
UNIT 4 JEWISH AND ISLAMIC PHILOSOPHERS

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4.1 INTRODUCTION

The origins of Jewish philosophy are considered to be in Alexandria by the introduction of Hellenistic culture during the reign of Ptolemy Philometor. The attempt to apply Greek philosophical concepts to Jewish doctrines was made by Philo of Alexandria, also called Philo Judaeus (20 BCE - 40 CE), a prominent member of the Jewish community at Alexandria, and a figure that spans two cultures, the Greek and the Hebrew. Jewish philosophy sprung up due to the encounter between Hebrew religious thought and Greek philosophical thought in the first century B.C.E. Philo developed speculative and philosophical justification for Judaism in terms of Greek philosophy and thus he produced a synthesis of both traditions developing concepts for future Hellenistic interpretation of messianic Hebrew thought, especially by Clement of Alexandria, Christian Apologists like Athenagoras, Theophilus, Justin Martyr, Tertullian, and by Origen.

Jewish philosophical growth and contribution were considerably regressed during the early centuries of the Christian era. This was because the Jews became absorbed in their political struggles that followed the destruction of Jerusalem; this situation continued until the second caliphate of the Abbassides who began their reign in 754. Even though, there were no outstanding philosophers between Philo (first century) and ninth century, during the reign of the second caliphate of the Abbassides, one of the main Jewish thinkers in the Academy of Babylon founded a school that denied the authority of Talmud and the traditional Jewish laws, and instead proclaimed the right of reason to freely interpret scriptural texts. The followers of that school were called Karaitas; the oldest writings available from the first Karaitas date back to the tenth-century. The Karaitas had an adversary, Rabbi SAADIA ben Joseph (891-942), one of the last and most famous Gaonim, a great Talmudic scholar, Jewish philosopher and inspiring leader, who was born in a small village near Fayyum, in Egypt. He fought against the beliefs and customs of the Karaites with his scholarly and logical arguments.

Soon after Saadia's death, the works of Arab philosophers were introduced into the Iberian Peninsula; it was also the period when Jewish philosophy reached the Caliphate of Cordoba.

4.2 CHARACTERISTICS OF MEDIEVAL JEWISH PHILOSOPHY

In the middle ages, the two sources of knowledge or truth were religious opinions as embodied in revealed documents on the one hand, and philosophical and scientific judgments and arguments, the results of independent rational reflection, on the other hand. Thus, Revelation and Reason, Religion and Philosophy, Faith and Knowledge are the various expressions for the dualism in medieval thought. For the medieval Jewish thinkers, reason and philosophy were represented by Plato, Aristotle and the neo-Platonists, while faith was represented by the Old Testament and the Talmud.

Beyond that of establishing a harmonic relation between philosophy and Revelation, there were also other motivations for a medieval Jewish philosopher to take recourse to philosophy. They are the necessity to integrate Bible discourse wherever it was vague or incomplete and the need to elaborate a systematic framework for all the truths contained in the Bible and the Talmud. In order to make clear the relations between Revelation and Reason or Religion and Philosophy, the medieval Jewish philosophers were recourse not only to the teachings of Christian philosophers from the Patristic period and the Islamic philosophers, but also to the thoughts of their own philosopher, Philo of Alexandria, who had given at the beginning of Patristic period a positive solution to reconcile Revelation and philosophy.

4.3 MEDIEVAL JEWISH PHILOSOPHERS

Medieval Jewish philosophers receive their knowledge on Greek philosophy not directly from Greek sources, but through the work of the Arab philosophers. Their religious philosophy was different from that of Philo, because, if Philo used mostly Plato and the Stoics in his attempt to synthesize Hellenism and Judaism, the Jewish medieval philosophers made the most use of the neo-Platonists and Aristotle. Among the highly competent and qualified medieval Jewish thinkers, we limit ourselves to studying two philosophers such as IBN GABIROL, known by the Latin scholastics as AVICEBRON, and MAIMONIDES.

