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Averroes Revisited: Intellectualism, Interculturalism and Dialogue in Medieval Spain

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Diss Habti

Introduction

A member of an intellectual family, Ibn Rushd (Abu Al-Waleed Mohammed Ibn Ahmed Ibn Rushd, 1126–1198), Latinized as Averroes, was the grandson of Cordoba’s Supreme Judge. He saw Cordoba as a center of knowledge and thought for Andalusia and for medieval Europe. Besides philosophy, Ibn Rushd excelled at medicine, jurisprudence, mathematics, and theology. During his youth al-Kutubiyya, Marrakesh’s greatest monumental mosque and library in Morocco, was built. In his middle ages, he might have seen Giralda, Seville’s greatest tower and mosque of that time, and a symbol of the city being built in a time when architectural and intellectual creativity was in its grandeur. Learned men were seeking common ground in the face of conservatism and rigidity among diverse communities making up medieval Spain. A large number of translations, scientific and artistic creative works burgeoned 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 forth-coming Renaissance, which began in Spain and Italy and extended to Northern Europe into the eighteenth century. The political unrest during the twelfth century led many learned men to quit Andalusia for new universities like Oxford, Salerno and Bologna. Ibn Rushd was seen as the bridge between two faiths and between the past and the present. His works (in Arabic, Latin and Hebrew) and their translations represent the heights of interculturalism and the flourishing of intellectualism in Andalusia.

Throughout history, rationalism and religion have always been disputed dichotomies, and today we see an intensified and radicalized conflicting situation around the globe. Philosophy has often used reason to face traditionalism and conservatism and to challenge rationally invalidating premises and crude beliefs. The present-day attack on religiosity and faith has resulted in retaliation against modern rationality within and outside the academic sphere. In academia, the offensive takes the form of fideism, a position which exposes philosophical rationalism to support
unobstructed spirituality and transcendentalism. Anti-rationalism usually appears as an attack on modern forms of public life. Thus, the revolutions of modernity still mould contemporary thought and practice at the global level and many countries today witness a division between two parties, those adherents to reason and liberalism and those to revelation and traditionalism. This divergence is not solely found in academia but also in politics and history. In Islamic societies today, the interconnection between intellectualism and traditionalism and the divergence between both is intense and problematic. Under politically tolerant support, Islamic civilization throughout history has provided resources in handling this confrontation to foster harmonious relations between both. For example, consider the role philosophy played in Islamic medieval Spain in building an intercultural, multilingual and multiracial society through intellectualism, and the rapprochement between rationalism and faith.

Ibn Rushd was a philosopher who, in his lifetime, 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, and conservative-minded Europeans and clergy were suspicious of his philosophy, but the upper classes in Cordoba appreciated his controversial writings. He commenced his first philosophical work in Marrakesh before 1159. He was motivated by the desire to show that man is rational and nature is intelligible, and its interpretation is a legitimate task of man; that science and faith are not at odds as was largely believed in the West. With the struggle to reconcile both, Ibn Rushd’s commentaries gave new direction to Aristotelian philosophy by situating it within a new intellectual context. The context revealed a multicultural, medieval Spain witnessing heated, but open debates on religion and philosophy pertaining to state issues in the Eastern and Western parts of the Islamic world. His 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 Eastern Abbassid dynasty. The ruling 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 and intellectual system that enhanced critical thinking in the medieval Islamic West.

This chapter locates Ibn Rushd in a historical and cultural context of enlightened intellectualism, individualism, humanist free-thinking, open-mindedness, tolerance and consistency of medieval Spain. Within this setting his philosophy and persona both contributed to the enhancement of interculturalism and dialogue. His philosophy has already been discussed in many academic writings (see Oliver Leaman, 2001; Majid Fakhry, 2001; Gerhard Endress & Jan Aertsen, 1999; Dominique Urvoy, 1991; and Hans Daiber, 1999). Hence, this chapter discusses the way his intellectualism was used to bring about a symbiotic relationship between reason and revelation. Then some inferences are drawn from his arguments for an interculturalism within an intercultural dialogical setting in reference to Jorge Luis Borges’ (1964) short story of Averroes,
“La Busca de Averroes” (“Averroes’s Search”). This depicts the aspects which underlie Ibn Rushd’s endeavours for intercultural understanding and intellectualism.

