

DISCERNING THE DIVINE: AVERROËS AND MARTIN LUTHER ON INTERPRETING HOLY TEXTS

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The Medieval and Renaissance periods presented an environment in which a plethora of new ideas directly confronted long-established traditions. The turmoil forced the people of the era to seek an everyday balance between old and new and to redefine the relationship between secular and holy. The *Decisive Treatise* of Muslim philosopher Averroës (1126-1198), and the essay “To the Christian Nobility of the German Nation” by Christian reformer Martin Luther (1483-1546), greatly influenced the way their contemporaneous faith communities viewed their holy texts. An analysis of these two authors’ comments on scriptural interpretation offers insight into varying religious approaches yet simultaneously reveals a unity of purpose.

Fundamentally, both Averroës and Luther write upon the conviction that the law speaks directly to those who read it. Contrary to the common opinion of their communities, these men felt that the respective holy texts of their traditions should be made available to all believers. Believers must be free to read the text and form straightforward interpretations; outside esoteric interpretations should not be forced upon the lay community.

Averroës explains that not all people have the same interpretive skills and will, and therefore understand the Law on different levels. However, he insists that the Qur’an is written in such a way that “assent to” it on some level is “extended to every human being” who does not obstinately deny it (8). Although not everyone will understand the Law on the same level, each person is fully capable of gaining from it that which was intended for him. Therefore, Averroës rebukes efforts of al-Ghazali and others of his contemporaries who attempt to force their interpretations on those incapable of understanding or refuting their ideas. Averroës thus encourages believers to read the Qur’an to the best of their ability as opposed to clinging to an abstract interpretation they cannot comprehend.

Luther proposes a more egalitarian view that does not strictly define what types of people are capable of understanding. He, like Averroës, operates on the principle that believers should be able to read the Scriptures for themselves rather than depend upon an outside clerical interpretation. Instead of accepting the mandates of the pope, Luther contends that “it is the duty of every Christian to espouse the cause of the faith, to understand and defend it, and to denounce every error” (22). More specifically, he

arms and empowers Christians to use their “believing understanding of the Scriptures” to “test all that [the Romanists] do, or leave undone” (21). Luther reads verses like 1 Peter 2:9, “You are a royal priesthood and a priestly realm,” as grounds for granting all believers the authority to read and interpret Scripture and for dispelling the Catholic Church’s notion of priesthood (12). On this basis, he attempts to debunk the papacy’s monopolistic right to interpretation, which he perceives as an effort to “persecute the truth” (112). Jesus commands in John 6:45 that all Christians should be taught by God. Combining this directive with his own firm belief that the Scriptures are God’s most direct teachings to man, Luther concludes that Scripture itself—not the pope—should directly teach every believer (20).

By discrediting an interpretive monopoly and subsequently translating the Bible into the vernacular German language to broaden its readership, Martin Luther aligns with Averroës’ respect for the Law’s universal authority. However, Luther does not simply leave the issue and wait for his readers to develop their own conclusions concerning the true intent of Scripture. Instead, he establishes and defends his own alternative interpretations. Luther maintains that his goal is to “compel the Romanists to follow not their own interpretation but a better one.” Presumably, the “better” interpretation is found in the rest of the address and in his subsequent writings (21).

Luther’s interpretive conclusions, including the concepts of believers’ priesthood and salvation by grace, signify deep reflection upon the Bible. However, the broad array of views among later Catholic and Protestant subdivisions indicates that the Christian community often disputes these issues. Rather than shying away from controversy, Luther feels “duty-bound to speak” and opens his mouth “wider and wider,” bluntly sharing his compelling ideas with nobles and commoners as well as scholars (111).

Luther evidently considers it critical that his fellow Christians hear and believe his message. Averroës, however, would counter that believers need not be exposed to anything deeper than what they are capable of gleaning from their own reading of holy texts. In his eyes, the Law, not the outside interpreter, “is the one alerting to and calling for this happiness . . . for every Muslim in accordance with the method of assent his temperament and nature require” (8). More specifically, Averroës feels that members of the Muslim community understand the Law by three methods: the rhetorical (shared by the most people), the dialectical (which is less common), and the demonstrative (belongs to a select few who are adept in the science of syllogistic reasoning and the art of wisdom) (26). Regardless of what category a believer

belongs to, there are certain unifying concepts of faith that Averroës claims all methods “steer to cognizance of,” including an affirmation of God’s existence, an understanding of the prophetic missions, and knowledge of “happiness in the hereafter and misery in the hereafter” (18). While the obstinate unbeliever will reject these tenets, true Muslims will embrace these root beliefs regardless of how they achieve cognizance. In order to embrace these central principles, they need no ability beyond that which they already have.