IBN GABRIOL or AVICEBRON (1022-1058)

Salmon Ibn Gabriol or Avicebron was born in Malaga around 1022, educated in Saragossa, and died in Valencia in 1058. He possessed extraordinary intellectual gifts and excelled as a poet and philosopher. He wrote a grammar book on Hebrew in verse, several poems, and the *Fons Vitae* (The Fountain of Life, or *yanbû' al-hayâh* in Arabic), a work that provoked great reaction from his Jewish compatriots. *Fons Vitae* is of great importance for the History of Philosophy. It was originally written in Arabic, and was known in the western Latin world through a translation done by John of Spain (Johannes Hispanus) and Dominicus Gundissalinus in the first half of the twelfth-century.

The original Arabic text is lost to us, though we do have some extant fragments in the form of citations of the original Arabic version in the Arabic language texts of other Jewish medieval philosophers. Because the Arabic fragments are sparse, the main version of the text is the Latin 12th century translation—it is considered more true to the original than the later 13th century Hebrew translation both because it is an earlier translation, but also because unlike the Hebrew summary translation, the Latin edition is (ostensibly) a complete translation, maintaining the original dialogue format of Ibn Gabirol's original text.

Fons Vitae is a fictitious dialogue between a teacher and his pupil. It is considered as a book on neo-Platonism, containing the most special characteristics of this philosophy. The book is a philosophical study of matter and form, and it is devoid of any direct reference to biblical or rabbinic texts or doctrines. The main thesis of the work is that everything in God's universe has matter as well as form. Fons Vitae is divided into five treatises. The first is a general introduction of the topic of matter and form and their relation to physical substances. The second deals with the substance or matter that underlies the corporeality of the sublunar world. The third is a proof of the existence of simple substances, which function in Ibn Gabirol's ontology as intermediaries between God and the physical world. The fourth is a proof that these simple or spiritual substances are composed of form and matter, and the fifth treatise is an account of the universal form and universal matter that underlie everything in the universe except God.

Ibn Gabirol's most celebrated doctrine was that on universal hylomorphism. According to him, all beings, angels and human souls included, are gifted with (incorporeal) matter. In his opinion, matter is the prime substance which sustains the nine fundamental accidents, and matter is the first creature of God. Fundamentally the same in all creatures, it nevertheless presents very different grades of perfection according to a well defined hierarchy, which extends from a maximum of imperfection in the heaviest bodies to a maximum of perfection in the lightest Intelligences. Next to universal matter he places a universal soul or universal form, which is the soul of the entire created cosmos. The universal soul sustains the entire corporeal world, represents and knows everything that is in this world, just as our individual souls sustain our bodies, as they sustain and see everything that is in our bodies.

His teachings became influential in thirteenth-century University of Paris. They were considered seriously and criticized by St. Albert the Great and, above all, by St. Thomas Aquinas who dedicated four long chapters of his *opusculum De Substantiis Separatis*. The mark left by Avicenna in medieval Augustinism gave rise to a new philosophical trend which can be called Augustinian-Avicennian, that easily shows itself in great thinkers like St. Bonaventure.

MAIMONIDES (1135-1204)

Moses ben Maimon, commonly known as Maimonides, a Spanish-Jewish philosopher, was born in Cordoba in 1135 and died in Cairo in 1204. His family had sought refuge in Morocco and later in Cairo when Cordoba was conquered by the Almohads, who were strictly religious Muslims intolerant of other religions. He was one of the authorities most cited by the Scholastic authors, among them St. Thomas Aquinas; he was known to them as "Rabbi Moses." He wrote various exegetical books, including the monumental Comment of the

Talmud. In 1190 he completed in Arabic his principal work, the *Moreh Nebukim* (The Guide for the Perplexed), a sort of theological treatise that prefigured the glory of the Christian Summas of the thirteenth-century.

The Guide for the Perplexed has three parts. The first part is a discussion on God, His attributes and His essence, according to Scriptures, '*Kalam*' (Islamic theology) and philosophers (especially Aristotle and Avicenna). In the second part, after a long prologue on God's existence and the proofs used in favour of this agreement, the author confronts the problem of the creation of the world "*ex nihilo*", according to the opinions of philosophers (Aristotle) and the teaching of Scripture. The third part is on the study of man, his nature (soul and body), faculties, virtues and duties. He also examines the question of Providence, the Law, miracles, rewards and punishments.

