

**Averroes and Maimonides:
12th Century Figures of Philosophy and Faith**

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Abstract

This paper examines the intersection between religion, philosophy, and sociopolitical circumstance through a comparative study of two key figures in the 12th century Islamic World. Averroes and Maimonides had in common a birthplace in medieval Spain, a passion for philosophy, and deep religiosity, but belonged to different religious traditions, Islam and Judaism respectively. Through an analysis of major philosophical works and life events, this paper demonstrates that Averroes and Maimonides both focused on the intrinsic relationship between philosophy and religious faith and had an enormous impact on future scholastic tradition despite living in a tumultuous sociopolitical period.

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Medieval Spain holds claim to a unique period of flourishing culture and religious tolerance in human history. At a time when Europe remained in the dark Middle Ages, Andalusian culture built great cities and preserved the works of previous civilizations. It was a time of great scientific and philosophical thought as well as deep religiosity, which begs the question of how the two not only coexisted but thrived side by side. This paper will explore the intersections of philosophical thought and the religious faiths of Judaism and Islam in 12th century Medieval Spain, through a comparative study of the life histories and works of two philosophers. Both were born within a few years of each other in the Spanish city of Cordoba to a rich intellectual tradition, excelled as philosophers, and died in exile as the society of their birth collapsed. Averroes and Maimonides were deeply religious men and leaders of their respective faiths, Islam and Judaism. This paper will further examine how religious faith informed their works on philosophy and defense of worldview at a significant point in sociopolitical history.

When Abd al-Rahman of the Umayyad dynasty took control of Spain in 756, no one could have predicted the birth of an Islamic Empire that would last for hundreds of years and give rise to many cultural and intellectual triumphs. Abd al-Rahman came to Spain as the last surviving member of the Umayyad dynasty, which ruled over the Arab Islamic Empire from Damascus until they were massacred and deposed from power by the Abbasids, a rival faction (Menocal 6). Initially, Abd al-Rahman governed over a civilization considered nothing more

than a peripheral settlement relative to the Islamic Empire based in Baghdad (6). Yet it was the beginning of a great golden age in Andalusia, centered in Cordoba, that would last for more than 200 years and witness the rise of tremendous philosophical and scientific scholarship. During this period, people of Islamic, Christian, and Jewish faiths lived together in relative harmony. The Great Mosque of Cordoba stood as an architectural symbol of and testament to the religious tolerance, blending Islamic and Christian styles (Hildebrand). In regards to language, Arabic was held in high esteem, and even Christian scholars preferred it over Latin (Menocal 29). Scholars of all faiths translated Greek and Roman texts to Arabic, preserving essential knowledge that would later serve as a key foundation for European scholastic tradition. The Golden Age lasted until 1031, when the caliphate fragmented into smaller city-states (Gordon). In 1048, the Almohads, a group of North African Berber Muslims, assumed the government of Cordoba, and eventually conquered the entire region and imposed a strict colonial rule by 1090 (Menocal 43). The Almohad doctrine was fanatical and hostile to ideas originating outside the bounds of Islam. The beginning of the Almohad governance signaled the end of religious tolerance, as Jews and Christians were forced to convert or flee (44). Andalusia continued to exist as a mixture of cultures and peoples, but with more conflict and intolerance than before.

In 1126, Ibn Rushd was born into the complex sociopolitical context that encircled the city of Cordoba. Known by the name Averroes in Latin languages, he was born into an elite intellectual tradition from a lineage of scholars and Muslim leaders. Due to his background, he developed close ties to Almohad rulers in Spain, and eventually served as a religious judge in both Cordoba and Seville (Pasnau). Averroes served in these roles until 1182, when he became the court physician for the caliph of Marrakech. From 1169 to 1195, Averroes wrote the majority of his commentaries on Aristotle's works (Rosenthal). Though the project initially began at the

request of the caliph, Averroes clearly took an interest as he eventually wrote comprehensive, line-by-line commentaries on nearly all of Aristotle's works except for *Politica*, to which he did not have access (Rosenthal). While Averroes' commentaries on the works of Aristotle would later be read widely in Latin by European scholars, his writings remained unpopular and even downright controversial in his own time. In 1195, the Almohad caliph sent Averroes away to Lucena, a small, largely Jewish town halfway between Cordoba and Granada, and commanded that his works be burned (Pasnau). Apparently, this action was meant by the caliph to appease conservative parties concerned with the heretical nature of Averroes' philosophies and works. Although the exile was meant as a form of humiliation, it facilitated contact between Averroes and Jewish scholars, and most likely contributed to the later influence of his works on the Jewish intellectual community (Booth 146). Averroes eventually rejoined the court of the Almohad caliph in Marrakech, but he never regained full favor, and was held under a form of house arrest until his death in 1198 (Menocal 212).

