

CHAPTER I

*Averroes, Philosopher of Islam***Matteo Di Giovanni*

The origin of a philosophy is always bodily “impure.” Ideas as much as their constructions are rooted in things. They are ideas of men, and men are expressions of concrete situations, challenges, and needs that await answers and demand guiding lines and global visions.

– Eugenio Garin

With these and other similarly eloquent words the Renaissance scholar Eugenio Garin expressed his intuition that all writing, including philosophical writing, is interwoven with the sociocultural context that provided the conditions for its emergence. The observation is not nearly as trivial as it may seem. There is an obvious sense in which men of letters and philosophers alike belong in atemporal worlds of ideas, inhabiting the *antique corti delli antichi huomini* that Niccolò Machiavelli (d. 1527), another figure linked with the Renaissance, famously portrayed himself as entering clothed in *panni reali e curiali* in cloistered evenings free from quotidian labor. Indeed, the division between the cloister and the marketplace may apply to Machiavelli’s and others’ consumption of literature subsequent to its production, but it is not how ideas are produced in the first place. At the moment of creation all written exchange, including philosophical exchange, is prompted by and intended for a particular readership. It is this readership that furnishes the author with the cultural context and intellectual expectations to which his or her work is inherently and immediately addressed.

While this applies generally to every intellectual endeavor, it is especially true in the case of Averroes. Situated in a philosophical tradition that extolled the solitary life (*tadbīr al-mutawahhid*) described by Ibn Bājja (d. AD 1139) and celebrated disengagement of the kind personified by Ḥayy ibn Yaqzān from the pen of Ibn Ṭufayl (d. 1185), Averroes stood out for his active participation in the life of al-Andalus. He showed no hesitation

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in asserting that, when a philosopher “turns to isolation and lives the life of a solitary, the best perfection is missing in him, for that can be attained by him only in [the] city.”¹ True to this principle he assumed several offices as judge, first of Seville (1169) and subsequently of Cordoba (1171), to be finally appointed as chief judge of the capital city in 1180. Around the period of his second mandate in Seville (1179) he did not refrain from launching into an open polemic against detractors of philosophy. His response in the *Decisive Treatise* (*K. Faṣl al-maqāl wa-taqrīr mā bayna l-sharī‘a wa-l-ḥikma min al-ittiṣāl*) was all but apologetic, going so far as to enjoin whole sectors of society – to wit, all capable Muslims – to engage with professional philosophy. Also Averroes’ legal treatise of *ikhtilāf*, his so-called *Jurist’s Primer* (*Bidāyat al-mujtahid wa-nihāyat al-muqtaṣid*), has been described as the blueprint for a legal reform designed to transform mores and conventions throughout the caliphate of Spain.² Unique among the exponents of Arabic philosophy Averroes had “an evident wish to take part in the life of the community . . . Others of its exponents had been ministers and close to princes, but he alone undertook what he did within the framework of *fiqh*, the only truly stable framework, and made himself known in the field.”³

In glaring contrast to these historical records, the significance of Averroes’ context in twelfth-century Andalusia is still strikingly underinvestigated. There are of course a large number of studies in the social and intellectual history of Islamic Spain, alongside an overwhelming amount of sophisticated scholarship on Averroes as a philosopher *tout court*. Yet the critical points of intersection between these two ambits are by and large untouched territory. We are routinely presented with a *dimidiatus Averroes*: either a mere engagé intellectual divorced from his philosophical self or a mere *res cogitans* abstracted from his historical context. In either case, his all-round profile as a *Muslim philosopher* – where the conjunction of both terms is of the essence – fails to be appreciated as fully and integrally as it ought to. This chapter aims to bridge the existing divide in scholarly approach. In what follows I shall analyze two doctrines that are considered to be highly distinctive of Averroes’ philosophy. I shall discuss them with the aim of unearthing their ties with the circumstances surrounding Andalusian society in Averroes’ day. In the end, I hope to show that an adequate appreciation of the concerns typical of this society can afford an invaluable vantage point for identifying the trajectories of Averroes’ philosophy just as such, and on its own terms.

