

**IBN RUSHD'S INFLUENCE ON SCHOLASTIC AND  
RENAISSANCE PHILOSOPHY**

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## **Abstract:**

Despite the traditional outlook of an open confrontation between Ibn Rushd (Averroes) and Scholasticism, it is now accepted — at least in academical circles— that the most outstanding Christian thinkers, as Thomas Aquinas and Albert the Great, owe many of their innovative ideas to the Andalusian philosopher.

This influence was deeper on the so called «Latin Averroists» who defended autonomy of philosophy in an ideological struggle for intellectual hegemony and against the hierocratic theory of *plenitudo potestatis* (absolute power): an evidence of this position can be seen in Marsilius of Padua.

On the other hand, Ibn Rushd's mark is also present in Italian culture through the naturalist tendencies and the rationalist Ethics distinguishing of Renaissance Aristotelianism. Bruno, the most controversial thinker of this period, offers a good example of such philosophical developments.

## **THE RECEPTION OF IBN RUSHD INTO SCHOLASTIC PHILOSOPHY**

There are records dating from 1255 that Latin translations of Ibn Rushd's Commentaries were in use in Paris. By the middle of the 13<sup>th</sup> Century most of this working translation had been finished. Outstanding Latin translators of Ibn Rusd included: the Scottish scholar Michael Scot, born about 1175, who trained in Toledo (Spain) and died in Sicily in approximately 1235; and Hermanus Alemanus from central Europe, who was Bishop of Astorga (near the town of León, Spain) when he died in 1272. Scot translated Ibn Rushd's Long Commentaries on *De Anima*, *Physics* and *De Coelo*, as well as the Middle Commentary on *De Generatione et Corruptione* and the Epitome of *Parva Naturalia*. Hermanus Alemanus, on the other hand, translated the Middle Commentaries on *Nicomachean Ethics*, *Poetics* and *Rhetoric* from Arabic into Latin with the help of some Mozarabs.

The Latin translation of the *Kulliyyat fil-tibb* first appeared in the middle of the 13<sup>th</sup> Century under the title *Colliget*, while medieval translations of Ibn Rushd were printed for the first time during 1472-1475 in an edition by Lorenzo Canozio. Later on the eleven volumes of *Opera Omnia Aristotelis... cum Averrois Cordubensis Commentaria*, whose Latin translations were revised by Jacob Mantino, were published by the Junctas of Venice (Italy). This standard edition of Aristotle/Averroes was reprinted many times during the 16th Century, and was the bestseller of its day.

From a doctrinal point of view, Neoplatonism which had prevailed in Western thought since the Christian Fathers and upon which new life had been breathed by its reception by Ibn Sina, was replaced by Aristotelianism, an interest for which had been renewed in the Middle Ages through Ibn Rushd. Despite its tensions and ecclesiastical damnations, Aristotelian naturalism found its place at universities amongst students' enthusiasm, the intellectual concerns of Masters of Arts struggling for their autonomy, and the distrust of theologians fearful of a «pagan» philosophy that could overshadow their *Weltanschauung*, which until then had been hegemonic.

Until the 13<sup>th</sup> Century, the Christian world only knew two works of Aristotle, *Categories* and *De Interpretatione*, which belong to the so-called *Organon* or the whole

body of his logical writings. This means that the integral Aristotle that has stood throughout with different fluctuations, namely, the author of *Metaphysics*, *Physics*, *On the Soul*, *Organon* (made up of six Logical works), *Nicomachean Ethics*, *Rhetoric*, *Poetics* and some treatises on Biology was assimilated into the West thanks to the Arabs, and especially by the excellent Commentaries of Ibn Rushd. It is of considerable historical significance that in his interpretation of Aristotelian texts Ibn Rushd neither clouds the issue with dogmatic considerations, nor does he distort his naturalism, rather he purifies it of both the Christian as well as the Islamic ideological additions which had previously been kept by tradition.