In contrast to Avicenna's doctrine, Maimonides taught that the purely intellectual substances are totally devoid of matter. From Arab philosophy he received the thesis on the single agent intellect. He proved the existence of God as the Prime Mover, First Cause, and Necessary Being. He resolved the question on the hypothetical created eternity of the world by arguing that the rational proofs in its favour – following the explanation of Aristotle – are not conclusive, although neither could it be demonstrated that they are erroneous. Lastly, he flatly denied the possibility of assigning positive attributes to God, of whom only negative ones could be validly said: "God is one from all aspects, there is neither multiplicity in Him nor anything attached to his essence, such that the various attributes with their own meanings that are used in Sacred Scriptures to designate God refer to the variety of his actions, not to the multiplicity of his essence" (The Guide for the Perplexed, Ch. 52).

4.4 THE ORIGINS OF ISLAMIC PHILOSOPHY

Prophet Mohammed, born in Mecca around 570, is the founder of Islam and the author of Quran. The main essence of the Quranic revelation can be summed up in five basic beliefs: in God, in angels, in revealed books, in God's messengers (Mohammed as the last and greatest of the prophets) and in the Last Day when human beings will be judged. Along with the beliefs, Islam has also religious practices that can be summed up in the so-called Five Pillars. There is no god but God and Mohammed is his messenger; in praying five times daily; in paying the alms tax, in fasting during the holy month of Ramadan; and if financially possible, in going on the great pilgrimage to Mecca. After the death of the Prophet (632), the Arab followers spread Islam through military conquests to the entire Middle East as far as Turkey to the north, India to the east, and northern Africa and Spain to the west. The conquests paved the way for Islam to profit of all pagan and Christian culture, thus coming in contact with the sources of Greek thought. With their contact with Christianity and Greek philosophy, the Arab philosophers began to apply the philosophical method to the exposition of their sacred texts and were making a rational reflection on various questions. Hence, the so-called "Arab scholastic theology" was born, generally known as the *hulam* or *kalam* (i.e., method of reasoning or art of discourse). It was initiated in Damascus and developed later on in Baghdad and Basra.

HALAM (ARAB SCHOLASTIC THEOLOGY)

In early Islamic thought (dated between 8th and 12th centuries), two main currents could be distinguished. The first is *halam* or *kalam* and the other is *falsafa*. While *halam* dealt mainly with Islamic theological questions, *falsafa* with interpretations of Aristotelianism and Neoplatonism. In a later period, the important Islamic philosopher-theologians who attempted to harmonize these two currents were Ibn Sina (Avicenna) who founded the school of Avicennism, Ibn Rushd (Averroes) who founded the school of Averroism, and others such as Ibn al-Haytham (Alhacen) and Abu Rayhan al-Biruni. Two periods of development can be traced back in *halam*: during the first period the theologians were almost exclusively engaged in interpretative casuistry. This doctrinal movement was called the *mutazilite* and its founder was Wasil bn 'Ata' (700-749). This movement evolved and the mutazilites looked for support in philosophy and were one of the first to pursue a rational theology called *Ilm-al-Kalam* (Scholastic theology). The thinkers of this second period were regarded as the architects of *halam* from which the name of this period, *mutakallimoun*, is derived. The subsequent generations who were critical to Mutazilism paved the way for another trend called Asharism, which made use of the dialectical method for the defence of the authority of divine revelation.

MUTAZILISM

Mutazilism, originated from Basra in the beginning of the eighth-century, was a moderate reaction against the literal interpretation of the Quran. The Mutazilites focused their speculation on four main topics:

- i) On the unity of the Divine Being (God) and that of His attributes. In order to safeguard both God's unity and his transcendence they held that the attributes of God are indissolubly part of His essence.
- ii) On divine justice and human freedom, which they tried to reconcile by denying God's intervention in the affairs of the world.
- iii) On the sin of infidelity, saying that in order to be saved, believing in the Quran is not enough: it is necessary to avoid mortal sins;
- iv) On the attitudes one must have towards his enemies and to infidels, who need to be converted by kind methods, but without discounting the use of force if they persevere in their errors.