Over his lifetime, both in Cordoba and in exile, Averroes was a prolific writer, defending Aristotle in extensive commentaries and considering the intersection between faith and philosophy. In *Decisive Treatise*, one of his most famous works on philosophy, Averroes vigorously argued for the value of philosophy and its consistency with Islamic theological teachings (Heller-Roazen 413). He attempted to draw the connection between divine law and human wisdom, arguing that "Truth does not contradict truth but rather is consistent with it and testifies to it" (Taylor 3). In other words, Averroes contended that both religion and philosophy have a unity of truth, and the study of one will lead to a better understanding of the other. Along those lines, Averroes maintained that the power of God acts through and in accordance with natural laws. For example, Averroes reasoned that the external physical world has existed

eternally, alongside the eternal God Himself, and that God did not create the physical world but shaped its creatures and habitats (Pasnau). In another famous work, the *Incoherence of the Incoherence*, Averroes furthered his argument for the key role of reason within religion, explicitly stating his assertion that “knowledge received from revelation comes to perfect the branches of knowledge of the intellect” (Booth 154). As such, for Averroes, divine truth exists in harmony with and is, in part, realized through the truths of intellectual reasoning via Aristotelian philosophy.

Though Averroes was a devout Muslim, his works were never fully accepted by the Islamic culture in which he lived and worked for the majority of his life. In fact, his defense of Aristotle was seen as deeply controversial, even blasphemous, by the Islamic Arab culture of the time (Gordon). His defense of Aristotelian philosophy and reason were not accepted and seen as heretical to the broader society in which Averroes worked, which tended more toward ultra-orthodoxy and anti-secularism (Menocal 45). The Almohad culture rejected logic, reason, and Aristotelian philosophy on the basis that these ideas would corrupt religious beliefs and practices (Pasnau). This environment explains the career transition Averroes made later in life, to become a court physician, and the general intolerance and house arrest under which he was placed until his eventual death. For Averroes, his philosophical and religious identities were intrinsically intertwined and rested upon core Aristotelian premises. Though his stance may have been acceptable, even typical, had he lived and worked during the Golden Age of Andalusia, it remained controversial and ignored in the sociopolitical context of Averroes’s lifetime.

Meanwhile, another philosopher looked for meaning and reason in the historically tumultuous time. Musa ibn Maymun, or Maimonides as he is better known as in Latin languages, was born in 1135. He was born in Cordoba to a Jewish family with a deep history of rabbinic

learning and was a brilliant student from a young age (Menocal 209). Maimonides was young when the Almohad government took control of Cordoba in 1148, and his family left soon after, fleeing southward. After a period of wandering around southern Spain, Morocco, and the Holy Land, the Maymun family eventually settled in Egypt (210). Under the Egyptian ruler, Sultan Saladin, Jews could freely practice (210). Maimonides quickly rose in status, becoming both the religious leader of a Jewish community and the physician to the royal court by the time he was 36 years old (Dunn 227). The years after saw Maimonides complete a great deal of his writing and most well-known works. His death in 1204 in Alexandria, Egypt, was seen as a great loss in the Jewish community and beyond (Menocal 209).

In his lifetime, Maimonides produced a number of great works across a multitude of disciplines, including philosophy, medicine, science, and religion. Maimonides aimed to reconcile Greek philosophical tradition with Jewish law, as he did through his commentary on the Mishnah and a re-codification of a variety of sources into his famous *Mishneh Torah*. In particular, the *Mishneh Torah* was an unprecedented text of Jewish law, which took over ten years to write and would become profoundly influential in the Jewish world (Gordon). Maimonides saw the study of philosophy and science as the avenue to a higher religious experience. He pursued this aim through exploring the wisdom and will of God in the natural world according to Aristotelian thought, as well as the revelation of truths (Bokser 541).

These topics are given great attention in *The Guide to the Perplexed*, arguably Maimonides's greatest philosophical work. Completed in 1190 in Judeo-Arabic, it addresses the roles of reason and revelation as "the respective sources of knowledge through which philosophy and the Torah derive their truth" (544). The conception of God was central to this investigation, and for Maimonides, the highest purpose of reason was to discern the unity of God, without any

plurality (545). Thus, according to Aristotelian philosophy, God cannot be described with positive attributes, but rather only with “negative theology” (Robinson). The method of defining the natural world in negative terms, by describing what it is not, parallels modern scientific doctrine, in which the processes explaining natural phenomena can only be disproved and never fully proven. Moreover, it demands the utilization of reason to fully appreciate the total unity of God, intrinsically linking Aristotelian philosophy to the conception of God Himself. At the same time, Maimonides recognized the limits of intellectual reason to reaching the highest form of worship and argued that revelation was the essential complement toward achieving this goal (Bokser 545). Reason provides the tools to recognize the unity and perfection of God, while revelation delivers the emotional reaction that will carry an individual from “knowledge to worship” (546). Thus, Maimonides argued for the dually important roles of philosophical reason and religious revelation to reach the ultimate truth of God through worship.