¹ *Paraph. Republic*, at Averroes 1974: 78, slightly modified. ² Fierro 1999.

³ Urvoy 1992: 871.

The two doctrines that I am going to consider are none other than those which the founding father of Averroean studies, Ernest Renan, following a long history of studies (and condemnations) of Averroes in the Latin West, described as the signature of his philosophy: the uniqueness of the human intellect and the eternity of matter.⁴ While I take this description as essentially correct, my objective is to show that even these doctrines for which Averroes became universally known in the West cannot be understood in isolation from the indigenous context from which they arose. This is the context of Andalusian Islam at the time of Averroes' flourishing, that is, Islam as championed by the Almohad caliphate. Almohadism developed into a sophisticated ideology revolving around the authority of the "Proof of Religion" (*hujjat al-Islam*), Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī (d. 1111). It is, consequently, in constant dialogue with the teachings of al-Ghazālī that Averroes shaped his major philosophical views. The precise terms of Averroes' anti-Ghazālīan polemic are left implicit in his discourse more often than his up-front attack in the *Incoherence of the Incoherence* would lead one to believe. For this reason, casting light on the original drive of his philosophy means, first and foremost, bringing out the systematic reversal of al-Ghazālī's dogmatics, which informs Averroes' project all through. To see this reversal in action we need first of all to consider Almohadism itself, its emergence as a religious movement, and its relation to the course of Averroes' undertaking.

Almohad Islam, the Horizon of Averroes' Philosophy

"Almohadism" notoriously designates a movement and ideology of twelfth-century Berber combatants who professed a radical version of the Islamic *tawḥīd*, whence their appellation of *al-Muwahḥidūn*. The movement gathered around the figure of the infallible Mahdī Abū 'Abd Allāh Muḥammad ibn Tūmart (d. 1130). The nature of the movement is best detectable from its earliest interactions with the then ruling dynasty of Andalusia: the Almoravids. Virtually all that Almohadism aimed to represent was the complete reverse of the traditional values championed by the Almoravids. While the latter sponsored the practice of *taqlīd* in legal matters, which meant reliance on authoritative opinions (*furū' al-fiqh*) stemming from the sources of law (*uṣūl al-fiqh*) as branches (*furū'*) from the roots (*uṣūl*), the Mahdī Ibn Tūmart called on his disciples to revive the study of *uṣūl*. In fact, Ibn Tūmart is regarded as the first to have

⁴ Renan 1861: 107–8.

transmitted the science of *uṣūl*, then flourishing in the East, to the Islamic West. He had a clear predilection for theoretical analysis over pragmatic or casuistic approaches such as displayed by practitioners of *taqlīd*. Following this inclination he imported into Andalusia also another theoretical science that had blossomed in the East: the science of *kalām*. His *Profession of Faith* (*ʿAqīda*) opens with the pivotal claim that true worship (*ʿibāda*) presupposes knowledge (*ʿilm*), which in turn requires study (*ṭalab*).⁵ Intellectual endeavor is thus presented as part and parcel of religious devotion, to the point that religion itself, in the words of Ibn al-Qalānīsī (d. 1160), consisted for Ibn Tūmart in a “religion of thought” (*madhhab al-fikr*).⁶ No wonder that such knowledge was styled “the most precious treasure that can be sought after” (*aʿazz mā yuṭlabu*), which became the general title of Ibn Tūmart’s writings.⁷