The first *receptor* of Ibn Rushd into Scholasticism was the Dominican Albert the Great, Master in the Theological Faculty of Paris University, who wrote impressive books on theology and philosophy. The Albertian outlook is characteristic of a Christian thinker who has assimilated Aristotelianism. For this reason he continues Ibn Rushd's teachings in many theoretical questions but criticises him when he considers that the Rushdian philosophical position collides with dogma, for example, in the theory of the eternity of the world and in his innovative psychological theses.

At the request of Pope Alexander IV, in about 1256, Albert the Great wrote *De unitate intellectus*. It is not directed specifically against Ibn Rushd but against Monopsychism in general, and for that reason he attacks amongst others al-Farabi, Avicenna (Ibn Gabirol), Ibn Bayya and of course Ibn Rushd, whose *Long Commentary On the Soul* he uses as basic text. The Dominican Master rejected the theory of the unity of material or possible intellect attributed to Ibn Rushd, although surprisingly he admits the possibility of the human soul's union with a separate intellect, an Averroist theory as underlined by the Italian scholar Bruno Nardi.

A clear trace of the Aristotle/Averroes naturalism can be found in Albert's interest in Biology (something which was unusual for a Medieval theologian) and in his consideration of experience as a criterion for truth on contingent objects. Let's recall his comment on the necessary distinction between Philosophy and Theology: "dico quod nihil ad me de Dei miraculis cum ego de naturalibus disseram [When I am discussing questions about nature, God's miracles do not affect me] " *De Generatione et Corruptione*, I, 22.

### **Thomas Aquinas, the Main Receptor**

Even though it is a paradox, the main *receptor* of Ibn Rushd was another Dominican, Thomas Aquinas. Aquinas was also a student of Albert, a Master in the Theological Faculty in Paris and without doubt the most outstanding theologian in the Western Medieval Christian World. Despite an apparent hostility between him and Ibn Rusd that can be seen in religious iconography and in the following literature, both thinkers share a common philosophical source, Aristotelianism. As the Spanish Arabist, Miguel Asín pointed out many years ago, they are also close on many theological issues.

A well-known specialist, Salvador Gómez Nogales, summed up the influence of Ibn Rushd on the Italian Dominican with the following points [cfr. "Saint Thomas, Averroès et l'averroïsme", in *Aquinas and problems of his time*, Louvain, 1976]:

- In *Logic and Theory of Knowledge* Thomas Aquinas has accepted many ideas that Ibn Rushd had expounded in his Commentaries on Aristotelian works.

- In *Cosmology*, the concept of time and some astronomical theories.
- In *Metaphysics*, Occasionalism, the knowledge of individuals, providence and some proofs for the existence of God.
- In *Psychology*, some ideas on the relation between senses and intellect, on the nature of soul and its faculties, in the same way as the theory of the agent intellect internal to man.
- In *Theology*, the method of exegesis, prophecy, the need of revelation and the conception of the relations between reason and faith.
- In *Ethics*, the theory of virtues and the concept of practical reason.

An abundant presence by Ibn Rushd in Thomas Aquinas's writings is evident with more than 500 contrasted quotations. This influence turned openly polemic only in his later years, and coincided with attacks from the Catholic hierarchy on Latin Averroism with regard to some of its psychological, cosmological and ethical theses. The crux of this confrontation lies in Ibn Rushd's supposed Monopsychism. Trying to determine the exact doctrinal position of Ibn Rushd on unity of Intellect which he considered was wrongly interpreted in Scholasticism, Gómez Nogales picked up this wise formula proposed previously by H. Kainz: *pluralitas intellectuum, unitas intellecti* (*plurality of intellects, unity of the intelligible object*).

