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Reason and Revelation for an Averroist pursuit of Convivencia 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, (1126-1198), who lived in medieval Spain, in his philosophy, attempts to reconcile philosophy with religion. The paper 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 Rush’s retaliation to al-Ghazali was his defense 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 in medieval Andalusia.

You too! oh palm, are
Foreign to this soil...

(ibn Rushd, in Borges 1964)

Introduction: The Search for Aristotelian and Islamic horizon of understanding

The main theme of this paper is not to re-introduce ibn Rushd 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 had contributed to the enhancement of intercultural dialogue. The theoretical framework and the structure of the arguments deserve some exploration and attention for their philosophical rigour. The paper discusses the relations between reason and revelation according to his perspective; his political view is highlighted where the nexus between the two were influential, then 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? Do they increase our understanding of the civilizational and cultural dialogue?
A descendant of a family of intellect, Ibn Rushd was Cordoba’s Supreme Judge's grandson who saw his city a center of knowledge and thought for Andalusia and for medieval Europe. Other fields he excelled in beside philosophy are 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, and the close-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 on, due to some complex political and doctrinal reasons, he was among some philosophers to be expelled from the court. Around 1196, he regained back favour at the court in Marrakesh where he stayed until he died in 1198.

Ibn Rushd’s commentaries have given new direction to the Aristotelian philosophy by putting it in 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 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 the multicultural medieval Spain.

This is a crucial historical moment because towards the end of his life, theology got grip on civic discourse. The writing of his commentaries on Aristotle involved a revolutionary intellectual project launched by the Almohads. To achieve this goal, they patronized and sponsored academic works to develop their political, social, economic system in 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*, 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, p. 46-47). After showing the instrumentalist perspective to knowledge, he highlights the importance of “a code of ethics in reading classical texts” and academic honesty (*ibid.* 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 for a passage, but the understanding should not contradict the affirmative truths in the Quran. He holds that both are based on the same truths, a *double truth* doctrine, one held by the erudite philosopher and another by common people. He advances that the same truth is represented in both though their modes of exposition vary. Ian Netton (1989:328) 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.

Ibn Rushd contends primacy of reason is unquestioned but compatible with revelation (Fakhri, 34). The only difference between philosophical and theological truth is in the way to attain it. He advances if the deep meaning of Quranic verses is understood, then the position of philosopher agrees with that of the theologian (*ibid.*, 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 16th 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 the outcome is “the Renaissance in the 13th century, the Protestant Reformation in the 16th century, and eventually the rise of modern science in the 17th.”

He confesses that he adheres to Islam and avers 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 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.” (quoted in Hoodbhoy, 114).

It might be, as Ivry (1998:52) maintains, that he was just employing similar criterion to religion which he employed to other areas of investigation, that it had proper premises which were not self-evident. He furthermore 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 necessary for rational discourse. In this regard, his theology is philosophical, where his assertions of Islam are appropriate at 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 was how ibn Rushd of the twelfth century pondered with logic and political purposes on such questions. He had affinity more for rhetoric than poetics to express truth, acknowledging the importance of rhetoric in religious discourse (Butterworth 1977: 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 the way it develops and changes, contrary to the view of Muslim and Christian theologians who believe the order of the world is preordained and immutable (Butterworth, 1985). The political tensions during the rule of Almohads in his lifetime didn’t seem to have affected 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 burnt. The reason why he gained disfavour is probably for his pledge to rationalism and frank social criticism.
Is Inter-philosophical Dialogue possible?

The Andalusian and North African philosophy, according to Dussel (2009:513) inspired by the scientific empiricism and strictly Aristotelian thought (with the characteristic slogan: ‘abandon the argument based on authority and go back to the sources’ as urged by the Almohad dynasty produced Ibn Rushd, a true philosophical Enlightenment, which will be the origin of the Latin-Germanic philosophy in the 13th century, which was at the same time the foundational moment of the modern European philosophy. Ibn Rushd perfectly defines what inter-philosophical dialogue should consist of:

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, 2001a: 157–8)

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 church authority. Ibn Rush produced an unprecedented intellectual upheaval which developed social thought in medieval Islam and the Christian West. The intellectual creativity was at its peak and learned men were in search of common ground to face conservatism and rigidity among competing parties. Thus, a bulk of translations, scientific and artistic 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 to the forthcoming Renaissance which started in southern Europe.

