

**A MUSLIM PERSPECTIVE
ON PHILOSOPHY & RELIGION:
*The Decisive Treatise of Averroës****

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THE BEST WAY FOR US, as Christians and Westerners, to approach Averroës is to begin with events in the intellectual history of the West, where he had more influence than in the Islamic world. Then, once we have seen him as his Christian readers saw him, we can try to glimpse him in his native habitat.

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In the West, as knowledge of Greek declined along with the old Roman empire, the philosophically inclined had to rely on Latin translations of Greek texts, which meant a little Plato and no Aristotle except for parts of his logic. Aristotle's "content-works," those works in which we see what he accomplishes with logic, entered Latin as a large and not very digestible mass only in the second half of the twelfth century.

Readers confronted with these difficult texts did what readers today do: they clamored for commentaries. And translators obliged, putting both Greek and Arabic commentaries into Latin.

Among the commentators, readers found Averroës particularly helpful, which explains why St. Thomas Aquinas could refer to him

*This talk was presented at the Franciscan University of Steubenville on Friday, 4 November 2005, before an audience of undergraduates and M.A. students, most with no prior knowledge of Islamic philosophy; perhaps it will prove useful to others who wish an introduction to Islamic thought.

simply as “the Commentator” and expect everyone to understand which commentator he meant.

Part of Averroës’ appeal was his meticulous attention to detail. He wrote three kinds of commentary on Aristotle—the short, the middle, and the long—and sometimes all three kinds on one Aristotelian text. The long commentaries offer line-by-line analysis, which leaves no room for hand-waving or pretending not to notice puzzling phrases. And Averroës took the trouble to revise his short and middle commentaries in light of what he found as he prepared the long ones.

Another reason for Averroës’ appeal was that he faced difficulties more or less the same as those troubling Western readers. To begin with the West again, Aristotle’s very impressive and comprehensive account of reality appears to contradict that of the Bible in spots. In other words, reason, as ably represented by Aristotle, seems to contradict faith.

For example, Aristotle clearly thought that the world had always existed, whereas Genesis speaks of a beginning. Not so clear but equally troubling was Aristotle’s suggestion that God knows only himself, a situation which would make nonsense of divine providence. Also, Aristotle is hard to pin down on the question of personal immortality, without which hope for heaven becomes wishful thinking and fear of hell becomes a child’s fear of monsters in the dark. Finally, even though the notion of resurrection never crossed Aristotle’s mind, arguments he makes in his work on coming to be and passing away seem to show that resurrection is impossible.

How were Christian thinkers to interpret Aristotle and deal with what looked like contradictions between faith and reason? Some looked to Averroës for guidance. At first that may seem like an odd move: why would Christians turn to a twelfth-century Muslim for help with the problem of faith and reason?

But their discomfort was not an exclusively Christian discomfort. The Qur’ān speaks of creation, providence, heaven, hell, and resurrection, just as does the Bible. And Averroës, as an expert in Islamic law,

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knew right well what the Qurʾān said. Nor had he failed to put Aristotle and the Qurʾān side-by-side, noting the points of tension. He told one of his students how an older philosopher, Ibn Ṭufayl, who also happened to be the caliph's medical advisor, introduced him to the caliph; Averroës was about 42 at the time, and he described the episode like this:

When I entered into the presence of the Prince of the Believers, Abū Yaʿqūb, I found him with Abū Bakr Ibn Ṭufayl alone. Abū Bakr began praising me, mentioning my family and ancestors and generously including in the recital things beyond my real merits. The first thing that the Prince of the Believers said to me, after asking me my name, my father's name and my genealogy was: "What is their opinion about the heavens?"—referring to the philosophers—"Are they eternal or created?" Confusion and fear took hold of me, and I began making excuses and denying that I had ever concerned myself with philosophic learning; for I did not know what Ibn Ṭufayl had told him on the subject. But the Prince of the Believers understood my fear and confusion, and turning to Ibn Ṭufayl began talking about the question of which he had asked me, mentioning what Aristotle, Plato and all the philosophers had said, and bringing in besides the objections of the Muslim thinkers against them...¹

Averroës, then, shared with his Western, Christian readers the problem of the relation between sacred texts and Aristotelian texts. What solution did Christians find in his commentaries?

Some found no solution there at all, but others, whom we call Latin Averroists,² understood the relation between Aristotle and the

¹Quoted by George F. Hourani in his translation of *The Decisive Treatise* (London: Luzac, 1976), pp. 12–13. All quotations of *The Decisive Treatise* itself will be from Hourani's version, which is available as an e-text at www.muslimphilosophy.com and on this site.

²In thirteenth-century texts, "Averroist" means one who adopts Averroës' account

Bible in the way Averroës appeared to understand the relation between Aristotle and the Qur'ān. That is, they argued that the world has always existed, in timeless dependence on the timeless God; that God does not know particular creatures in their particularity; that all human beings share a common intellect, such that immortality is collective and impersonal, not individual; and that resurrection cannot occur. The same persons who argued these positions also professed orthodox beliefs, although they judged them false according to philosophical principles.

If you find yourselves wondering how one and the same individual can profess orthodox beliefs but judge them false according to philosophical principles, you are not alone: it does seem an extraordinarily difficult thing to do. In fact, it seems downright impossible: “with the truth all things harmonize,” but these men maintained discordant views as though they had never heard of the principle of contradiction.