The strongly polemic tone of *De unitate intellectus contra averroistas*, written by Thomas Aquinas in 1270, was of no use to him at all. In fact, the Bishop of Paris's condemnation on the 7<sup>th</sup> of March 1277, three years after his death, had a direct effect on Aquinas' works. A competent researcher has discovered 53 Thomist theses among the 219 considered heretical whose theoretic core is summed up in this way: "A whole of theses, most of them philosophical, that mean the difficulty of reconciling Christian doctrine with the teachings of pagan philosophers, mainly Aristotle" [R. Hissette, *Recherches de Théologie et Philosophie médiévales*, 64,1, 1997].

We can therefore talk about a moderate Averroism in Thomas Aquinas, through whom Rushdian theories were spread throughout Europe. Nobody before him among the Christian theologians dared to think from the Aristotelian-Averroist conceptual world, traditionally labelled as heretical.

#### **LATIN AVERROISM**

The integral Aristotelianism of Ibn Rushd found favourable ground in the Faculty of Arts of Paris University. Some Masters of this Faculty read and commented on the writings of the Andalusian philosopher with restrained passion. They were the so-called «Latin Averroists», although this label is a matter of controversy amongst scholars, some of which have even refused to accept the very existence of such a Philosophical School. Its foremost members were: Siger of Brabant, Boetius of Dacia, John of Dry Town (or Jean de Sécheville), John of Jandun and Marsilius of Padua, who considered themselves «philosophers» in contrast to the «theologians». Their thought can be broadly described as a radical Averroism that recreates with a degree of personal interpretation the integral Aristotelianism recovered in the West thanks to Ibn Rushd.

The first problem we face when trying to reconstruct the contributions of these Averroist philosophers is the disappearance of most of their writings, a result of the relentless persecution they suffered following condemnation of their works by the

Catholic Church. On a personal level this ideological hounding entailed withdrawal of their academic positions, exile and even death. This is why John of Dry Town had to return to England for protection; why Boetius of Dacia went to Italy after the Condemnation of 1277; why John of Jandun and Marsilius of Padua fled Paris and the Curia Romana in 1326 and were given refuge and protection at the Court of Ludwig of Bavaria; and why in 1276 Siger of Brabant was summoned to appear before the Tribunal of the Inquisitor of France, Simon du Val, but instead fled to Italy where he took refuge in the town of Viterbo, was sentenced to compulsory residence and was then stabbed to death by a hired killer posing as a secretary.

Fortunately History did not stop after condemnations, and although some of theologians did contribute to the development of Philosophy, there is no doubt that the ideological repression resulted in negative effects on philosophical activity at universities. Faced with the Revisionism of some Medievalists who dared to wonder whether the Bishop Tempier or the Paris Masters of Arts could be considered enlightened, Professor Luca Bianchi summed up the matter well, remembering for example how dangerous it was after 1277 to voice an opinion freely either about the soul (with regard to Pietro d'Abano) or about the nature of the angels (*propter periculum excommunicationis, for danger of excommunication*, according to the very words of theologian Godfrey of Fontaines).

The common feature of Latin Averroists, each one of whom has their own characteristics that deserve to be known thoroughly, is their acknowledgement of the autonomy of Philosophy whose method is different from Theology. They also defended the eternity of the world, the Rushdian theory of Intellect and the concept of human happiness as a way of philosophical life. Our French colleague Alain de Libera has come to the conclusion that it is through contact with this rationalist Arab thought of Rushdian origin that in this age, namely the XIII Century, takes shape the figure of Western intellectual.

A commonplace that is still upheld in many textbooks is the attribution to Ibn Rushd of the so-called «Double Truth Theory». However, as a good philosopher who knew Aristotelian Logic well, he could not have said it. With the principle of non-contradiction, there cannot be two different truths for the same question at the same time. He expounds this clearly in his work *Fasl al-maqāl*: “Truth cannot contradict truth but harmonize with it being used as a confirmatory evidence”.

Nevertheless, the Andalusian philosopher plainly declares that there are *two ways or methods* of approaching truth, one of them characteristic of philosophy by means of reason, and the other characteristic of religion by means of the revealed text; the first one is more difficult and restricted to the wise, while the second one is easier and suitable for the common people.