According to Mutazilites God is a Being who is strictly One and absolutely Necessary, while everything else is strictly possible being. God willed Creation, but properly speaking, what he created was only the universal primordial act from which all other created things necessarily flow.

MUTAKALLIMOUNS

The Mutakallimouns considered the Quran as the prime source for their knowledge about the world, and therefore they intended to set-up to understand the world according to the stipulations of the Quran. They brought forth a theological reaction to the unorthodox activity of the Mutazilites. They searched for answers to the speculative problems posed by the Mutazilites: how can the divine will be explained if God merely created the universal primordial act, and that he does not interfere in all that happens in Creation? They wanted

to preserve the immutability of the divine essence within the context of the continual interventions of the divine will. The solution offered by the Mutakallimouns can be summarized as follows: The divine will cannot cease its activity because that would imply that in God there is discontinuity and accidental changes in his essence. Therefore, it is necessary that he be creating continuously some atoms, which do not have any special properties nor special laws in themselves; the divine will unites and separates them in a vacuum.

ASHARISM

Al- Ash'ari (874-936), the founder of Asharism, belonged to the school of the Mutazilites and he continued to support its doctrines up to the age of forty. But later he abandoned it because of a disagreement with his teacher, the head and scholar of the School of Basra. He abandoned the rationalism of Mutazilites and became their most vehement and severe critic. He spent the rest of his life in combating 'Mutazilite heresy' and proposing orthodox interpretation of the Quran. The Ashirites held the view that God's will rules all creation and governs the deliberations of the human will. Things happen because God so wills, and if they occur, it is because God wants it that way. Nothing escapes the scope of divine will because God alone is absolutely necessary in himself. God is not only the Necessary Being, He is absolute possibility as well. Without God, created things are not necessary nor are they possible; they do not simply exist.

Check Your Progress I

Note: Use the space provided for your answers.

- 1) What were the motivations of a medieval Jewish philosopher to take recourse to philosophy?

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- 2) Explain the doctrine of universal hylomorphism of Ibn Gabriol.

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- 3) Explain Maimonides' doctrine on God.

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4.5 MEDIEVAL ISLAMIC PHILOSOPHERS

AL-KINDI (796–ca. 866)

Chronologically, the first important Aristotelian Arab philosopher was Al-Kindi (796–ca. 866). Most probably he lived in Baghdad and Basra, under the aegis of the ‘Abbasid Caliphs. Al-Kindi’s philosophic thought is directly connected with Greek philosophical doctrines transmitted to him through translations and with the rationalist theological movement of the Mutazilites. The central point of Al-Kindi’s theodicy is the denial of the positive attributes of God, and the negative attributes are given prominence; his purpose was to emphasize the absolute transcendence of God in relation to the world. In order to prove God’s existence, he preferred the demonstration based on creation, which shows God as the necessary Being, supreme Creator who is the source of order and government in the universe.

In his philosophy, Al-Kindi was more of Neoplatonist than an Aristotelian. He adopted the Neoplatonic doctrine of emanation in his metaphysics and cosmology. In his theory of intellectual knowledge, he adopted the doctrine of the active intellect and the passive intellect (formulated by Aristotle and later elaborated by Alexander of Aphrodisias and subsequently reworked and modified by Neoplatonists). After his study in detail, Al-Kindi differentiates four kinds of intellect: i) the intellect that is actual; ii) the intellect that is passive or potential; iii) the intellect that passes from potency to act, that is the possible intellect (actualized by intelligible forms); iv) the demonstrative intellect (that is, it retains acquired knowledge and transmits it via demonstration). The intellect that is always actual is the intellect of the last celestial sphere and it governs the sublunar world. The potential or possible intellect forms part of the individual soul of every human being.