In Search of a Fusion of Aristotelian and Islamic Intellectualism

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 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. In addition, 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, happiness and prevention of extreme and destructive excesses. His commitment to a shared horizon of praxis is obvious in his Fasl al-Maqaṣ (see Hourani, 1967, trans. On the Harmony of Religion and Philosophy) wherein he mentions, concerning practical matters, that people agree that “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: (i) natural intelligence and (ii) “religious integrity and practical virtue”, a disposition which normally any Muslim must be endowed with (Dallmayr, 2002, p. 128).

Ibn Rushd contends primacy of reason is unquestioned but compatible with revelation (Fakhry, 1997, p. 34). The only difference between philosophical and theological truth is in the way to attain it. He argues that if the deep meaning of Quranic verses is understood, then the position of philosopher agrees with that of the theologian (Fakhry, pp. 33–34). His intellectual contributions became a source of inspiration for scholars and the major mode of social thought in Europe. Averroism, or medieval intellectualism, was highly influential in social thought, and it remained dominant until the end of the sixteenth century despite orthodox attacks from the Jewish Talmudists and Christian clergy in Andalusia and the Islamic East. His work on Plato’s Republic is important regarding the idea society is perfectible and that it develops and changes—a view contrary to that of Muslim and Christian theologians, who believed the order of the world is preordained and immutable (Butterworth, 1985, p. 17). Hence, Ibn Rushd inspired Renaissance thinkers like Tomaso Campanella and Thomas Moore to form the theory of Utopia and the ideal state. This ideal is definable and attainable through human endeavours and wise leadership, not simply a matter of God’s grace or coincidence. In his lifetime, the political tensions emerging during the rule of the Almohads did not appear to have affected his productive appetite and the relative peace and prosperity in Cordoba and Seville, where he was active. His criticism applied
from Plato’s theories to his own time, where the political system in Cordoba failed from 1145 onwards during the reign of his patron, the Caliph. This resulted in his arrest and exile to Marrakesh, while his books were burnt. The reason he fell out of favour is probably his fluid intellectualism, frank social criticism and a call for more social interculturalism. Ibn Rushd produced an unprecedented intellectual upheaval which developed social thought in medieval Islam and Europe with rigorous intellectual creativity. The learned men were in search of common ground to face conservatism and rigidity among competing parties.

**Intellectualism for an Interculturalist Project of Convivencia [coexistence] in Medieval Spain**

Andalusia witnessed a rich cosmopolitan culture of medieval Spain; scientific and artistic works burgeoned, fusing the efforts of Muslim, Christian and Jewish peoples. In later centuries, the Jews in Central Europe were fascinated by the heights attained by their Sephardic counterparts in Spain and tended to credit an unprecedented high level of tolerance on the part of the Andalusian authorities (see Cohen, 1991). Castro (1948, pp. 23, 25–26, 39) understands the existence of a distinctively Spanish “structure of life”, which shows a “mesh of interconnected values” produced through a unique blend of Muslim, Christian, and Jewish cultural elements that occurred between the late eleventh and late fourteenth centuries. A common Andalusian Muslim and Jewish influence on Castilian culture is apparent in the heritage of language and literature, which, he thinks, provided the best access to the heart and soul of Spanish identity. He sees it as “the sine qua non of peninsular ‘multiculturalism’”, Spain’s most distinctive contribution to medieval European history (Castro, 1954, p. 31).