Where does this polemic theory come from? It probably comes from the need of the Masters of the Faculty of Arts to prevent an open confrontation with Masters of the Faculty of Theology and above all with the ecclesiastical hierarchy. The lack of texts has led some medievalists to deny the «Double Truth Theory» among Latin Averroists. But we must not forget that most Averroists' writings have disappeared due to censorship. On the other hand, as has been recently underlined by some scholars, the theses damned in 1277 were rather fragments of a future philosophical project than

doctrines really taught by the Parisian Masters. Anyway, the Latin Averroists struggled for the autonomy of philosophy in a world ruled by bishops and theologians. This trend is clearly reflected in Political Averroism, whose main figure is Marsilius of Padua.

It is surprising that thanks to the influence of an Islamic philosopher like Ibn Rushd would take place in the Christian Europe what G. Lagarde has called “the birth of the lay spirit in the Late Middle Ages”. To those who at present maintain a permanent prejudice against the Islamic world, this will seem almost impossible. But despite widespread ignorance on these matters, our cultural history was shaped in this way. And Averroism, first in France and later in the flourishing towns of Italy, brought with it the germ of democratic citizenship.

### **Marsilius of Padua**

Born about 1278, Marsilius was a pupil of the Averroist Pietro d’Abano and lectured on Natural Philosophy at Paris University where he was elected Rector in 1313. Later Pope John XXII was to condemn his chief work *Defensor Pacis* (*The Defender of Peace*) and excommunicate him.

What is the doctrinal contribution of this Averroist philosopher? In a recent study on him this conclusion is made: “Only Marsilius succeeded in recapturing political doctrine from its enslavement to theology and canon law by giving a lay basis to law and kingdom. For the first time a Christian author maintains that power is not sacred”: B. Bayona Aznar, *Religión y poder. Marsilio de Padua: ¿La primera teoría laica del estado?*, (Madrid, Biblioteca Nueva, 2007, p. 15).

Cruz Hernández has seen the influence on *Defensor Pacis* of Ibn Rushd *Commentary on Plato’s Republic* with regard to the immanent condition of human happiness and the concept of social good as the ultimate goal of human action. I think there is also an influence of Ibn Rushd’s *Commentary on Aristotle’s Nicomachean Ethics*, which was in fashion in later medieval schools as shown by the fact that it is the only work quoted in Bishop Tempier’s condemnations of 1277. Nevertheless, the most quoted text in the First part of *Defensor Pacis* — which has a greater political, unlike the Second part which was of a religious-political nature, or the Third part which is an abstract of the book — is Aristotle’s *Politics*, a work that Ibn Rushd unfortunately never knew.

So I am led to the conclusion that, starting from a naturalistic philosophy of Averroist origin, Marsilius autonomously developed a political theory whose basis is the concept of State or *civitas* as a perfect and self-sufficient society. Sufficiency of life can only be attained in the civil community, or as Marsilius himself writes: “ Finally, the need to live and to live well discovered by reason and men’s experience, the perfect community called *civitas* (or *State*) reached fullness and was constituted” *Defensor Pacis*, I, 3, § 4.

From that central point, and using biblical and patristic literature, Marsilius of Padua produces a series of conclusions which were shattering to the Papacy and which undermined the pontifical claim to exercise *plenitudo potestatis* (*absolute power*) as much in spiritual affairs as in temporal. Among these conclusions are the following:

**§ 6. The whole body of citizens or its majority alone is the human legislator.**

**§ 7. Decretals and decrees of the bishop of Rome, or of any other bishops or body of bishops, have no power to coerce anyone by secular penalties or punishments, except by the authorization of the human legislator.**

**§ 14. No bishop or priest has coercive authority or jurisdiction over any layman or clergyman, even if he is a heretic.**

**§ 15. The prince who rules by the authority of the legislator has jurisdiction over the persons and possessions of every single mortal of every station, whether lay or clerical, and over every body of laymen or clergy.**

**§ 25. No bishop or body of bishops may give permission to teach or practise in any profession or occupation, because this right belongs to the legislator or to the one who rules by its authority.**

In announcing his death on the 10<sup>th</sup> April 1343 Pope Clement VI said “There has never been a greater known heretic than Marsilius”. Despite this, Marsilius’s intellectual legacy has increased with the passage of time. Right up to today those distant political reflections remain essential for a democratic, open society.