Of course, we all know the principle of contradiction. Even people who have never heard of it know that the same thing cannot both be and not be at the same time and in the same way. Small children arguing on the playground assert the principle of contradiction, albeit with simpler formulas. And the Latin Averroists knew the principle of contradiction not only with the vague, if unavoidable, recognition of those who have never given it careful articulation; they knew it as devoted students of Aristotle, who made an elaborate defense of it in his *Metaphysics*.

But when they professed orthodox beliefs while judging those beliefs false according to philosophical principles, what were the Latin Averroists doing if not embracing a contradiction? Here we must tread carefully: we cannot have full and certain knowledge of the inward dispositions of another human being, especially not across a

of the intellect. In the broader sense in which I am using it, the term is not entirely satisfactory—as neither is any other term for the thinkers to whom I refer—, but it is convenient for our purposes.

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distance of centuries. Perhaps some of them had rejected the faith but found it expedient to profess faith anyway. Perhaps some were just confused Christians, as we ourselves may be; if their writings were cautious or less than forthcoming, that bought them time to think things through. And perhaps others had never given enough attention to their faith either to reject or to become confused about it; they philosophized as if their faith were irrelevant to their search for truth, and maybe they lived as if their faith were irrelevant.

Whatever was in their hearts, their contemporaries sensed confusion or dishonesty or some combination thereof, and tried to bring them to clarity and honesty by accusing them of proposing what has come to be called the “double truth theory.” That is, they accused the Latin Averroists of claiming that what is true according to philosophical principles may be false according to faith, and that what is true according to faith may be philosophically false. Putting the same thing a different way, faith and sound reason may contradict each other, yet both are true.

That, of course, makes no sense whatsoever. No surprise, then, that we have no text in which a Latin Averroist states the double truth theory. Instead, the double truth theory is found only in texts by opponents of the Latin Averroists, because it is a reduction to the absurd. That is, opponents of the Averroists made explicit the absurdities which followed from their duplicitous, expedient, or careless statements, in an attempt to force them to show their hand or to face difficulties they were ignoring.



Now what would Averroës have thought of his Latin disciples? Who was the real Averroës?

He was born around 1126 into a family of renowned jurists; he himself became a judge in Seville³ and then chief judge at the Great

³1169–72.

Mosque in his native Córdoba⁴, each at different times the capital of Muslim Spain. Averroës was an equally successful doctor, serving as personal physician to the caliph Abū Ya‘qūb and to the caliph’s son and successor, al-Manṣūr;⁵ it was at the request of Abū Ya‘qūb that he wrote his Aristotelian commentaries.

As these few facts already suggest, law and politics will have everything to do with his story, so we need to know a little about Islamic law and about the vicissitudes of Muslim Spain.

Experts in Islamic law were (and are) divided into several schools of thought, among them the Malikite school. The Malikites, together with the Ḥanbalites, were called “the people of Tradition.” Their founder, Mālīk b. Anas,⁶ is perhaps best known for what he said when asked about Qur’ānic references to God sitting on His throne. Prominent Muslim theologians took this language to be an allegorical way of expressing God’s majesty, but not Mālīk, who replied:

The sitting is known; its modality is unknown. Belief in it is an obligation and raising questions regarding it is a heresy.

Reportedly, Mālīk also said,

Knowledge is threefold: the clear Book of God, past Tradition, and ‘I know not.’⁷

The Malikites, then, had no use for logical techniques in matters of religious doctrine, although they did allow for argumentation on some points of religious law—a fact which will help Averroës make his case for philosophy.

This was the unlikely atmosphere in which Averroës lived and breathed. His father was a respected Malikite judge; his grandfather

⁴1172–82.

⁵Abū Yūsuf Ya‘qūb al-Manṣūr succeeded his father in 1184; Averroës had become royal physician in 1182, at the court of Marrakesh.

⁶D. 795.

⁷Quoted in Hourani, p. 7.

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was so famous as a Malikite judge that Arabic texts avoid confusion by referring to our philosopher as “the Grandson.” And although the grandson’s legal opinions were eclectic and reflected his extensive knowledge of the many schools of legal thought, officially, he too was a Malikite judge. In fact, the whole of Muslim Spain was mostly Malikite; at times in its history, it was almost exclusively so.

If that was the state of religious law in Alandalus, what about religious speculation? Speculative theology made brief appearances now and again, but never took root. More than that, the caliph who reigned during Averroës’ youth⁸ banned theology and burned even the works of al-Ġazālī, although Ġazālī is widely considered the greatest of Islamic theologians and honored with the title “Proof of Islam.” But in the eyes of that prince, even the best speculative theology was a bad thing, and only law deserved to be studied.⁹

In this unpromising soil, philosophy managed to thrive, perhaps because it kept to itself: philosophers were a tiny minority, and they reckoned that, by the very nature of things, they would always be a tiny minority, so they never tried to be anything more. We have already seen signs of their discretion in the report that Averroës, when first introduced to the “Prince of the Believers,” had no idea of the caliph’s favorable opinion and hoped he might be able to get away with pretending never to have studied philosophy. And while almost all Westerners who have heard of Averroës think of him as a philosopher or perhaps as a figure in the history of medicine, most of his fellow Muslims knew him principally as a jurist.

