd explained that the different religions share the same basic beliefs, goals and means. They all teach the existence of God and hold the doctrine of life after death. They address both the common people and intellectuals, aiming at improving everyone's lives and enabling the capable to gain eternal spiritual life. Ibn Rushd explained that those goals are achieved by formulating commandments which regulate social life. The motivation for keeping social order is the belief in God. Ibn Rushd emphasized that the different religions establish common commandments in order to strengthen this belief. They all have prayers, fasts and sacrifices.

### Communion between Reason and Revelation for Human Validity

If man wants to assess the meaning of life, he must, first of all, rely on openness to the 'Other', whose presence is ultimately beneficial. *Passive intellect*, rigidity and closure constitute obstacles to the achievement of a pure life. Ibn Rushd demonstrates the necessity of dialogue between reason and revelation, between individuals and cultures, and between differences. With reason as a common denominator, to dialogue augurs an exigency. Reason must be unconditional and explicated by divine text which recommends *qiyas* ('reasoning'). Originality resides in the fact that divine injunctions establish autonomy and the responsibility of reason. Revelation, which takes the risk of intervening in the life of human beings, does not limit the horizon by its orientations, but rather orientates man to assume his responsibilities. This permits man first to welcome the 'Other' as different to himself, a stranger with a *strangeness* of difference, to realize justice and happiness. It permits transformations and changes produced through the ongoing time sequence. Ultimately, it permits access to the holistic meaning of life, transcending its aspectual differences, incongruity and unpredictability.

Reason, according to Ibn Rushd, is the privileged tool for achieving *convivencia*. He knows that the Quran distinguishes, but does not oppose, the subjective and the objective, the sacred and the profane, although the field of the sacred is limited to some fields and symbols. The goal of the thinker is to reach a universal culture of reason and revelation, which dwell everywhere. He attacks what might resist this dimension of connectivity, this junction and disjunction, of which he shows the potentialities. In the version of humanity according to Islam, we note the exigency of openness to the Other with vigilance, without falling captive to the Other. Ibn Rushd thinks that Islam poses the necessity of thinking about difference, as he thinks it a crucial element to learn how to know the Other within the frame of creation. This direction as underlined by Ibn Rushd is the one of giving answers without preconditions, which must not be submitted to any restraint. Revelation is that intuitive response, he thinks. In faith, for him, we can affirm today that we could not comprehend religion if we oppose or confound reason and revelation, oneself and the Other, meaning and logic, the similar and the different.

The conditions of validity and access to the universal are today a global problem. In dealing with the question of the relation with the Other, the stranger, the different in names and place of origin, Ibn Rushd handles the issue of universal validity, transcending antagonisms produced by differences between reason and intuition. In his discussion, as we have seen, he does not only seek to accord them into harmony, but there is a difficulty in the validity of truth. Access to universal truth, in his view, goes through a sort of meeting with the Other, the similar, the different. Ibn

Rushd's thinking rejects those imposing conditions, either conservative or moderate, who practise rigidity and closure, opposition and rejection. Islam makes distinctions without opposition, enjoining without confounding the self and the Other, the temporal and the spiritual, reason and faith – all that, in articulation, can make sense and give meaning. Opening towards the Other without any a-priori conditions is the best means to know them.

The act of thinking sets as a goal knowing God and humanity, transcending the limits and conditions imposed by subjectivity to approach the universal. Ibn Rushd shows that not only does the Quran call for knowledge and frank debate based on the ethic of respect, a sine qua non to enhance a rapprochement between humanity within the limits of the possible and the extent of what is required from them. His thinking sheds light on the complex difficulty of coexisting together in a responsible manner. He always privileges mutual understanding and open debate and takes courage in reaching the Other. For him, reason is what allows the coexistence between cultures and the main dimensions of life. Welcoming reflection on the Other, on reason, on the universal is an act of true humanity. To reason, to dialogue and to accept the Other is not to abdicate, to relinquish one's own values and intuition, but rather to open up possibilities of enriching life and to receive the strangeness of life in a responsible manner through exchange. Reason which does not welcome difference and build bridges is in rupture with what is required of revelation and of the human condition. He is concerned with maintaining a connection between reason and revelation and between diverse cultures in his 'double truth' theory. It is about conjoining revelation as an act of faith and reason as a risk to undertake for learning how to coexist and accept the Other and to assume life in its pluralistic dimensions.

### **Conclusion: an intercultural dialogue for a universal civilization**

In this epoch of increasing cultural uniformity, it is essential for us to respect diverse cultures and seek their coexistence. The Islamic world during medieval times enjoyed considerable mobility of trade and people across vast regions, which brought scholars into contact with sources of learning. There was an active exchange of views between Jewish rabbis and Muslim and Christian theologians. In this environment, scholars and scientists of whatever background would enter into dialogue and exchanges with the locals in Andalusia and in other centres such as Cairo, Baghdad and Samarkand. From the eight century, they became academic centres where Europeans could study advanced Islamic culture, sciences and the arts.

Intercultural dialogue might help dissipate misrecognition and misunderstanding, and clarify and rediscover the line for openness towards the Other, that of the universal. In the absence of a universal civilization, we need to approach each other, to reread with critique all the past master thinkers and philosophers in order to learn how to live together in another *convivencia*. Different forms of interreligious dialogue can exist, as they existed in medieval Spain and other parts of the globe. A *dialogue of life* is possible where individuals live in an open and friendly spirit, sharing their joys and sorrows, their human problems and preoccupations. Dialogue can be of *action*, in which people of diverse faiths coexist and collaborate for the development and freedom of people. Theologians can dialogue to try to deepen their understanding of their respective religious traditions and to appreciate each other's spiritual values. Dialogue can be of *religious experience*, where individuals, rooted in their own religions, share their spiritual wealth – for instance, with regard to faith and ways of searching for God. There is a clear interdependence between these genres of dialogue.

There is a need to open up a new route to 'global civilization' based on tolerance and symbiosis, without hierarchical notions of cultures and civilizations. That understanding is the necessary premise of inter-civilizational dialogue. Civilizations are products of the human imagination made to adapt to, transform and transcend the universal human conditions of finitude, fragility and moral frailty. Each culture and civilization in its own unique way offers its members ways of self-transcendence, moral fortitude and resistance to force. Indeed, human imagination and vigour for change imbue cultures and civilizations with life. Diversity, reason and faith must be valued and celebrated as signs of human genius. To speak of higher and lower civilizations is to miss the main value of diversity in the unfolding of human history.

## Note

- [1] Translated as *coexistence*. *Convivencia* as a concept denotes the 'coexistence' of the Andalusian communities constituted of Christian, Muslim, and Jewish in medieval Spain and by extension the cultural interaction and exchange fostered by such proximity which fostered a higher level of interculturalism that survived for about five centuries.

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