The gist of this knowledge is encapsulated in the self-evident truth according to which all actions require an agent (*al-fiʿl lā budd labu min al-fāʿil*).⁸ This points immediately to a Creator of all nature, so that God’s existence becomes known by the necessity of reason (*bi-ḍarūrat al-ʿaql*).⁹ The rationalistic epistemology implicit in this claim is a striking feature of Ibn Tūmart’s doctrine. Suffice it to recall that only one century earlier the leading theologian Abū Bakr al-Bāqillānī (d. 1013) had categorically denied that God could be known independently of revelation.¹⁰ At the same time, the rationalism of Ibn Tūmart was tempered in one important respect by the apophatic outcome of his theology. Since God is the cause of creation, and since every cause transcends its effect, God transcends all things: He is the one whom “no mind comprehends, no imagination represents, no thought reaches, no intellect conceives” (*lā taḥudduhu l-adhbhān wa-lā tuṣawwiruhu l-awhām wa-lā talḥaquhu l-afkār wa-lā tukayyifuhu l-ʿuqūl*).¹¹ As a result, while God’s existence can be known by unaided reason – to the point that, indeed, “the way of *tawḥīd* is rational thinking (*ʿaql*)”¹² – God’s essence is bound to escape all attempt at grasping it. The doctrine has an important implication for the approach to the Holy Book. The Qurʾān is filled with anthropomorphic descriptions of God: these should be neither taken at face value after the fashion of sheer anthropomorphism (*tajāsīm*) – because God transcends such attributes – nor explained away through speculative interpretations

⁵ Ibn Tūmart 1903: 230.2–3.

⁶ Ibn al-Qalānīsī 1908: 291.18.

⁷ Ibn Tūmart 1903: 2:2 of the collection (*sif*). Cf. Griffel 2005: 767 n. 47.

⁸ Ibn Tūmart 1903: 230.12.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 230.6.

¹⁰ Al-Bāqillānī 1958: 40.1–6.

¹¹ Ibn Tūmart 1903: 240.8–9.

¹² *Ibid.*, 47.13–14.

(*ta'wīl*) as common among Mu'tazilites. Instead, they should be accepted with no qualification or characterization (*min ghayr tashbīh wa-lā-takyīf*)¹³ along the lines developed by Ash'arism.

This notion was key in realizing the strategic goal of the Almohad party: overthrowing the Almoravids. Ibn Tūmart was not so much an intellectual as a warrior driven by military and political ambitions, to which doctrine itself was subordinated. Hostile intentions had become manifest since his public confrontation (1120) with the Almoravid ruler 'Alī ibn Yūsuf (d. 1143). We are informed by Shams al-Dīn ibn Khallikān (d. 1282) that "Ibn Tūmart, whilst retiring from the king's presence, kept his face turned towards him till he left the hall, and some persons having said to him: 'We see that you [showed] respect to the king in not turning [your] back to him,' he replied: 'My intention was to watch vanity as long as I could, until the time come that I may change it.'"¹⁴ On the same day "the persons present perceived from the drift of this discourse that the speaker aspired to the possession of the kingdom."¹⁵ Their perception was true. The new theology was rapidly put at the service of war, and the precept of *jihād* against unbelievers was elevated from the status of a mere collective duty (*farḍ kifāya*) to a special pillar of religion.¹⁶ Concurrently, unbelief (*kufr*) was defined in an unusually broad way to include mere heterodoxy such as professed by the Almoravids. To the extent that the Almoravids lacked a theology to guide their approach to Scriptures, they were bound to fall – or so it was held – into sheer anthropomorphism (*tajsīm*).¹⁷ Fighting the anthropomorphists (*qitāl al-mujassimīn*) became the battle cry of Ibn Tūmart's day,¹⁸ and a key role was played by the teachings of al-Ghazālī. In his *Incoherence of the Philosophers* the Ash'arite theologian had established that heterodoxy by itself constituted unbelief: it was an aberration from true faith (*kufr ba'da imān*) resulting in clandestine apostasy (*zandaqa*), which in principle legitimized the holy war on purely doctrinal grounds as practiced by Ibn Tūmart.¹⁹

The figure of al-Ghazālī was crucial to the Almohad movement also in a broader sense. Arabic sources relate that Ibn Tūmart joined al-Ghazālī as his student in the 'Abbāsīd capital, where he traveled, in compliance with the pious practice of *riḥla*, to be turned into an "overflowing ocean of science and a blazing fire of religion" (*bahr mutafajjir min al-'ilm*

¹³ Ibid., 233.1.