Revealing advanced interpretations to the masses is not only unnecessary but also potentially harmful to the recipient’s faith. Averroës explains that when simple-minded people hear a complex interpretation, they no longer value the apparent sense of the verse itself. Left only with doctrine they do not understand, believers may begin to question the very basis of the Law (26). Differing interpretations can also cause unbelief among the rhetorical masses. For example, they cannot reconcile competing syllogistic proofs for the world as eternal or generated or for God’s knowledge of universals only or of particulars and universals. Because of the dissension between interpretations, publicized interpretations themselves engender unbelief and strife. The result, Averroës argues, can be seen in Islamic history when the Mu‘tazilites and Ash‘arites declared their interpretations to the multitude: “They threw people into loathing, mutual hatred, and wars; they tore the Law to shreds; and they split people into every sort of faction” (30). Given the disastrous consequences of doing otherwise, Averroës endorses al-Bukhari’s plea to “speak to the people concerning what they are cognizant of,” rather than openly divulging conclusions that reach beyond their rhetorical means (11).

Despite the danger syllogistic interpretations present to some believers, Averroës does not propose banning them altogether as this would hinder the understanding of the adept. A complete ban on demonstrative books would be “wrong for the best sort of people” and would thus be a grave injustice that “bars from what the Law calls to” (22). To offer those skillful in syllogistic reasoning the advanced material they need and to protect the masses from unbelief, Averroës proposes that Muslim *imams* only ban books from those who are not adept in the thought processes the books employ (22). As an extra precaution, he urges theologians to reveal their complex, demonstrative interpretations exclusively in dense philosophical texts so that they remain hidden from those incapable of reading on this level. Those like al-Ghazali who establish interpretations in easily decipherable books endanger the faith of the more simple-minded and thus commit “an error against the Law and against wisdom” (21). In fact, Averroës

contends that “anyone who declares these interpretations to those not adept in them is an unbeliever because of his calling people to unbelief” (27). Because Luther’s fiery polemics appeal to those far below him in interpretive abilities, Averroës might have considered him another well-intentioned but havoc-creating “unbeliever.”

Given the argument that sharing interpretations with the masses could lead to a rejection of the holy texts, why does Luther cater to the laity in his own interpretive writings? He does not seem motivated by a mere affinity for chaos; he claims in his letter to Pope Leo X that he would much rather spend his time on quiet studies. The difference in approach between Luther and Averroës may, however, indicate important discrepancies between the theologians’ religious perspectives.

Averroës defines the Law as a summons to “cognizance of God . . . and of his creation” (8). In accordance with this emphasis, he opens the treatise with the Qur’anic command, “consider, you who have sight,” and proceeds to detail the various ways in which believers might achieve a more thorough understanding (2). Because he prioritizes helping others to develop a more full comprehension of God, Averroës naturally refutes the improper sharing of interpretation, which replaces believers’ simple but understood beliefs with those they cannot comprehend.

To Luther, the picture of faith is somewhat different. At the beginning of his treatise, Luther quickly establishes that “we must not start something by trusting in great power or human reason, even if all the power in the world were ours.” Instead, he implores those who would hear him to turn to the grace of a merciful God (9). Since Luther believes that human salvation fully depends on the acceptance of God’s grace, as his work “The Freedom of a Christian” makes clear, it comes as no surprise that he willingly risks everything to convey this idea to his fellow countrymen. Indeed, it might prove impossible for Luther to so effectively disarm the Romanists of their walls of defense without grounding his argument in Scripture and offering an alternative interpretation. In Luther’s eyes, both the Church’s reform and his audience’s salvation ultimately depend on his willingness to share the interpretation he has found. The problem as he sees it is not that Christians are accepting an interpretation, but that they are accepting the wrong interpretation.