## **Dante Alighieri**

Halfway through the Middle Ages, with equal gifts of literary and philosophical genius, came the philosopher-poet from Florence, Dante Alighieri. In his *Commedia*, where Ibn Rushd is called the *Commentator* [of Aristotle] par excellence, he is held in high esteem, being placed in a circle reserved for the greatest men of Science from the Ancient World, such as Democritus, Socrates, Plato, Aristotle, Ptolemy, Hippocrates and Galen.

In another of Dante’s works, *Convivio*, where there are prevailing philosophical problems, some topics of clearly Averroist origin can be found: for example, when he writes that “knowledge is our last perfection” and that for this reason science can be called “heaven” (II, 13, 6). In my opinion, we must pay special attention to the treaty *Monarchia*, because in it he advances as a political thinker from the Aristotle who more interested in the Renaissance, the Aristotle of *Nicomachean Ethics* and *Politics*, in a broad line which can be described as political Averroism, although without the harsh tone of Marsilius. After asking himself what is the end of human society as a whole, he comes to his answer: “It is, so, evident that the last end of the potency of the whole mankind consists of the intellectual potency or faculty” (I, IV). He finishes this reasoning with an appeal to the argument by authority: “And with this sentence agrees Averroes in his Commentary on *De anima*” (*ibid.*).

The Third book of *Monarchia* is the most polemic and in it he discusses nature and the limits of power of the Pope and the Emperor. After explaining that authority of the Emperor does not come from the authority of the Pope (III, XIV), Dante introduces a clearly Averroist analytical method which maintains a close parallelism with the «Double Truth Theory». There are, according to him, two ends assigned to men by providence: *happiness of this life*, which is represented by *earthly paradise*, and *happiness of everlasting life*, which is represented by *celestial paradise*. Both happiness, as different goals, need to be reached *by different means*: the first we reach *through the teaching of philosophers*; while we reach the second *through spiritual teachings* which go beyond the limits of human reason. “That is why man has had the

need for a *double guide* according to a *double end*: namely, *His Holiness the Pope's guide* for leading mankind to everlasting life according to the teachings of Revelation; and *the Emperor's guide*, for leading mankind to temporal happiness according to philosophical legacy ... It is evident that the authority of the Monarch comes directly from God who is the source of the universal authority" (III, XV, 10-15, italics mine).

Besides the philosophical influences I have referred to, we must not forget Dante's political praxis. He participated in the political struggle within the Gibelins party which defended the Empire and the independence of Italian towns against the Pope's followers, the blacks Guelfes. Exiled in 1302 and condemned to death, he was compelled to leave his beloved town of Florence to which he never would return.

## TRACES OF IBN RUSHD IN THE ITALIAN RENAISSANCE

Against old commonplaces, the Italian Renaissance cannot be called a Platonic and anti-Aristotelian period. Scholastic Aristotelianism was criticised, but Aristotle continued to be taught in universities; the Averroists made use of the naturalistic gold mine recovered by Ibn Rushd; the Hellenists began to read Greek texts with a new outlook and Aristotelian ethical thought occupied a place of prominence.

In any case we must distinguish Humanists from Philosophers. Leading Humanists included: Francesco Petrarca, Lorenzo Valla, Giovanni Pico della Mirandola, Giovanni Boccaccio and Leonardo Bruni; while leading Philosophers include: Marsilio Ficino, Tommaso Campanella and Giordano Bruno.