Precautions notwithstanding, the learned sometimes excited the antipathy of literalists and, through them, of the populace. In both the Middle East and Alandalus, we find rulers whose personal sympathies rested with the philosophers but who feared rebellion unless they gave the philosophers over to the will of the crowds. So it was

⁸cAlī Ibn Yūsuf, the last of the Almoravid dynasty (a Malikite dynasty), reigned from 1106/7–1142/3.

⁹Nonetheless, Averroës’ youthful studies included speculative theology (*kalām*).

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with Averroës. His fellow Malikite judges were hostile to philosophy, so hostile that al-Manṣūr could not squelch their opposition. In 1195, probably because of Malikite pressure, al-Manṣūr began a persecution of philosophers. Averroës had always loved to preach in the mosque, and one of his early biographers preserves these words:

The worst thing that happened to me in my afflictions was when I and my son ‘Abdallāh entered a mosque in Córdoba at the time of the evening prayer, and some of the lowest of the common people made a commotion against us and ejected us from it.¹⁰

After his trial, his books were burned and he was exiled to Lucena, a small Jewish town south of Córdoba; two or three years later, the caliph apparently felt secure enough to summon him to Morocco,¹¹ but Averroës died shortly afterward, in 1198.

Despite the book-burning, about a hundred and four of his works survive, sometimes only in Hebrew or Latin translations. Some are legal studies, others medical treatises, and others Aristotelian commentaries; of special interest to us are his works on the relation between philosophy and religion.



Why did Averroës write about the relation between philosophy and religion? He did so about sixteen years before his fall from favor,¹² and we have no record of any particular event to which he would

¹⁰Anṣārī, quoted in Hourani, pp. 38–39.

¹¹Perhaps this did not indicate a return to favor: one early account says that Averroës died in a house of detention in Morocco. On the other hand, his sons did well as judges, and one became the caliph’s physician. The timing of the persecution suggests an attempt to strengthen religious support for the campaign against the Christian Alfonso IX.

¹²The *Decisive Treatise* seems to have been written in 1179 or a year or two earlier. It’s the second part of a trilogy; the first part is the *Epistle Dedicatory* or *Epistle on Divine Knowledge* (which has for years been called the “appendix” and put in

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have been responding; as far as we know, he simply found the anti-philosophical atmosphere in Alandalus troubling. That atmosphere came in part from the natural tendencies of literalists, and in part from the efforts of Ġazālī.

After the lifting of the ban on theology, Ġazālī found a readership in Alandalus, and among his writings was *The Incoherence of the Philosophers*, a polemical work which charged philosophers with heresy on seventeen points and outright unbelief on three more. His vigorous attack on philosophy went unanswered for some eighty years, until Averroës replied with *The Incoherence of the Incoherence*.¹³ Ġazālī also wrote a work called *The Decisive Criterion for Distinguishing Islam from Masked Infidelity*; there he argued that some of the philosophers' allegorical interpretations of the Qur'ān¹⁴ have so little to do with its meaning that they amount to unbelief. Averroës replied to this attack as well, with the *Decisive Treatise*, the work I wish to describe.

Decisive Treatise is a shortened version of its rather unwieldy title, *Book of the Distinction of the Discourse & Determination of the Connection between Religion & Philosophy*. Not only the title, but also the form of the work is strange to most of us. The text is by a philosopher and about philosophy, but it's not a philosophical text. Instead, it's a discussion of philosophy from the perspective of Islamic law, and so its form and its intended audience are legal. In other words, the *Decisive Treatise* is a judge's decision, Averroës' formal legal opinion, a *fatwā*.

The *Decisive Treatise* frames the question about philosophy in legal terms: it asks whether philosophy is obligatory or recommended

second place by mistake); the third part is the *Exposition of Religious Arguments*. We have reports that Averroës wrote a commentary on the Almohad profession of faith and a book about Ibn Tūmart, founder of the Almohads, but these are lost, as is his commentary on Ibn Ṭufayl's *Hayy Ibn Yaqzān*.

¹³*The Incoherence of the Philosophers* was completed in 1095; *The Incoherence of the Incoherence* dates to about 1180.

¹⁴Those concerning God's knowledge and the afterlife.

or merely allowed or prohibited. And Averroës draws the answer to this legal question from the four sources of Islamic law: the Qurʾān, the Traditions about the Prophet, the consensus of the Muslim community, and analogical reasoning, which was the sort of reasoning used by those lawyers who allowed for argumentation when interpreting the Qurʾān.

The foundation for Averroës' decision is that we know an artisan by his works, and that philosophy studies the works of the divine Artisan, which is something the Law urges us to do. Indeed, the Law obliges us to study the heavens and the earth, says Averroës, and he quotes some Qurʾānic verses to support his claim.

But how should we study the heavens and the earth? Since the works of the divine Artisan are the best matter for reflection, we should use the best kind of reasoning, namely, demonstration. And of course, the obligation to acquire demonstrative knowledge of God and of creatures brings with it the obligation to study logic, so that we understand what constitutes demonstrative as distinct from dialectical or rhetorical reasoning.

Now, that there are different kinds of reasoning will be central to Averroës' understanding of the relation between religion and philosophy, so, for the benefit of anyone who has not yet studied logic or who hasn't studied logic in the same terms as Averroës, let me briefly explain:

- Demonstrative or necessary arguments yield knowledge; they show, with certainty, that something is so, and the cause why it must be so.
- Dialectical or probable arguments yield opinion; starting from propositions which have some acceptance among the learned,¹⁵ they give us some reason for accepting the conclusion, but they do not establish the conclusion beyond the shadow of a doubt.