¹⁴ Ibn Khallikān 1868: 210, slightly modified; Arabic at Ibn Khallikān 1977: 50.16–19.

¹⁵ Ibn Khallikān 1868: 209; Arabic at Ibn Khallikān 1977: 50.5–6. ¹⁶ Fromherz 2010: 184–86.

¹⁷ Serrano 2005. ¹⁸ Ibn Khaldūn 1971: 228.10. ¹⁹ Griffel 2009: 103–5.

wa-shihāb wār min al-dīn).²⁰ On learning that his *Revivification of Religious Sciences* (*Ihyā' 'ulūm al-dīn*) had been disgraced by the Almoravids, al-Ghazālī reportedly invoked their dethronement, thus eliciting a devout pledge from the future Mahdī: “May that be done at my hand, if God wills!”²¹ The historicity of the encounter has been doubted since al-Ghazālī left for Khorasan several years before Ibn Tūmart made his appearance in Baghdad. At the same time, it has been argued that the two might have met in Alexandria, which Ibn Tūmart visited on his way to the East and where al-Ghazālī purportedly sojourned around the year 1107.²² Even if Ibn Tūmart never met al-Ghazālī, he must have met with his teachings as perpetuated by his successor at the Baghdad Niẓāmiyya, the shāfi'ī jurisconsult Abū Bakr al-Shāshī (d. 1113).²³ In a sense, even supposing that the story is a later fabrication would corroborate the thesis of a calculated affiliation of the Mahdī to the authority of al-Ghazālī. Whether true or not, finally, the story gained wide currency as attested by Averroes' student Abū l-Ḥajjāj ibn Ṭumlūs of Alcira (d. 1223). He informs us that the Mahdī “clarified the questions that bothered people and invited them to study the books of al-Ghazālī, making them see that his doctrines were in agreement with his own.”²⁴ In this way Ibn Ṭumlūs fleshes out other similar claims by Ibn Khaldūn (d. 1406), according to whom Ibn Tūmart studied under Ash'arite masters and commanded adherence to their teachings,²⁵ as well as the earlier 'Abd al-Wāḥid al-Marrākushī (d. ca. 1228), on whose account “the gist of what he used to proselytize was religious instruction adhering to Ash'arism.”²⁶

The reasons for this endorsement are not difficult to see. Al-Ghazālī was a powerful symbol of the conflict at play and the emblem of an intellectually sophisticated approach to religion of the kind that was opposed by the Almoravid establishment. The champion of a strand of Ash'arite *kalām* that entertained an intense dialogue with philosophy and made ample recourse to rational arguments, the “Proof of Islam” stood out as the upholder of a judicious use of reason in matters of theology. His embrace of *kalām* and opposition to uncritical emulation (*taqlīd*) were among the factors that had alienated him from Mālikī conservatives of Andalusia and the Almoravid establishment under their influence. In 1109 Mālikīs had persuaded the prince 'Alī ibn Yūsuf to decree the burning of al-Ghazālī's

²⁰ Ibn Khaldūn 1971: 226.19. ²¹ Ibn al-Qaṭṭān 1990: 73.15–16.

²² Fletcher 1997: 305–9. Cf. contra Griffel 2005: 753–56. ²³ Langhade and Mallet 1985: 105.

²⁴ Fletcher 1997: 315. ²⁵ Ibn Khaldūn 1971: 226.19–26.

²⁶ Al-Marrākushī 1847: 132.16–17, my translation. English translation of the context in Williams 1971: 210–15.

monumental *Revivification* in the great mosque of Cordoba.²⁷ The episode may have followed signals, understandably alarming to the Mālikis, that al-Ghazālī was working to ingratiate himself with the Almoravid ruler.²⁸ Certainly it marked the high point of the Almoravid anti-Ghazālian policy in a way that would be easily exploited by the Almohads, eager to capitalize on a *casus belli* calling for vindication and restoration of true religion. In this way al-Ghazālī became the symbol of what Almohadism intended to represent: a celebration of theological reason, a “religion of thought” in the words of Ibn al-Qalānīsī, and a rebellion against the obscurantism of the ruling power.