Although Luther feels justified in sharing his interpretation, his action is by no means devoid of the consequences Averroës warns of and accurately foresees. Countless modern Christian denominations have arisen since Luther’s day. Many people now would contend, as Averroës did, that “innovative heresies have increased” exponentially, causing disillusionment in regard to the

faith (32). While Martin Luther certainly cannot be held responsible for the actions of so many others, his decision to convey complex theological issues in a way that incites revolutionary responses established a precedent followed in modern religious culture. In this culture, believers accept the conclusions of differing theologians and argue bitterly, often without fully understanding what they promote. Luther had no way of predicting what path the Christian Church would take, but his writing suggests that he expected to instigate controversy even in his own day. He admits that his plea to the German nobility marks the end of his “frequent overtures of peace to [his] enemies” (111).

Luther’s arguments, although expressed in relatively simple and straightforward terms, are certainly deeper than his polemical style might suggest. Despite the opening remarks in which he sends “apologies to those who are moderately intelligent” and claims to “not know how to earn the grace and favor of the superintelligent,” Luther’s address to the German nobility successfully couches the thoughtful conclusions of a Doctor of Theology in terms the layman can grasp (8). He also frequently refers to Scripture and logic to bolster his claims. However, even though this approach can convince readers, it is not likely to educate them in a manner that enables them to closely analyze, qualify, or refute the interpretation. In fact, even his choice of verses reflects the themes Martin Luther wants to emphasize rather than serving as a representative sample of the Gospel. It is unlikely that many in Luther’s intended audience would have knowledge of Scripture or the interpretive methods necessary to argue coherently against Luther’s apparently self-evident conclusions.

In case there is any substantial opportunity for opponents to counter him using a differing interpretation, Luther frames his argument so that it is largely unapproachable. He concludes the treatise by inviting “pope, bishop, priest, monk, or scholar” to disagree and to “go hard at it,” continuing to “persecute the truth, just as they have always done” (111-12). Luther preemptively disregards anything they might say by using the escape clause that he “must be judged by God alone” (111-12). Furthermore, he asserts that if his cause does not encounter condemnation, he “would know for certain that it is not yet pleasing to God,” thus positioning himself to consider any critique as divine approval of his controversial stances (111). On the one hand, these words convey a man who desires to reveal the truth for God’s sake, regardless of how others may view him. On the other hand, in framing the argument so absolutely, Luther essentially rebuilds the unassailable interpretive authority he has just wrested from the pope. Moreover, it is undeniably difficult to hold a productive theological debate when one party labels the other’s actions as

“certainly the proper works of the real Antichrist” the way Luther brands the practice of papal glorification (27).

Even without the strong terms and the decided rhetorical advantage Luther gives himself, it is doubtful that his audience of German nobles would have the education in Scripture and logic needed to assess or refute him. The treatise targets a class of people that, while not uneducated, is most comfortable reading vernacular German, which was not the language of scholarly discourse or of the Bible. (Luther’s German translation of the New Testament appeared shortly after this treatise was first circulated in 1520). A person’s education fosters an ability to interpret and molds a comprehensive worldview from which he evaluates holy texts. Fully realizing this, Luther writes that “there is no work more worthy of pope or emperor than a thorough reform of the universities” (94). Indeed, both Averroës and Luther comment extensively on how an ideal education system should operate, and they each offer reforms to the systems of their respective communities.

A cursory overview of these proposed reforms appears to illustrate thinkers on completely opposite sides: Averroës praises pagan philosophers’ insights while Luther condemns the Church’s reliance on non-holy texts. To Averroës, “it is evidently obligatory for us to rely on what the one who has preceded us says . . . regardless of whether that other person shares our religion or not” (4). In accordance with his belief that the Qur’an requires reflection on nature since “one who is not cognizant of what has been artfully made is not cognizant of the Artisan,” Averroës encourages believers to study scholars’ insight into natural sciences and their mastery of philosophy (5). Luther clearly has a different estimation of the ancients, referring to Aristotle as a “damned, conceited, rascally heathen” and remarking that “any potter has more knowledge of nature” than the philosopher demonstrates (93). In spite of their consensus on the need to address educational approaches, Averroës and Luther appear to agree about little else concerning the subject.