¹⁵Students of Aristotle will find this account narrower than his, but the probable arguments which concern Averroës are of this sort.

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- Rhetorical arguments use propositions which the general public tends to accept, and they aim at persuasion.

Clearly, then, if knowledge is better than opinion, so too are demonstrative arguments better than dialectical or rhetorical techniques; and when we are speaking about the highest things, we should want to have mastered logic so that we can use the best arguments.

Averroës concludes that logic is to knowledge of God as the study of legal reasoning is to knowledge of legal categories. That is, the Qurʾān commands that the lawyer place acts within some legal category such as “recommended” or “forbidden,” but the Qurʾān does not mention all acts; therefore, the Qurʾān implies a command to use legal reasoning, which in turn implies a command to study the art of legal reasoning. Likewise, says Averroës, when the Qurʾān urges us to study the works of the divine Artisan, it implicitly commands the study of logic.

In case anyone objects that the first Muslims did not study logic, Averroës retorts that neither did they study legal reasoning, and yet legal reasoning is not considered a heretical innovation. Why, then, should logic be suspect simply because it was not cultivated by the early community of believers?¹⁶ Besides, adds Averroës, we can find

¹⁶Ġazālī makes a similar argument to defend *kalām*. In Islam as in Christianity, there have always been some who want to return to the simplicity of the primitive community—an impossible dream: before long, the community finds that it needs exegetical and legal tools, and a technical terminology arises; “why not for *kalām*?” asks Ġazālī. Averroës is using Ġazālī to go where Ġazālī would not want to go by asking, “why not for demonstrative knowledge?”

Averroës is his own man in this text. The caliphs of his adult life were of the Almohad dynasty, which, in law, followed the Zāhirite school of thought, the only school which did not allow for reasoning in legal matters. Of course, the caliphs had privately abandoned the pure Almohad position in favor of philosophy, and publicly they cooperated with the Malikites, since they needed the Malikites as civil servants (the Malikites had long been firmly rooted in Spain, whereas the Almohads had only recently come from Africa). Averroës is siding with the Malikites and against the Zāhirites as far as the need for legal reasoning goes, though he tries to bring the

examples of reasoning even in the Qurʾān.¹⁷

But how do we go about the project of studying logic? One man all by himself would be hard pressed to discover everything he should know about legal reasoning; all the more so with intellectual reasoning. Fortunately, we don't have to discover the whole of logic by ourselves, because we have predecessors. And, Averroës notes, it makes no difference that those predecessors were not of our religion: using the intellectual tools of the ancients is like offering a sacrifice with a non-believer's knife; the sacrifice is valid, and that's what counts.

In this way, the Qurʾānic injunction to consider the works of the divine Artisan includes an obligation to study the books of those who came before Islam.

Once we have mastered logic and are ready for philosophy itself, again, we need predecessors. Therefore, writes Averroës,

whenever we find in the works of our predecessors of former nations a theory about beings and a reflection on them conforming to what the conditions of demonstration require, we ought to study what they said about the matter and what they affirmed in their books. And we should accept from them gladly and gratefully whatever in these books accords with the truth, and draw attention to and warn against what does not accord with the truth... (*Decisive Treatise*, cap. 1, p. 48)

Again, the upshot is that, by obliging us to think about the works of the divine Artisan, the Qurʾān obliges us to study the books of the ancients. Those who interfere with the study of these books by worthy

Malikites from their acceptance of legal reasoning to acceptance of philosophical reasoning, which they most definitely do not want. And whereas the Almohads believed in the rationality of the Qurʾān and therefore favored *kalām*, Averroës, like the Malikites, rejects it (even while agreeing about the rationality of the Qurʾān), although he knows *kalām* and can make clever borrowings from Ġazālī to establish his own view.

¹⁷This, too, is an argument Ġazālī makes; when he explains logic, he even takes sample syllogisms from the Qurʾān. (Christian theologians make the same argument about the Bible.)

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students are guilty of what Averroës calls “the extreme of ignorance and estrangement from God the Exalted” (*Decisive Treatise*, cap. 1, p. 48).

But why would anyone interfere with the study of these books? Among other reasons, because sometimes books are read by people whose minds are less than sharp or whose character is bad, or books are read in the wrong order or without a teacher, and the result is that readers go astray. Philosophy, then, would seem to be dangerous and best avoided. However, to draw that conclusion is to confuse the accidental with the essential; in the words of Averroës,

a man who prevents a qualified person from studying books of philosophy, because some of the most vicious people may be thought to have gone astray through their study of them, is like a man who prevents a thirsty person from drinking cool, fresh water until he dies of thirst, because some people have choked to death on it. (*Decisive Treatise*, cap. 1, p. 49)

Still, the occurrence of choking raises an interesting question. So far, Averroës has argued that Islamic law makes philosophy obligatory. However, he has mentioned persons of defective intellect or character who are harmed by it. Plainly, then, philosophy cannot be obligatory for everyone. For whom is it obligatory? This is the problem to which Averroës devotes the rest of the *Decisive Treatise*.