AL-FARABI (ca. 870-950)

Al-Farabi, a great Islamic peripatetic, was a native of Persian Turkestan, studied in Baghdad and lived in Aleppo and Damascus. He attempted to elevate philosophy to the place of highest value and to subordinate the revelation and the *sharia* (the religious law) to it. His importance lies in his attempt to establish the concordance between Plato and Aristotle. During his time, the main disputed topics springing from discrepancies between Plato and Aristotle were the following: whether the world is eternal or created in time; how to prove the existence of the first maker of the universe, as well as how to affirm the existence of things emanating from him; the problem about the soul and the separated intellect; how good works and evil ones are remunerated; the so-called “problem on the substance” (what is the first and most noble substance: whether it is the substance closest to the intellect and to the soul, that is, the substance farthest from the senses, or is it the individual substance or the person).

An important contribution of Al-Farabi was his concept of the necessary being, which influenced Avicenna’s philosophy. The factor that distinguishes God from things is that God is uncaused while everything else is caused, and therefore God is a necessary being but creatures are all contingent. From the necessary Being or God at the top emanates a first intelligence, which is the beginning of unity-in-multiplicity, since though it is in itself one, by its knowledge it knows

another. Out of it in successive emanations come the intelligences, each associated with one of the nine heavens, down to the moon. In the sublunary world, ruled by the tenth and last intelligence, exist the four elements (earth, air, water, fire) and human souls.

AVICENNA (980-1037)

Life and Works

Abu Ali ibn Sina, known to the West as Avicenna was responsible for systematizing eastern Islamic philosophy. The central thesis of his metaphysics is the division of reality into contingent being and Necessary Being, a doctrine that he formulated basing the theory of the distinction between essence and existence. He was born in Bukhara (Turkestan) in central Asia in 980 A.D. He was an extraordinarily precocious child. He studied the Humanities, the Quran, Mathematics, and philosophy. He was well known for his skills in Medicine. At the age of eighteen he could consider himself an accomplished physician and had acquired all the immense philosophical knowledge displayed in his large philosophical encyclopedias and in his numerous treatises. After the collapse of the Samanid empire in 999, he left Bukhara, and the later decades of his life are marked by some vicissitudes. About 1020 he was Vizier in Hamdan. The last fourteen years of his life were spent in the company of Ala ad-Daula, the ruler of Isfahan, whom he followed on all his journeys and on all his military ventures. In 1037, during a military campaign, he died in Hamadan. His philosophical vocation was confirmed by his contact with Aristotle's *Metaphysics*, which he read forty times in order to understand it, so much so that he was able to memorize it. Al-Farabi gave him the key to understand Aristotle's thought. His contribution to Christian Scholasticism is very important. St. Thomas Aquinas would quote him almost three hundred times, and Duns Scotus set the framework of his system in view of Avicenna's intuitions.

Around two hundred works were attributed to him. The best known of his large philosophical encyclopedia is *Ae-Sifa* ("Healing" or "Recovery"; i.e. of the soul from error), known in the Middle Ages as the *Liber Sufficientiae*. It was an encyclopedia of all knowledge during his time, a work that includes treatises on logic, physics, mathematics, psychology, metaphysics, etc. His most famous medical work is *Al-Qanun fi'l-Tibb* ("The Canon of Medicine" or Canone), a systematic encyclopedia in five books based on the achievements of Greek physicians of the Roman imperial age and other Arabic works and on his own experience.

The philosophical system

Like Aristotle, Avicenna assigned to metaphysics the study of being. According to Avicenna, the notion of being is the first to be formed, "it cannot be described other than by its name; since it is the first principle of all description, it escapes all description. But its concept immediately arises out of the mind without any mediating factor". Therefore, the point of departure for Avicenna's philosophy is the division of being into "being necessary by itself" and "being necessary in force of its cause". In the philosophical system of "necessity" and the "necessary being", Avicenna postulated the priority of necessity on the basis of his concept of creation, that is, as a necessary procession from the first principle.