We find clear opposition to Aristotelianism and Averroism by the Humanists. Petrarch's position is especially noteworthy: he contrasts Classical Antiquity with what he calls the "barbarism" of Averroists and "Moderns" or Nominalists, while he upholds a return to the *antiqui* or Ancients. On an ideological level his position is more literary-religious than philosophical, as he himself acknowledges in *De ignorantia* in a polemic with the Averroists.

Marsilio Ficino, on the other hand, places Plato at the summit of Philosophy, because he considers Plato's thoughts to be in harmony with Christianity. Nevertheless, we also find the influence of Averroism on Platonic philosophers of the Renaissance: for example, in Giovanni Pico della Mirandola for whom the highest human happiness consists of the conjunction or *copulatio* of our intellect with the agent Intellect. According to the Italian Medievalist Bruno Nardi, one of his more fruitful humanist concepts, that of *dignitas hominis* (man's dignity), comes from these reflections on Averroes's Psychology.

In the Universities of Padua and Bologna a renewed interest in Aristotelianism gained strength during the 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> Centuries, and research, editing and teaching of the philosophical doctrines of Ibn Rushd came to occupy an elevated position among professors. In the second half of 14<sup>th</sup> Century an outstanding figure was Biagio Pelacani of Parma, a physician, mathematician and astronomer who taught at the University of Padua before being condemned as an atheist in 1396. He was outstanding because of the naturalism of his Psychology, and because of his defence of the autonomy of philosophy and the application of the «Double Truth Theory».

In the fields of editing and teaching outstanding thinkers linked to Averroism included: Paolo Veneto, Nicoletto Vernia, Agostino Nifo, Alessandro Achillini, Pietro Pomponazzi and Giacomo Zabarella. It also seems evident that, in spite of attacks by clerical and idealistic groups, Averroism continued to occupy a pre-eminent position in the world of Renaissance academia.

## **Giordano Bruno**

Finally, let us mention the most radical and polemic philosopher of the Renaissance, Giordano Bruno. Here we will only look at some of the topics connected to the Andalusian philosopher, without considering his innovative Philosophy of Nature, nor his revolutionary Cosmology which is noted for the Theory of the Infinite Universe.

### **— Distinction between Philosophy and Religion**

According to Bruno, religion is directed at common people, its diffusion is based on sensitive experience and it seeks to establish rules of conduct that are useful to society. Philosophy, on the other hand, represents a kind of superior knowledge, its activity relies on reason and is directed to a minority of wise men who try to be ruled by the intellect, as much on the theoretical level as on the moral level.

### **— Happiness and intellectual activity**

In the practice of philosophy, namely, in the intellectual activity, consists human perfection. Recovering the widespread medieval concept of happiness as *copulatio* or *conjunctio* with the agent Intellect, writes Bruno: “It seems to me that the Peripatetic [Philosophers] , as Averroes explained, mean it when they say that the highest happiness of man consists in the perfection by the theoretical sciences. It is true and they are right” (*Eroici furori*).

### **— Criticism of Christianity**

Bruno has a double criticism of Christianity, from a theoretical as well as an ethical point of view. He is also opposed to its pretension to become a universal religion and to be the only path to eternal salvation. As Massimo Campanini has written, starting with the Brunian *Spaccio della bestia trionfante*, the Italian philosopher denounces Christianity as the enemy of nature and as an ideology that has destroyed the harmony of man with nature.

### **— Man, the great Wonder**

For Bruno the Universe, necessarily infinite in time and space, shows the infinite potency of God. The «perfect man» will be the natural man who unites with divinity through the philosophical contemplation of the universe.

As the Spanish scholar Miguel Ángel Granada underlined in his book *El umbral de la modernidad* (Barcelona, Herder, 2000, p. 259), once Giordano Bruno had assimilated the Averroist-Aristotelian rationalism and after re-working the topic of

*man's dignity* as described by Marsilio Ficino and Pico della Mirandola, he proposes a new theory of *man's dignity* “quite apart from any representation of man as a microcosm or a *copula mundi* and from any salvific mediation by Christ”.

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