Averroës proposes that Islam is true¹⁸ and that it leads us to the happiness of knowing God and His creation, but that different persons are led differently. The reason is that Aristotle’s distinction between demonstrative, dialectical, and rhetorical arguments implies a corresponding distinction of persons. Some have a temperament and nature which fit them for following demonstrations; such a nature even requires demonstrations, because when a man is capable of following a demonstration, it will produce firmer assent in him than would merely dialectical or rhetorical arguments. That is emphatically not

¹⁸At least as interpreted by the philosopher.

the case with persons who cannot follow demonstrations; for them, firm assent comes from whichever sort of argument they can grasp.

It follows that assent to Islam is open to everyone except the stubborn and the negligent. That, says Averroës,¹⁹ is what the Qurʾān means when it says,

Summon to the way of your Lord by wisdom and by good preaching, and debate with them in the most effective manner.
(16.125, quoted in *Decisive Treatise*, cap. 1, p. 49)

“Wisdom” is philosophy, and “preaching” is a rhetorical exercise, while “debate” is dialectical.

All of this brings Averroës to a most important point: since Islam is true and urges demonstrative study, demonstrative study does not lead to conclusions which contradict Islam, “for”—in Averroës’ own words—“truth does not oppose truth but accords with it and bears witness to it” (*Decisive Treatise*, cap. 2, p. 50).

Now, that does not look like a double truth theory; how, then, does Averroës deal with contradictions between philosophy and the Qurʾān?

He begins by locating the problem more precisely. Sometimes demonstrations give us knowledge of something the Qurʾān doesn’t mention; but the fact that philosophy mentions what the Qurʾān does not is no contradiction, and philosophy is free to explore the unmentioned thing, just as the lawyer uses reason where the Qurʾān is not explicit about actions.

Contradictions can arise only when both philosophy and the Qurʾān mention a thing. However, the contradictions must be apparent contradictions only—again, because truth does not oppose truth. How can one resolve an apparent contradiction and show that it is merely seeming and not real? By interpreting the Qurʾān allegorically.

¹⁹Ġazālī also associates the three kinds of argument with this verse.

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This may seem to open the way to chaos: five people could propose five different allegorical interpretations of a single verse. It begins to look as if contradictions between philosophy and the Qur'ān are impossible because the Qur'ān in itself means nothing; it has only the meaning each reader assigns it.

That is not Averroës' intention. He does not want each reader deciding for himself how to take the Qur'ān, because most readers are not competent to see allegorical interpretations. Who is competent? Philosophers.

This claim may seem self-serving, but Averroës has an argument for it: whereas the common run of mankind and even most cultivated men live by persuasion or, at best, by opinion, philosophers alone have necessary knowledge of reality, that is, demonstrations. And in view of their knowledge of reality, philosophers alone are fully competent to distinguish between verses which can be taken at face value and verses which require allegorical reading if they are to express reality.

Of course, there is no question of a philosophical free-for-all: since the Qur'ān was written in Arabic, allegorical interpretations must respect the rules of Arabic grammar regarding metaphorical speech. But that is the only limit placed on the philosopher.

Here it helps to know that Sunnī Islam has nothing like a magisterium when it comes to doctrinal matters, although it does have authoritative teaching in practical matters. Generally, Islam concerns itself more with orthopraxy than orthodoxy. And if the lawyer is competent to interpret what the Qur'ān says about practical matters, who is competent to interpret it in theoretical matters? Who else but the philosopher? Again, this is not self-serving: Averroës, faced with a text in need of interpretation and unable to point to a doctrinal magisterium, naturally suggests that the most competent should determine its meaning.

After all, philosophers can argue with certainty, whereas lawyers, who deal with practical matters, can offer only dialectical arguments;

yet even lawyers resort to allegorical interpretation when two scriptural texts appear to contradict each other.

Notice what has happened in the *Decisive Treatise*. Averroës' premises have come from Islamic law; however, his conclusion is that philosophers are the ones most competent to judge the meaning of Islamic law. And even Ġazālī would agree with Averroës that the Qur'ān needs interpretation. Ġazālī's disagreement is only that personal mystical experience rather than philosophical demonstration should be the standard by which we judge the true meaning hidden under the figurative speech. Averroës' approach would seem safer than Ġazālī's, in that mystical experience is at least as subject to misunderstanding as is figurative speech.

Averroës finds support for his position in the Qur'ān, which admits to its own ambiguity with this famous verse:

He it is who has sent down to you the Book, containing certain verses clear and definite—they are the essence of the Book—and others ambiguous. Now those in whose hearts is mischief go after the ambiguous passages, seeking discord and seeking to interpret them allegorically. But no one knows their interpretation except God and those who are well grounded in science.
(3.7)

In the Arabic, that verse itself is ambiguous,²⁰ but Averroës passes

²⁰In his note on this part of the text (n. 87 on pp. 97–98), Hourani explains that, as Averroës reads the Qur'ān, these lines are followed by the sentence, "They say, 'We believe in it, it is all from our Lord; but only men of intelligence give heed.'" But if one punctuates the unpunctuated text differently, one gets this reading: "He it is who has sent down to you the Book, containing certain verses clear and definite—they are the essence of the Book—and others ambiguous. Now those in whose hearts is mischief go after the ambiguous passages, seeking discord and seeking to interpret them allegorically. But no one knows their interpretation except God. And those who are well grounded in science say, 'We believe in it, it is all from our Lord; but only men of intelligence give heed.'" In this case, the learning of the learned consists in their knowing what they do not know. Averroës punctuates the text both ways, choosing where to put the stop according to the needs of his audience.