This is the situation that presented itself to the young Averroes when the Almohad forces arrived in the country (1147), soon after an expedition of Alfonso I El Batallador (d. 1134) had humiliated Almoravid commanders and shaken their leadership. The domination that ensued was intolerant of dissension. All subjects, literates and illiterates alike, were enjoined to memorize the Mahdī’s dogma on penalty of death. The state was firmly controlled through a network of scholars (*ṭalaba*) subsidized by the regime, and Averroes might have been one of them.²⁹ Certainly he sought the favor of the ruling class, on which he depended for the realization of his scholarly ambitions. Evidence thereof is not lacking in the Averroean corpus: the Almohad regime is extolled as a state that is founded on religious law, where philosophy would blossom as in the ideal city described by Plato.³⁰ The Mahdī himself is credited with a stunning theology (*ṭarīq ‘ajīb*) in a version of the *Exposition*.³¹ Moreover, the famous *barnāmaj* in MS Madrid, Escorial 884 lists a treatise on *How He Entered into the Service of the All-Powerful Rule* (*Maqāla fī Kayfiyyat dukhūlihi fī l-amr al-‘azīz*), namely the Almohad rule,³² and even a commentary on Ibn Tūmart’s *Profession of Faith* (*Sharḥ ‘Aqīdat al-Imām al-Mahdī*), which is alleged to be partly extant and might, in conjunction with other indications, point to some involvement of Averroes in the redaction of Tūmartian dogmatics.³³

²⁷ Accounts differ as to the role played by Mālikī scholars; see Urvoy 1992: 866–67 and Griffel 2005: 754 n. 2.

²⁸ Fletcher 1997. ²⁹ Huici Miranda 1956: 89–95; Urvoy 2005: 124, cf. Urvoy 1998: 110–11.

³⁰ *Paraph. Republic* 180, 227. For the problems posed by more critical passages on Almohad society, see Geoffroy 2005b: esp. 733 n. 23.

³¹ Geoffroy 2005a: 888.

³² The list of Averroes’ works that is provided in the *barnāmaj* was printed by Renan 1861: 462–65; see esp. 464.4–5 and 464.17. The title of Averroes’ *maqāla* is interpreted in accord with al-‘Alawī 1986: 40.

³³ Fletcher 2012: 190–91. Bin Sharīfa 1999: 47–48 published an extract of the commentary.

It would be a mistake, however, to conclude that Averroes was an intellectual on the payroll of power. Quite the opposite, he was a fiercely independent mind with a clear vision of what Almohad society was to become through his own efforts: one in which philosophy would no longer be a divertissement for few individuals consigned to the solitary life that was celebrated by Ibn Ṭufayl, but an activity universally honored and socially recognized as a religious duty specifically incumbent on (*sharīʿa khāṣṣa*) every capable Muslim.³⁴ Indeed, if Averroes was no warrior like Ibn Tūmart, he was nonetheless a combatant spirit, willing to fight the good fight to transform Almohadism itself much as Almohadism had transformed the Almoravid status quo. As a state official he could not enter an open confrontation similar to that launched by Ibn Tūmart against the ruling power. At the same time, his services to the Almohad dynasty gained him increasing distinction and placed him in a position to negotiate his reform from within the ruling establishment. As argued above, the Almohad ideology extolled the value of reason within religion. The natural strategy toward securing official sanction for philosophy itself was, therefore, to maximize this rationalistic imprint. Averroes outdid the Maḥdī as a zealous follower of the “religion of thought” accentuating his intellectualistic approach to various aspects of Islam. In *fiqh* he advocated generalized recourse to critical judgement (*ijtihād*), obliterating Ibn Tūmart’s restrictions.³⁵ In the same vein, he considered it the task of natural reason to determine the ethical value of actions, thus abandoning the theistic subjectivism that was defended by the Maḥdī: “For [in that case] there would be no essential good in the present world but [only] posited [good], and [similarly] there would be no essential evil . . . All these are views similar to those [propounded] by Protagoras.”³⁶ Most emblematically, Averroes relied on a famous verse in the Qurʾān (3:7) stating that “No one knows its [true] interpretation except God and those firm in knowledge; they say ‘We believe in it. All [of it] is from our Lord,’” and on its basis defended a liberal use of *tawʿīl* that Ibn Tūmart had rejected on a different reading of the very same verse (“No one knows its [true]