A high level of tolerance and coexistence seems to characterize the Umayyad period of Andalusian history (756–1031), which was built not so much on “guarantees of religious freedoms comparable to those we would expect in a modern ‘tolerant’ state”, but on the “often unconscious acceptance that contradictions—within oneself, as well as within one’s culture—could be positive and productive” (Menocal, 2002, p. 11). This state of unity in diversity is evidenced by the translation into Arabic of Greek philosophy and by the positive working relationships cultivated with non-Muslims. The Umayyads, who lost the capital Damascus, rebuilt Cordoba in 756 AD as its capital and “created a universe of Muslims where piety and observance were not seen as inimical to an intellectual and ‘secular’ life and society” (Menocal, 2002, p. 87). Their ecumenical attitude of cultural “open-mindedness” outlived them and actually spread across medieval Spain and then beyond into Europe. Renowned figures appeared like Samuel Ibn Nagrila, Jewish poet and vizier of the kingdom of Granada, Peter the Venerable, abbot who oversaw the first translation of the Quran into Latin, and Thomas Aquinas, who created a synthesis of Christian theology and Aristotelian philosophy on the basis of Ibn Rushd and the Jewish philosopher Ibn Maymoun
(Maimonides). Being among the elitist community, they all emphasize the critical component of the Cordoban intellectual project, particularly the manner in which it would remove the bad faith in mysticism, clericalism, and fideism, and hence how intellectualism and faith can be symbiotically interlaced.

However, Lowney’s understanding of the instance of coexistence in medieval Spain is that “tolerance may be regarded as a value in its own right, a means of securing peace in a mixed society, or a useful expedient to trade. Medieval Spain’s particular recipe for tolerance relied on the latter two ingredients rather than the former” (Lowney, 2005, p. 225). These diverse communities built a “shared life” and in the process “left humanity’s later generations a lesson about the capacity of ordinary humans to give priority to what unites them rather than what divides them” (Lowney, 2005, p. 197). A deep reconstruction of the historical context with a tangible problematisation of revisited but lived individual instances might be soothing comfort for the days of yore, for an interculturalist dialogical encounter. This might lead to the enrichment of civility and coexistence among diverse cultures and civilisations. An instance worth mentioning in this regard is Jorge Luis Borges’ famous story “La Busca de Averroes” (“Averroes’ Search”).

Lost in Translation or an Experience of Intercultural Communication?
The story is a celebration of an instance of interculturalism and the relationship between language, culture and understanding. For Borges (1964), it is a story of otherness and alienation, of the paradox of Ibn Rushd who, exiled in Morocco, consoles himself with a pastoral image that reminds him of Cordoba when he recites verses of an Arab poet Ibn Zuhair. Ibn Rushd’s failure in fathoming the meaning of tragedy and comedy at a dinner meeting trespasses his successes in the way Borges dramatizes this episode. Yet, Borges fails to see the lesson about language that has been paraded before the audience. The audience might see linguistic communication as a failure, when the story repeatedly epitomizes ibn Rushd as conqueror of history, culture, and subjectivity. Here, we can underline two impediments for language: the gap between different cultures and the gap between different individuals within the same culture. Borges’ great aspiration for a universal language of understanding lies in the conjecture that the world is full of diverse unique phenomena. The understanding of the world and Weltanschauung rise to the extent that we reach diversity in our words. Words and any communicative act depend on shared experiences and memories. This implies that we could not really understand anything that we do not already understand. Hence, language might appear a reminder of an experience rather than a communicative tool for it, an attempt to attain intercultural or intersubjective understanding. If language is not more specific than the unique experience it is used to describe, then it would be futile (in Borges, 1964, p. 153–154).
Ibn Rushd defends the generality of words as he illustrates the way in which the language of one man can touch others. He does not suggest that all men have had the identical experience, but merely one similar to that of the man who first crafted the metaphorical meaning of the word. He elucidates that because words are products of use (in communication), they have histories that nurture them. Words pass through different times, places, and minds, sweeping up nuances and associations as a river sweeps up particles from its bed (Borges, p. 154). He mentions, “Besides (and this is perhaps the essential part of my reflections), time, which despoils castles, enriches verses…. Time broadens the scope of verses and I know of some which, like music, are everything for all men” (ibid.) Here, he argues that a word creates its precursors as well, that is, its previous usages. The re-usage of language, possible by its generality, allows erudite language like verses and thus the experience of words or collection of words to enhance their performance on a past and future enactment: “The singular benefit of poetry: words composed by a king who longed for the Orient served me, exiled in Africa [Morocco], to express my nostalgia for Spain” (ibid.). Abdurrahman’s words, despite their unique experience, might be meaningful for Ibn Rushd in his unique experience because language does not allow us to have another person’s experience, but it permits us to understand it and learn from it, and in that way to make it our own. However, it appears that Borges intends his story to entail a failure of an erudite man unfamiliar with drama as a concept, trying to discover the meaning of tragedy and comedy. Some critics suggest that Averroes is not wrong as he appropriated his own meaning from Aristotle’s text. As Daniel Balderston contends, “story is that of the founding text of literary theory as misunderstood or else re-imagined in a different cultural context” (1996, p. 205). Yet, the story is about the difficulty we all have in forming a bridge between our own limited experience and our understanding of another culture. The essence is how to grasp that meaning, convert it to understanding, and disarm the threat of the inevitable misunderstanding between different cultures and restore common ground in an intercultural setting.