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over that point to an explanation why the Qurʾān would contain any ambiguities at all.

The reason is that the Qurʾān addresses different sorts of reader. It has an apparent as well as an inner meaning because some readers cannot understand anything beyond the apparent meaning. To quote Averroës,

God has been gracious to those of His servants who have no access to demonstration, on account of their natures, habits or lack of facilities for education: He has coined for them images and likenesses of these things, and summoned them to assent to those images. . . (*Decisive Treatise*, cap. 2, p. 59)

The Qurʾān also nurtures the learned, and so, besides images, it has seemingly contradictory verses, because they “draw the attention of those who are well grounded in science to the interpretation which reconciles them” (*Decisive Treatise*, cap. 2, p. 51).

Now, if we understand the Qurʾān as addressing each according to his ability, then we, too, must treat its readers responsibly. Averroës mentions evidence that even the earliest Muslims distinguished between the apparent and the inner meaning of the Qurʾān and held that the inner meaning should not be communicated to those who are incapable of understanding it. In the words of the fourth caliph,²¹ cited by Averroës,

Speak to people about what they know. Do you want God and His Prophet to be accused of lying?

The reticence of the fourth caliph and of other learned Muslims has an interesting consequence. To see it, you need to know that, in Sunnī Islam, religious truth is determined first by the Qurʾān, then by the Traditions of the Prophet, and then by the consensus of the Muslim community. But even though consensus is listed third, really it is

²¹ The fourth Rightly Guided Caliph, ʿAlī Ibn Abī Ṭālib, quoted in *Decisive Treatise*, cap. 2, p. 52.

the foundation of Sunnī Islam, because consensus was what approved the written editions of the Qurʾān and the Traditions.

Now, says Averroës, lawyers have worked out methods for establishing consensus in practical matters; but in theoretical matters, we can never know that the community of believers has achieved consensus, because from the earliest days of Islam, the learned have kept some knowledge secret. We can never know that the community has agreed to take a given verse literally, because scholars have kept inner meanings to themselves. Consensus is not consensus if we leave out the learned, but we can never know that the learned agree, because they do not divulge their thoughts. Therefore, Averroës concludes, Ġazālī had no right to accuse philosophers of unbelief, because he could not prove that they had violated the consensus of believers.

In fact, Ġazālī made two dreadful mistakes: not only did he accuse philosophers unjustly, but in the process, he publicized what philosophers thought about the inner meaning of the Qurʾān. For example, while philosophers practiced the discretion recommended by the fourth caliph, Ġazālī told the world that they considered resurrection merely symbolic. Philosophers did not disturb simple believers; it was Ġazālī who troubled them by interfering with philosophers.

This brings us to an aspect of the *Decisive Treatise* which puzzles Christians. Averroës has shown the need for allegorical interpretation by mentioning apparent contradictions between philosophy and the Qurʾān and reminding us that truth does not oppose truth. He then gives philosophers the task of interpretation. And Christians often wonder why Averroës doesn't leave the task of interpreting the Qurʾān to theologians. In the absence of a doctrinal magisterium, would not speculative theologians have the most to say about the meaning of sacred texts?

Averroës admits that theologians say a lot about the Qurʾān; in fact, he thinks that they say far too much and that we would all be better off if they said nothing. Again, this hostility to theologians tends to baffle Christian readers, since we associate it with open hostility

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to religion. Averroës does not seem intent on destroying religion; indeed, he served it as a judge in a court of Islamic law. Why, then, does he want to gag theologians?

I cannot comment on contemporary Islamic theology, but from the beginnings of Islam right through Averroës' day, Islamic theology differed from Christian theology in more than doctrine. From the start, Christian theologians made use of philosophy in their efforts to understand revelation. For example, Augustine called upon Plotinus when trying to understand the literal sense of Genesis, and he turned to Porphyry for help with the problem of evil. We find nothing like that among the theologians of Islam. They made some use of logic (though most preferred to get their logic from non-Greek sources), and they picked up a few basic philosophical notions during their debates with Christians, but, for the most part, Islamic theology developed independently of Islamic philosophy.

If Islamic theology was not drawing support from philosophy, what were its tools? Theologians used dialectical arguments, that is, arguments with premises which may or may not be true but which have some currency among the specialists in a field. Therefore, Averroës can maintain that theologians do not have knowledge of reality; they have opinion only.

That would not be so bad if theologians kept their opinions to themselves, but Averroës complains that they do not. They ask questions which surpass their powers, they reach ludicrous answers, and they impose those answers upon simple believers who do not even have the questions. Worse than that, competing theological schools impose their competing answers, with the result that they upset and divide simple believers—something philosophers would never do, because philosophers discern who is capable of learning the inner meaning of the Qur'ān and who is better off humbly accepting its apparent meaning.

From this we can see that theologians are the enemies of religion, while philosophers are its friends. And if anyone has been guilty

of unbelief, it's Ġazālī, not Averroës, because Ġazālī has disturbed the unity of Islam and produced unbelief among ordinary believers by publicizing the esoteric. Therefore, the prince should impede the circulation of theological books—something he need not do for philosophical books, since their intrinsic difficulty keeps most unprepared readers away.