The “necessary being” is the being whose nonexistence would be a contradiction. The logical concept of “essence” and the metaphysical concept of “existence” are identical for the highest being, the “necessary being”. It can in no way depend on a principle apart from itself. In God alone essence, what He is, and existence, that He is, coincide. So, God is the first cause, the One, the highest light and the source of all light, as He is the highest intellect and the highest love. His essence is free from matter. All things proceed from Him, and things proceed from him necessarily, but it takes pleasure in and approves of that emanation. (This well-known Avicennian thesis regarding the necessity of creation, influenced the subsequent Islamic philosophy). Therefore, from the “necessary being”, i.e., from God, proceeds the world, not through mechanical necessity, but through the requirement of divine goodness. Since only one can come from the One, only one thing in this world has a direct origin from God: “the prime intelligence”. From the “prime or first intelligence” proceed nine other intelligences. The tenth intelligence, which is the most imperfect of all, closes the cycle of producing another intelligence and it irradiates the intelligible forms and engenders in the material world everything that is perceived by the senses – among these forms are the individual souls of men. The tenth intelligence is the “Giver of forms” and it is the “agent intellect” that governs the souls of human beings. The argument of Avicenna to demonstrate the real distinction between essence and existence was taken up later by St. Thomas Aquinas. Although St. Thomas was inspired by the Avicennian methodology, we cannot conclude that the Thomistic notions of *essentia* and *esse* coincide with those of Avicenna. On the contrary, while there was similarity in their methods, they had a basic discrepancy as to the metaphysical framework they were working in.

AL-GAZEL (1059-1111)

Life and works

Al-Gazel (Al-Ghazali), considered to be the greatest Moslem after Mohammed, enjoys a great place and authority among the Sunni (orthodox) Moslems. Al-Gazel was born in Tus, in north-eastern Iran, but most of his studies were conducted elsewhere: Giugian (near the Caspian Sea) and Nishapur. He was appointed to a professorship of the Nizamihah university in Baghdad; but, in 1099, after a period of severe spiritual crisis leading to his rejection of philosophy and rationalistic theology, he abandoned his position as a university professor. He devoted himself to the wandering life of the ascetic and Sufi religious practices. There are mainly four major works from Al-Gazel, two written before his “conversion” and two after. The works from the period before his conversion are *Maqasid al-falasifa* (*Intentiones philosophorum*) which is a methodological exposition of the principle doctrines of Islamic philosophers, especially of Avicenna, and *Tahafut al-falsifa* (*Incoherentia philosophorum*) which is a very severe critique of the errors of philosophers and philosophy. The other two works are *Ilhya ulum ad-din* (Revivification of the Religious Sciences) which gives a review of all theological questions, and *Al-Munqidh min addadal*, which is his autobiography.

Critique of Philosophy

His knowledge of Greek and Islamic philosophy, together with a good grasp of logic, initiated him to introduce a new form of theology less rationalistic and more responsive to the needs of the piety, thus helping the believer to draw near to God both in heart and in mind. In criticizing philosophers, he distinguishes

them into three principal groups: materialists, naturalists and theists. He accuses the first two groups of atheism and he considers the materialists “atheists par excellence”. According to Al-Gazel, Aristotle is the best among the theists.

He criticized the philosophers on:

- i) their teaching on the eternity of the cosmos and the inconsistency of their claim that this teaching fits with the doctrine of creation by God;
- ii) their notions about God’s knowledge of either universals or particulars;
- iii) their doctrine of souls of the heavenly spheres and of their knowledge;
- iv) their theory of causation;
- v) their failure to prove or recognize the spirituality and immortality of the soul;
- vi) their denial of the resurrection of the body.

He criticizes the philosophers because their views are in basic conflict with Islam, especially on the eternity of the world, their views on God’s knowledge of particulars, and their denial of the resurrection of the body.