The second obstacle faced by language is the gap between different cultures, as is discussed in Borges epilogue. His choice of Ibn Rushd’s mistranslation as the subject of story is a case in point: the man is not famous because he got everything in Aristotle wrong; the particular failure Borges takes as his subject stands out precisely because Ibn Rushd’s interpretation of Aristotle is generally so successful (Borges, p. 149). Borges imagines him reflecting, despite using the translation of a translation from Greek, to interpret a text from fifteen centuries earlier. Umberto Eco (2004) emphasizes the domination of culture over language when he states that “translation is not merely a matter that involves two languages, it also involves an encounter between cultures”, and continues that “even if Averroes had had a Greek-Arabic dictionary that told him how to translate the Greek term tragedy into his language, he would have gone on without understanding what a tragedy is because his culture had not habituated him to theatrical works” (pp. 80–81). The force of the story
is not that language and understanding depend solely on culture to read or think our way beyond it. Language and understanding tend to be more constrained by culture than Borges’ story implies. Ibn Rushd could not transcend his culture and history and, yet, this does not imply he was so rigid in his worldview that he could never have comprehended the concepts of tragedy and comedy, as the story recounts.

Ibn Rushd’s attempt to understand a concept foreign to his socio-cultural and historical context appears useless only when we accept for intercultural understanding the mistaken conjecture we discarded for intersubjective understanding, that it is predicated on identical experience. It appears that he could have understood Aristotle only to the level that medieval Spain was ancient Greece. Were not his Commentaries instrumental in bridging Arab-Islamic culture with the Greek? Borges’ epilogue concludes that since Ibn Rushd understood Aristotle, likewise he could have attained broader understanding of such concepts as tragedy and comedy if he had more information. In the same manner, Borges’ mind and thoughts could have been closer to Ibn Rushd’s—if he had exhaustive information about him. Borges thinks language could have permitted him to break through time and culture to Ibn Rushd, just as it may have permitted Ibn Rushd to do likewise to Aristotle and Plato. The prerequisite condition for intercultural understanding and communication here was more knowledge and information, and not less culture.

Whether one’s culture dominates understanding, we would be impelled to explicate the dynamic momentous changes within that particular culture. How could we, for instance, explain the development of tragedy and comedy by the Greeks? If culture restricts much of our thinking, how does a culture ever change and develop, from within itself, its current cognitive structures and conceptual categories? Scholars might discuss the origin of the development of Greek drama, but there was a time when there was neither tragedy nor comedy. Thus, drama had no origin but always existed among the Greeks, which augurs the possible conclusion about Borges’ story. If we argue that Ibn Rushd lacked a sort of basic conceptual category, like a man who does not know a word because he does not know a word, it somehow would relegate him to a position less than the intellectualist he had been throughout his life. Furthermore, could it be that a kind of drama would not have emerged in Arab-Islamic civilization, as it occurred in Chinese or Greek cultures? In sum, there is no principle in language or understanding that prevents such development. Borges appears to have missed this conclusion. Borges ends the story with Ibn Rushd’s contemplation of some children playacting just outside his study:

Averroes put down his pen. He told himself (without excessive faith) that what we seek is often nearby.…. From this studious distraction, he was distracted by a kind of melody. He looked through the lattice-work balcony; below, in the narrow earthen patio, some half-naked children were playing. One, standing on another’s shoulders, was obviously playing the part of a muezzin; with his eyes tightly closed, he chanted, “There is no god but the God.” The one who held him motionlessly played the part of the minaret; another, abject in the dust and on his knees, the part of the faithful worshipers. (Borges, p. 149)
Borges indicates that the imitations by these children refer to Aristotle’s seed of drama, the inclination of Man to imitate. Ibn Rushd looks around at the children playing and then returns to his work. Does the act of seeing mean the failure to grasp the essence of what drama means? Or does it imply a universal understanding of imitation through acting, being hidden within the fabric of daily life, hence failing to fathom drama as a concept? Indeed, some aspects of human nature seem more universal than culture is particular, and that creativity can occur within a culture, even if on particular occasions it passes by unnoticed. This might be why Ibn Rushd, according to Borges, sees no connection between the boys’ game and the concepts in Aristotle that escape him. Borges refers us to a major point that history is on the side of theatre, “The fact that the children speak in a Romance language [Spanish] and not in Arabic suggests that their incipient language and spontaneous game, both of which stand outside the Islamic mainstream, represent an emergent Spain, a culture in which theatre would eventually flourish” (Borges, p. 173–174). Ibn Rushd was not in principle excluded from the development of an art form as in the ancient Greek culture, but it might have been only an artistic denouement of a near-miss recognition of the nature of drama or even his predicament of grasping it. His story is that of a well-bred intellectualist striving persuasively to understand concepts of tragedy or comedy despite the limits of time and its conceptual scheme. Language and understanding are not restricted by culture, and hence interculturalism is not so confined by culture.

**Conclusion: An Intellectualism for an Interculturalist Project of 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. The passive intellect, rigidity and closure constitute obstacles in the achievement of pure life. Ibn Rushd demonstrates the necessity of dialogue between individuals, cultures, and differences. With reason as a common denominator, to dialogue augurs an exigency. Originality resides in the fact that divine injunctions establish autonomy and responsibility of reason. This way permits us first to welcome the “Other” as different to oneself, a stranger with a strangeness of difference, to realise justice and happiness and enhanced interculturalism. It permits transformations and changes produced through the ongoing time sequence. It finally permits access to the holistic meaning of life, transcending its aspectual differences, incongruity and unpredictability.

The conditions of validity and access to the universal and interculturalism are today a global problem. In dealing with the question of the relation within an intercultural setting, Ibn Rushd handles the issue of universal validity, transcending antagonisms produced by differences between reason and intuition. In his discussion, he not only seeks to bring them into harmony, but also notes there is the difficulty of the validity of truth. Access to universal truth, in his view, go through a
sort of meeting with the Other, the similar, and the different. Ibn Rushd’s thinking rejects those imposing conditions, either by conservatives or moderates, who practice rigidity and closure, opposition and rejection. Islam makes distinction 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 condition 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 condition *sine qua non* to enhance a *rapprochement* between humanity in the limit 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 much responsible manner. He always privileges mutual understanding and open debate and takes courage in reaching the Other, as the story in Jorge Borges depicts. For him, reason, and in a sense intellectualism, are 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. Borges’ story ends with Ibn Rushd’s contemplation of children playing, trying to reason, to dialogue and to accept the Other, not to abdicate, to relinquish one’s own values and intuition, but rather to open possibilities of enriching life and to receive the strangeness of life in a responsible manner through exchange. A reason which does not serve interculturality and building a bridge, but is in rupture with what is required of human condition. He is quite concerned with learning how to coexist and accept the Other and to assume life in its pluralistic dimensions.

In the absence of a universal civilisation, we need to approach diversity, to re-read with critique all the past master thinkers and philosophers, to develop more than ever interculturalism, and to learn to live together because language and understanding are not confined by cultures. Civilizations are products of 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. This was what Ibn Rushd tried to point out, and intended for us to reach.

**Notes**

1. In Socrates’ view, intellectualism allows that “one will do what is right or best just as soon as one truly understands what is right or best”; that virtue is a purely intellectual matter, since virtue and knowledge are cerebral relatives that one accumulates and improves with dedication to reason. Medieval intellectualism preaches choices of the will
resulting from that which the intellect recognizes as good; the will itself is determined. This trend is found mainly in Averroes, Aquinas, and Maimonides.

References