In order to understand why philosophers are friends of religion, we need to go outside the *Decisive Treatise* and consider Averroës' *Commentary on Plato's Republic*, a commentary he did not intend for the general public.²²

Today, some philosophers take pleasure in being dangerous and being seen as dangerous. But ancient and medieval philosophers understood philosophy as a healing of the soul. What about the souls of those who cannot grasp philosophy? Just as physicians can use poisons—drugs—to heal bodies, so the philosopher-king can use lies to heal souls. Averroës writes:

²²The *Decisive Treatise* discusses philosophy from the perspective of law; the *Commentary on Plato's Republic* discusses law from the perspective of philosophy. But even though the perspective of the *Decisive Treatise* is legal, its doctrine agrees with what Averroës says in his philosophical works. And the *Decisive Treatise* more or less invites us to go outside the *Decisive Treatise*, because it tells us that it explains only “as much as we see fit to affirm in this field of study” and it adds that “the proper place to discuss these questions is in demonstrative books” (*Decisive Treatise*, cap. 2, p. 62).

For Averroës, Aristotle's are the “demonstrative books”; Averroës comments on the *Republic* “since Aristotle's book on governance has not yet fallen into our hands” (*Averroës On Plato's “Republic,”* trans. Ralph Lerner [Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1974], §22)—indeed, Aristotle's *Politics* did not appear in Arabic until 1957. Nonetheless, we can consider this commentary among Averroës' demonstrative works insofar as “the intention of this treatise is to abstract such scientific arguments attributable to Plato as are contained in the *Republic* by eliminating the dialectical arguments from it” (§21).

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The multitude ought to be told that when one of the multitude lies to the chiefs, there is a possibility of harm resembling the harm that comes when an invalid lies to the physician about his sickness. But the chiefs' lying to the multitude will be appropriate for them in the respect in which a drug is appropriate for a disease. Just as it is only the physician who prescribes a drug, so is it the king who lies to the multitude concerning affairs of the realm. That is because untrue stories are necessary for the teaching of the citizens. No bringer of a nomos [law] is to be found who does not make use of invented stories, for this is something necessary for the multitude to reach their happiness. (§32)

That's remarkable. Averroës is chief judge in a court of Islamic law, but he writes, "no bringer of a law is to be found who does not make use of invented stories"; he does not add anything about Muḥammad being a different case. Philosophy orders the lives of those who can understand it; unfortunately, few can understand it, so Islam offers a more accessible, if semi-mythical, version of the truths of philosophy. Islam is, therefore, a noble lie.²³

The philosopher knows that the apparent meaning of the Qur'ān is not strictly true, and he has no need of any alleged revelation; but for the sake of the less intellectually gifted, he never openly calls religion into question. And the philosopher himself needs the Qur'ān in his childhood, because he is not born a philosopher, and without the moral guidance provided by the Qur'ān, he might develop vices which impede the life of the mind before it gets underway.

One begins to see how a philosopher could serve as a Malikite judge. Mālik opposed argumentation in matters of religious doctrine, and so should philosophers, because argumentation harms the people who need the Qur'ān. Of course, philosophers may privately engage

²³Noble, because the intention is not to deceive, but to give the hearer the best approximation to truth that he is capable of receiving. Here, as throughout the *Decisive Treatise*, Averroës grounds his argument on the intention of the Qur'ān.

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in speculation, but judges concern themselves only with outward acts, and that is where philosophers know better than anyone how to be discreet.



You may be wondering what sort of reception the *Decisive Treatise* had. Averroës' fellow Muslims made no response at all, unless we should take his trial and condemnation some sixteen years later as the response. Only two Arabic manuscripts of the *Decisive Treatise* survive, and their very existence was overlooked until the 1800's. Indeed, not only the *Decisive Treatise*, but all of Averroës' philosophical work went practically unnoticed in the Islamic world until the mid 1800's, when the rather distorted interpretation of a French scholar²⁴ sparked interest.

Averroës fared better among Jewish thinkers: his Aristotelian commentaries and also his *Decisive Treatise* made a deep impression on Maimonides.

In Christian Europe, Averroës' Aristotelian commentaries quickly became the center of attention, friendly attention at first, and mixed later. But the *Decisive Treatise* was never translated into Latin.²⁵

At first sight, that's surprising. Given the many heterodox philosophers we know of just in thirteenth-century Paris, we would have expected the *Decisive Treatise* to be there as a source and a support for their musings. However, upon further reflection, we begin to notice that the problem facing philosophers in the Islamic world differed from that facing philosophers in the Christian world. Christian philosophers of weak faith could imitate Averroës as he commented on Aristotle and left unanswered points which contradict the Qur'ān,

²⁴Ernest Renan, *Averroès et l'averroïsme: Essai historique*, Paris, 1852 (before the 1859 *editio princeps* of the *Decisive Treatise*), 1861, 1866, 1882.

²⁵Its so-called appendix was translated by the thirteenth-century Dominican Arabist Raimundo Martí in his *Pugio fidei*.

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as if philosophy and the Qurʾān had no bearing on each other; however, Averroës' more explicit solution to the problem of philosophy and religion could not be transferred to Christianity.²⁶

Why not? Let me conclude with two brief observations.