There is possibility of ‘civilizational dialogue.’ Ibn Rushd lived during the 12th century in the Andalusian city of Cordoba when Muslim rule began in 711. His writings on Plato and Aristotle elegantly combined Aristotelian conceptions of theoretical reason and nature with Islamic requirements of faith and socio-religious consensus. Being among the elitist community, he emphasizes 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 of liberal toleration.

**A symbiosis between Reason and Revelation for a common horizon of truth**

Before and during the epoch of his life, 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 in the scene within this contextual framework. Being aware of the situation, he spent much time committed to saving the legitimacy and integrity of human thought and reason against the backdrop of various attacks. His main task, to achieve his goal, was to clean Greek philosophy from later accretions and re-read it in the light of Islamic context of the time. He sought to safeguard Aristotle’s heritage from intrusive illuminationist and mystical trends of thought which was popular in Islamic East. Besides 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 though humans follow different paths, they eventually reach a uniform or identical formulation of transcendental “truth.” Though venerating a common horizon of truth, human articulations of truth are essentially distinct owing to diversity of human aptitudes and available linguistic or discursive genres. Ibn Rushd differentiates between three genres of discourse (reasoning) which is basically Aristotelian in nature: demonstrative, dialectical and rhetorical modes of speech (Buijs, 2002:161). *Burhan* is the first genre is logical-deductive which proceeds from valid premises to valid conclusions. The dialectical genre depends on approximate or probable assumptions, while the rhetorical relies on daily common-sense assumptions. Ibn Rushd strived to relate kinds of discourse with different groups of people by declaring demonstration to be the province of philosophers, dialectical assumption as the activity of clerics and theologians, and the rhetorical speech as customary genre of ordinary individuals. He refers to the Quran which states that the scripture is addressed to all human-kinds 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 didn’t 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 attained the main goal of practical life in development of ‘virtue’ 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, happiness and 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.” 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 (see Hourani 1967).

**From social order to a world order of diversity in unity**

Ibn Rushd, in his Tahafut al-Tahafut, discussed the distinctions between various religions, claiming that there was no fundamental difference between Judaism, Christianity and Islam. He argued that they were all popular versions of eternal truths which were best articulated by rationalistic philosophy (Wolfson, 1973, p. 583). He encouraged philosophers to be involved within 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 era in different periods (Bouyges, 583; in Van Den Bergh, 360–61). 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 the intellectuals, aiming at improving everyone’s lives, and enabling the capable ones to gain eternal spiritual life. Ibn Rushd explained that those goals were achieved by formulating commandments which regulate social life. The motivation for keeping social order is 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, relies 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 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 responsibility of Reason. Revelation, which takes the risk of intervening in the life of human being, does not close the horizon by its orientations, but rather orientates him to assume his responsibilities. This way permits him first to welcome the ‘Other’ as a different to oneself, a stranger with a *strangeness* of difference, to realise justice and happiness. 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 unpredictibility.

Reason according to ibn Rushd is the privileged tool of achieving Convivencia. He knows that the Quran distinguishes, but does not oppose, the subjective to the objective, the sacred and the profane, though 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 an exigency of openness to the Other with vigilance, without falling captive of the other. He thinks Islam poses the necessity of thinking on 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 answer without pre-conditions 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 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, the different. Ibn Rushd’s thinking rejects those imposing conditions, either by conservative or moderate, 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. 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 possibilities of enriching life and to receive the strangeness of life in a responsible manner through exchange. A reason which is not welcoming difference and building a bridge is in rupture with what is required of Revelation and of human condition. He is quite 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 civilisation**
In this epoch of increasing cultural uniformity, it is essential for us to respect diverse cultures and grope for their coexistence. The Islamic world during medieval time enjoyed considerable mobility of trade and people across vast regions that brought scholars into contact with the sources of learning. There was active exchange of views between Jewish rabbis, Muslim and christian theologians. In this environment, scholars and scientists of whatever background used to enter into dialogue and exchange with the locals in Andalusia and in other centers like Cairo, Baghdad and Samarkand. Since the 8th century, it became academic centers where Europeans could study advanced Islamic culture, Sciences and the arts.

Intercultural dialogue might help dissipate misrecognition and misunderstanding, clarify and rediscover the line for openness towards the Other, that of the universal. In the absence of a universal civilisation, we need to approach each other, to re-read with critique all the past master thinkers and philosophers to learn to live together in another Convivencia. Different forms of inter-religious dialogue can exist as it 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 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 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.

References