The Question of the Eternity of the World and its Emanation

Al-Gazel is very fierce on the teaching of the philosophers about the eternity of the world and the related concept of the emanation of the world, because it offended strongly against his belief in the contingency of God’s act of will in creating the world out of absolutely nothing. According to him, the philosophers assumed things about causation which there is no need to assume, that is, that every effect has a cause and that a cause lies outside of the effect and that a cause will lead immediately to an effect. Therefore they argued that if the world came into being at a particular time, there must be a cause of God’s change of mind; but this is impossible since at the time in question *ex hypothesi* nothing else existed. So the world must have been in existence from all eternity. But Al-Gazel counters this by saying that we could equally believe that the cause of God’s willing lies within his mind; God can will from all eternity, but at differing times : there is no need for the effect to follow directly upon his willing. God’s will is not in any case bound by anything. Al-Gazel is especially critical of the philosophers because they are happy to think of God’s knowledge as being of quite a different character than ours, but they continue to make close comparison between our will and his. Actually, according to him, the philosophers really reduce God.

God and His Attributes

Al-Gazel organizes, following the example of Al-Ashari, theology around two fundamental doctrines of Islamic faith: God’s unity (Allah is Allah) and God’s message (Mohammed is his prophet). According to Al-Gazel, God is unique because God is uncaused, without principle; the prime principle and final end of each thing, God is one in His essence without associates, Single without anyone like Him, Lord without any to oppose Him. He is One, Eternal without a First, Perpetual without principle, Perennial without end, always Eternal without end, Subsistent without creation, Continuous without interruption. From the fundamental attribute of uniqueness, Al-Gazel logically reaches all the other attributes: Simplicity, incorporeity, immutability. God is the only creator of

everything that exists; God is omniscient and omnipotent: His science and His will know no limits. Al-Gazel teaches that God, the eternal has manifested in a complete and definitive way through His messenger, his prophet, Mohammed, who gathered the Word of God in the Quran.

4.6 WESTERN ARAB PHILOSOPHERS

Islam spread to Europe when the Moslems crossed Gibraltar in 711 and conquered the Iberian Peninsula. They were stopped at Poitiers by Charles Martel in 732 and were driven out of Europe in 1492. Their stay in Spain and Portugal that lasted for almost eight centuries produced a Hispano-Islamic culture in which philosophy flourished. Spanish Arabic Philosophy was represented by Ibn Masarra (883-931, a native of Cordoba, who went to the East to study philosophy, becoming a neo-Platonist, returned to his native place during the Caliphate of Abderraman III), Avempace (ca. 1070-1138, born in Saragossa, had an important and wide-ranging influence on medieval thinkers, especially St. Albert the Great, Alexander of Hales, Roger Bacon and Raymund Lull. He held the view that the agent intellect is extrinsic to man, that it is divine, immortal and eternal), Ibn Tufail (ca.1110-1185, born in Guadix) and Averroes.

AVERROES (1126-1198)

Life and Works

Averroes (Ibn Rusd) was born at Cordoba in Spain. The young Averroes received a complete education in theology, law, medicine, mathematics, astronomy and philosophy. From the twentieth year of his life, he dedicated his time to study Aristotle and he spent his life commenting on Aristotle's works; for that he received the title Commentator par excellence. He wrote three types of commentaries on those works: the greater commentaries (written at the end of his life), the lesser or 'middle' commentaries, and the paraphrases. These works which he wrote in Arabic were later translated into Latin in 1230; as Aristotle's commentator, his works were widely used among the Scholastics in the Latin West. The influence of Averroes in Islamic philosophy was also important because he dared to disregard the authority of Avicenna, which was unchallenged and widespread at that time. Averroes' another famous work is *Destructio destructionis philosophorum* (*Tahafut-al-Tahafut*), which he wrote in defense of philosophers and philosophy, when Algazel attacked philosophy as an enemy of religion.