The first has determined my way of speaking today. Ordinarily, I talk about the relation between faith and reason, but today I've discussed the relation between religion and philosophy, because that's how Averroës speaks. And "religion" translates *sharʿa*, that is, religious law. Faith is the keynote in Christianity, but not in Islam, where law and submission to law are primary. To quote Ġazālī,

the fundamental principles [of creed] are acknowledging the existence of God, the prophethood of his Prophet, and the reality of the Last Day. Everything else is secondary.²⁷

For that reason, when Averroës shows the harmony between philosophy and the Qurʾān by reading the Qurʾān allegorically, he can go very far indeed without reaching clear-cut heresy.

Christians, too, read Scripture allegorically and recognize some of its expressions as metaphorical; however, Christian faith assents to many propositions which cannot be allegorized away.

That leads me to my second and final observation. Many Christians never bother distinguishing the question about faith or religion and philosophy from that about theology and philosophy; for them, faith, religion, and theology are all on the same side. We've seen that Averroës thinks otherwise, that he considers theology an incompetent

²⁶Another consideration, though a less interesting one, is that the *Decisive Treatise* would have been extremely puzzling to readers with no knowledge of Islamic jurisprudence.

²⁷From section 10 of *The Decisive Criterion for Distinguishing Islam from Masked Infidelity*, as translated by Sherman A. Jackson in his *On the Boundaries of Theological Tolerance in Islam: Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī's Fayṣal al-Tafrīq*, *Studies in Islamic Philosophy*, 1 (Karachi: Oxford University Press, 2002), p. 112. Students of Averroës should read the entire text, which makes clear that the line dividing him from Ġazālī is much finer than usually imagined.

meddler which jeopardizes acceptance of the noble lie. He indicates that more or less explicitly depending on his audience, but he is quite capable of making his case in terms of Islamic law.

His Latin followers, on the other hand, cannot state their case in Christian terms. When their opponents accuse them of positing a double truth, they have to say either that they are only trying to establish the autonomy of the disciplines,²⁸ or that they are looking for what Aristotle thought rather than for the truth—as if philosophy were the history of philosophy.

The Latin Averroists cannot say—even to themselves—that Christianity is a noble lie, a somewhat inaccurate, symbolic, and therefore more accessible version of the truths of philosophy;²⁹ they cannot say that because such mysteries as the Trinity in no way look like metaphysics “dumbed down.” Averroës himself recognizes that Christianity does a poor job fulfilling the role of religion as he understands it, because Christianity aims too high. He writes:

All the different religions are in agreement that souls experience, after death, certain states of happiness and suffering; but they disagree in the manner of representing these states and in explaining the mode of their existence to mankind. It appears that the way our religion represents them is more adequate for making the majority of people understand them and rendering their souls more eager to seek what exists [beyond this

²⁸In the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, this did need to be done, though more carefully than by the Latin Averroists.

²⁹The reason is not merely that medieval Latin readers had neither Plato’s *Republic* nor Averroës’ commentary on it; after all, they knew this way of interpreting religion from Aristotle (*Metaphysics* 1074^b1–10) and from Augustine’s account of Varro (*City of God* 4.27, 5.6).

I do not mean that no one in Christian lands ever considered Christianity a noble lie; but those who did could not argue based on thorough knowledge of the Christian religious sciences, the way Averroës argued based on the Islamic sciences. One must reject Christianity, at least within the privacy of one’s own mind, in order to think it a noble lie, whereas nothing prevents Averroës from embracing Islam.

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life]. After all, the primary target [of religions] is the majority [of people]. It appears that the spiritual representation is less effective in stimulating the souls of the common people to [seek] what lies beyond, and the common people are less desirous and fearful of it than they are of corporeal representations. [For this reason the corporeal representation seems] to be a stronger impetus for seeking the hereafter than spiritual representation. . . .³⁰

In view of this, it seems clear that Averroës had less than worthy followers in the Latin Averroists: his approach to the relation between religion and philosophy seems perfectly reasonable within the context of Islam, but transferring even parts of it to the Christian world was bound to result in absurdity.

³⁰ *Manāḥij* 5.5, translated by Ibrahim Najjar under the title *Faith and Reason in Islam: Averroes' Exposition of Religious Arguments* (Oxford: Oneworld, 2001), p. 125. Contrast the charge made by Thomas Aquinas in *Summa contra gentiles* 1.6 that Muḥammad “seduced the people by promises of carnal pleasure” and that “the truths that he taught he mingled with many fables.” Averroës agrees with the substance of the charge but considers it grounds for praise rather than blame, because the average man cannot grasp the truth in its purity.

Thomas, of course, knows about the capacities of the average man and about modes of representation, so we should take note of the difference between Averroës' approach and allegorical reading as Thomas thinks Christians should practice it. For Christians, Scripture communicates truths beyond the demonstrative power of even the greatest philosopher; Scripture adapts itself to our condition by the use of images, and faithful exegetes try to recognize those images as such and to gain some understanding of the realities signified. All the while, they admit to having only some measure of understanding and they trust that, once they finally see the realities, they will rejoice because what was promised us far surpasses all images and exegesis. For Averroës, on the contrary, the Qur'ān communicates nothing which a philosopher cannot find out for himself; if, *per impossibile*, the common man were to survive death long enough to realize that, despite the imagery of the Qur'ān, he would soon cease to exist as an individual, he would feel only bitter disappointment and the anger of one who has been deceived.