³⁴ *LC Metaphysics* 10.11. On the subject, Taylor 2012.

³⁵ Fierro 1999: 232, 244. Reserving legal elaboration for himself, Ibn Tūmart dictated that individual judgement play no role in religious law (*al-ʿaql laysa lahu fī l-sharʿ majāl*), as interpreted by Goldziher in Ibn Tūmart 1903: 44.

³⁶ Averroes 2010: 180, Arabic at Averroes 1994b: 173.6–11. Cf. along the same lines the section on divine justice in *Exposition* 234–39, Eng. at Averroes 2001c: 115–21. In his tract on religious practice (*ʿibāda*) immediately preceding the *Profession of Faith*, Ibn Tūmart denies objective ethical value to human acts; cf. Fromherz 2010: 176–78.

interpretation except God; those firm in knowledge say ‘We believe in it. All [of it] is from our Lord’).³⁷ Little wonder that Ibn Tūmart distrusted such recourse to rational interpretation: for him, as mentioned, God’s essence remained concealed to human understanding even though His existence was established as a necessary truth of reason. For Averroes, by contrast, the nature of God qua first form, mover, and end of the universe was precisely the end point of philosophical inquiry, leading to conclusions that are indeed informative and even apodictic.³⁸

Reforming Almohadism in the way that Averroes attempted, however, required more than substituting strong *philosophical* for more restrained *theological* reason of the kind iconized by al-Ghazālī. For him, it meant first of all clearing away the perceived enemies of philosophy, chief among whom was al-Ghazālī himself. All ties between traditional *kalām* and Tūmartian Almohadism should be severed. The flaming torch of enlightened Islam that had been carried by the Almohad state against traditionalists and proponents of *taqlīd* should be personified by not al-Ghazālī but Aristotle, in whom, indeed, “truth reached perfection”³⁹ and a path of thorough study opened up to the elite of philosophers. It is in this sense that we should interpret Averroes’ praise of the “triumphant rule” at the end of the *Decisive Treatise*, by which God “has opened a way to many benefits, especially to the class of persons who have trodden the path of study and sought to know the truth. This [He has done] by summoning the masses to a middle way of knowing God the Glorious, [a way] which is raised above the low level of the traditionalists (*ḥadīd al-mutaqallidīna*) but is below the turbulence of the theologians (*tashghīb al-mutakallimīna*); and by drawing the attention of the elite to their obligation to make a thorough study (*al-naẓar al-tāmm*) of the principles of religion.”⁴⁰

Addressed ostensibly to the prince to whom its accompanying epistle, the so-called *Appendix (Damīma)*, was dedicated – possibly the caliph Abū Ya‘qūb Yūsuf (d. 1184)⁴¹ – this eulogy expresses not so much the historical reality of Almohadism as Averroes’ own obliquely, obsequiously framed exhortation for the establishment to implement an interpretation of Almohadism along the lines that he himself would encourage. Essential to this project was severing Almohadism’s affiliation with the master of Tūs. This became the obsessive drive of Averroes’ argument as a

³⁷ Urvoy 1998: 139–42. ³⁸ See Di Giovanni 2014 and Chapter 11 in this volume.

³⁹ *LC Metaphysics* 10.8.

⁴⁰ English translation from Averroes 1967: 71, slightly modified; Arabic at *Decisive Treatise* 40.10–15.

⁴¹ Mahdi 1964: 118–19; cf. Hourani’s remarks in Averroes 1967: 117.