Indeed, there is a seemingly irreconcilable difference between the Muslim theologian who suggests “we ought perhaps to seize [the Ancients’] books in our hands and reflect upon what they have said” (Averroës 5) and the Christian reformer who later cries out “Away with such books! Keep them away from Christians” (Luther 93). Nonetheless, a closer examination of the two authors’ texts and contexts reveals that despite their dramatically differing tones, each ultimately drives toward the same general goal: an environment in which non-holy texts, by pagans and believers alike, are neither wholly discarded nor

uncritically accepted but rather used as tools to aid the full understanding and sharing of God's holy message.

It should first be noted that while Averroës has high regard for the ancients and respects nonbelievers' insights, he does not regard them as equal in authority to the Law. In the *Decisive Treatise*, he aims to "investigate, from the perspective of Law-based reflection, whether reflection upon philosophy and the sciences of logic is permitted, prohibited, or commanded . . . by the Law," making it immediately evident that both the need and the purpose for such analysis are ultimately rooted in the Law itself. Consequently, the study of nature and science is not its own end, but it develops "intellectual syllogistic reasoning," a means of logic which is in turn employed in scriptural interpretation (3). As Averroës notes, the relationship between this reasoning and the interpretation of holy texts "is that of tools to work" (3). Since "truth does not oppose truth" and the Law is the ultimate standard for truth, no correct philosophical conclusion can oppose what the Law says, provided that the Law addresses the subject (9). Thus, Averroës readily says "we will accept, rejoice in, and thank them for what agrees with the truth," but also asserts that "we will alert to, warn against, and excuse them for whatever does not agree with the truth" (6). The reader who fails to consider this word of caution misses half of the equation and cannot truly comprehend the entirety of Averroës' well-reasoned and qualified argument.

In the same way that Averroës limits his regard for the ancient texts as a tool for understanding the natural world and for interpreting Muslim texts, Martin Luther qualifies his plea for a return to Bible-centered education. Despite his strong rhetoric and deep fear that the universities of his day are "wide gates to hell," Luther acknowledges that some texts in addition to Scripture can serve a useful purpose (100). In fact, his rejection of Aristotle's *Concerning the Soul* on the grounds that it teaches that the soul dies with the body and thus fundamentally conflicts with Biblical teaching would also fit Averroës's criterion for rejection (Luther 93). Even given his dislike for the philosopher, Luther contends that *Logic*, *Rhetoric*, and *Poetics* might be put to use in training young preachers (94). Like Averroës, Luther readily utilizes secular texts as tools to a divine end. Commentaries by Christian theologians, specifically intended to aid in Biblical interpretation, also pose a danger according to Luther in the event that "we are like men who read the sign posts and never travel the road they indicate" (98). The problem to Luther is not that pagans or Christian authors are being read, but that universities grant them ultimate authority and "give the Bible, the holy word of God, a back seat" (97).

In spite of a predominantly similar stance on what should constitute a proper education, Luther and Averroës place emphasis on different components according to the practices in their communities they aim to correct. Averroës defends studying philosophy in response to al-Ghazali and others in the Muslim community who would completely ban such texts. Luther decries the secular focus of a system he feels has all but forgotten the most important of texts: the Bible. Both men recognize the value of secondary texts in the role of tools for interpreting the more authoritative Scriptures, but Averroës and Luther seem to emphasize different aspects of the same overall proposal.

An analysis of the commentary concerning Scriptural interpretation in Averroës' *Decisive Treatise* and Luther's "To the Christian Nobility of the German Nation" reveals two authors with contrasting views of faith but also illustrates the compelling interest of both authors to create a pious community prepared to read and understand vital holy texts. United in encouraging believers to read the texts themselves, Averroës and Luther combat those who would use their positions to force interpretations on others. Because Averroës values cognizance and fears that sharing interpretations with the rhetorical masses would cause misunderstanding, he expresses himself in a philosophical treatise that only the truly adept will comprehend. Luther, however, uses strong polemic language to lead more people to the gracious, personal God he has discovered in the Bible.

Despite clear differences resulting from each author's religion and the dissimilarities in the communities to which they respond, Averroës and Martin Luther share a deep respect for their holy texts and use their abilities to encourage a better educated and more pious community of believers. Both of these great thinkers move with courage to correct the problems they see around them, acting on conviction to bring believers back into a more personal understanding of the sacred writings of their communities.

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