Based on life history and intellectual objectives, a great many commonalities are clear between Averroes and Maimonides. The two philosophers were both born in Cordoba into the Andalusian culture, experienced the societal upheaval and cultural shift resulting from the Almohad government, and died in exile from the land of their births. In scholarly pursuits, Averroes and Maimonides shared a determination to confront the conflict between religion and philosophy (Menocal 208). The major works of each focus on that question and take similar stances on the dual importance of faith and reason to reaching the highest understanding of divine truth and relationship with God. Through these works, both defended a basic vision of “human freedom” to the pursuit of intellectual thought and religious revelation (208). Insofar as religious insight rests on the works of God in the natural world, which are more accessible to human observation, Averroes and Maimonides defended Aristotelian philosophy as the method

with which natural phenomena are best explained. Averroes supported this contention with his line-by-line commentaries on Aristotle, and Maimonides followed Aristotle in his construction of philosophical arguments (Bosker 569). Moreover, each constructed this defense within or in spite of a culture contrary to such beliefs, as was the discordant and intolerant fragments of Andalusia under Almohad rule (Menocal 45). The mismatch illuminates the motivations of the two men, to defend the worldview of the culture in which they were born, and yet saw dissolve before their own eyes.

Interestingly, Averroes and Maimonides shared similar views on the limits of philosophy in the larger social sphere. As both were raised in an elite intellectual tradition within their respective faiths, they acknowledged the lengthy educational and moral development required for philosophical contemplation of divine truths (Bokser 547). Consequently, neither supposed that philosophy should be taught to the ordinary people. Averroes was especially opposed, fearing that the average person would lose religious faith if told that descriptions in religious text should not be taken literally, according to reason (Pasnau). The shared belief in the exclusivity of philosophy as a tool for the intellectual elite differs greatly from modern ideals of education and reflect the more stratified society of the period.

Beyond the undeniable similarities in philosophy and sociopolitical circumstance, the way in which Averroes and Maimonides experienced events and the subsequent impacts were widely different. Averroes and Maimonides, a Muslim and a Jew respectively, experienced far different consequences as a result of the sociopolitical changes of the period on the basis of the religion with which each man identified. As aforementioned, Averroes' works were intensely controversial within the conservative Almohad culture, even though he was a Muslim living in an Islamic society. Though written at the bequest of the caliph initially, Averroes quickly went

beyond simple translation of and commentary on Aristotle to more contentious ideas. In due course, these ideas led to his exile. Averroes' philosophies would never be impactful among scholars of Arabic, his own native tongue, in his time (Menocal 213). The lines of acceptance for Maimonides are not so easily drawn. The philosophical works of Maimonides, written in Arabic, would be ignored by Islamic culture in the 12th century (213). However, his *Mishneh Torah* would have far-reaching influence on the Jewish world of that time and on future generations. Written in Hebrew, it was easily understood by devout Jews and unified Jewish law for years to come (Gordon). The impact was largely due to its unambiguous legal code and support of the present Judaism, without posing a challenge to the faith. The enormous impact of Maimonides, and widespread acceptance of his works and ideas within his own culture, led to frequent comparisons with Moses. To this day, Maimonides is often called the second Moses (Menocal 213).

Altogether, the broader interpretation and long-term impact of the works of both Maimonides and Averroes are more similar than different. Both philosophers were controversial in their own lifetimes to some degree. The root of the controversy lay primarily in the argument for philosophical reason as a path to truth, which rejected the notion that religious faith holds the sole means to truth. This assertion was considered sacrilegious and deviant by the Almohad Islamic culture. As a result, the works of Averroes and Maimonides would not rise to prominence until the opening of European universities in the 13th century, which generally implemented more secular curriculum (Pasnau). The commentaries, guides, legal writings, and philosophical works of Averroes and Maimonides brought the Aristotelian corpus of work to Europe and formed the foundation of its scholastic tradition (Menocal). These works would later be read and interpreted by future scholars, including Thomas Aquinas, Albert the Great, and

John Duns Scotus (Gordon). Even when these figures disagreed with the works of the 12th century philosophers, the ideas from Medieval Spain provided essential pillars of philosophical thought. Though Islam would turn away from philosophy even before the lifetimes of Averroes and Maimonides ended, their words would find new ears among the Latin readers in Europe. Among many shared characteristics, a fundamental difference in religious tradition, between Islam and Judaism, created a crucial distinction between the two men. Regardless, Averroes and Maimonides came to a great many of the same conclusions, which supports the belief that the powers uniting individuals in intellectual and theological thought are far greater than those that divide.

The works of Averroes and Maimonides represent a final blossoming of the classical era of philosophy in the Islamic World, hovering on a precipice between moments in sociopolitical history. Both were born into the rich intellectual tradition and diverse culture of Andalusia, witnessed it fracture, and spent their last years in exile. Both found truth in reason and revelation, and found an essential interaction between the two that heightens religious experience. Despite differences in experiences after the Almohad conquest of Cordoba and levels of acceptance within their respective cultures, Averroes and Maimonides are alike in impact on the European scholastic tradition. The two men are influential and enduring figures of philosophy and faith, who defended the ideals of Andalusia even when the civilization fell apart. In the process, Averroes and Maimonides demonstrated devoted faith and a relentless pursuit of learning that continues to inspire generations of future students.

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