Relationship between Philosophy and Religious Knowledge

On the relationship between Philosophy (reason) and religious knowledge (faith), Averroes teaches that only philosophy can properly express the truth; however, the same truth can be also shown by theology, although in a different manner, that is, allegorically. With this epistemological principle, he formulated the following hermeneutic rule: "We steadfastly say that every revealed text, whose literal sense contradicts a truth apodictically demonstrated, must be interpreted allegorically in accordance with the rules of this interpretation in the Arabic language". The allegorical reading of revelation is possible, according to Averroes, by the divine origin itself of the Koran that is so rich in meaning comprehensible by all sorts of men. About the relations between philosophy and religious knowledge, Averroes writes, "The demonstrative speculations of philosophy cannot arrive at contradicting the content of the Law because truth cannot place

itself in conflict with truth; on the contrary, the former is in agreement with the latter and testifies to it. That this is the effective situation arises from the fact that when a demonstrative knowledge leads to the knowledge of something real, then the only possibilities are the following: either the Law says nothing about it, or the Law says something. If the Law does not say anything, then there can be no contradiction. If it does say something, then the external expression either agrees with what is said by demonstrative speculation, or the two are contradictory. If they agree, then there is nothing to add. If they contradict each other, then an interpretation becomes necessary. The goal of this interpretation is to extract the profound meaning of what the word of the Law expresses in a figurative way”.

According to this text, Averroes attempts to reconcile his Islamic faith with Aristotelian philosophy. He thinks that this can be done with the allegorical reading of Quran.

Averroes did not hold the doctrine of “double truth” – attributed to him by his followers in 12th century, the so called Latin Averroists – which says that what is true for philosophy may be false for theology; that is, there can be a philosophical truth contrary to a theological truth about the same matter, with neither of the two “truths” being false. It is evident that Averroes subordinated theology to philosophy, because according to him it is the task of philosophy to determine which revealed truths must be interpreted allegorically, and which and how those truths must be taken literally. The subordination of religious matters to philosophical knowledge earned him great difficulties before the extremely conservative members of the Almohade kingdom.

Creation

For Averroes, the world is eternal and it was created by God. Hence God can be called the cause of the world. He answers the question of how and when it was created: according to him, creation was a free act of God, the Almighty. Since God is Almighty, there is no reason to think that after that decision of God to create He would delay its execution in time. Such delay or waiting would imply that He is determined by something extrinsic to Himself, and that is contrary to God’s essence. Besides, since the divine will is immutable, neither can it be thought of as waiting to create and subsequently creating. And being Pure Act, He cannot delay acting; a non-acting Pure Act is inconceivable. Thus, with this argument and other similar ones, Averroes reached the conclusion that creation is eternal.

Unity of All Human Intellect

A doctrine of Averroes which became particularly well known in the Christian west is the doctrine of the unity of all human intellects. Averroes maintained that there are three intellects: passive (material) intellect, active (efficient) intellect, and acquired (corruptible) intellect. The passive intellect is eternal and is no part of the essence of the individual soul but one and the same for all mankind. Because this intellect is a separate substance which exists outside the individual man and outside of matter, it is immortal. Therefore, Averroes regards the passive intellect as incorruptible. The active intellect transmits the *intelligibilia* for the passive intellect, which, in grasping them, becomes, in a particular individual, first active and then acquired intellect. Although different persons differ in intelligence and knowledge thus obtained, there is always the same amount of intellectual knowledge in the world.

Check Your Progress II

Note: Use the space provided for your answers.

- 1) Explain *Halam* and *Falsafa* in Islamic philosophy.

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- 2) Explain the important philosophical contributions of Al-Gazel.

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- 3) What is the theory of Unity of all human intellect according to Averroes?

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4.7 LET US SUM UP

We have observed in this unit that during the scholastic period of the Western Philosophy, there were quite interesting and profound contributions from Jewish and Islamic philosophers. Theirs was totally influenced by their religious conviction as that of the Christian philosophers of the West during the same period. Their contribution also enlightens the students of philosophy that their faith claims were strengthened by their leaning towards Greek philosophy and consolidating their claims as reasonable faith.

4.8 KEY WORDS

- Halam*** : that which deals mainly with Islamic theological questions
- Falsafa*** : that which deals with interpretations of Aristotelianism and Neoplatonism
- Sharia*** : Islamic religious law

4.9 FURTHER READINGS AND REFERENCES

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