

HESPERUS IS PHOSPHORUS  
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In the earliest days of Greek civilization, the evening star in the West, Hesperos, and the morning star in the East, Phosphoros, were thought to be two entirely separate bodies, separated by the widest of heavenly measures. But Pythagoras, in the sixth century B.C., was the first to make the amazing discovery— that the morning and evening stars were the same “star,” both were actually the planet Venus! The East and West stars were not separate entities at all; they were, in fact, inseparable. This philosophically-rich sentence has been used to indicate the correspondence of two items initially considered different or foreign from each other.

In the context of this article, I will conclude with this same strangely sounding truth: “Hesperus is Phosphorus,” West is East. Western philosophical foundations are not antithetical to Eastern, at least Middle Eastern, ways of thinking, historically speaking. The West and the East are not identical but they are certainly inseparable. The ancestry of the West is mixed and colorful. It is multicultural and multiethnic. To investigate this claim, the focus of this philosophical archeology trek will be the Christian-Islamic interaction of the Middle Ages.

According to Menocal, the most pervasive construct North Americans have of ourselves and our culture is one that can be subsumed under the descriptor “Western.”<sup>1</sup> With this Western bias comes a natural corollary: a tacit presupposition of the superiority of West over East. However, when we examine the medieval period of intellectual development, if we are honest, we see actually a very different, almost reverse picture. For the greater period of the Middle Ages, it was not the West but the eastern Islamic Empire which played the role of the ascendant and dominant culture, while the West languished in self-absorbed mediocrity. The resistance to the proper acknowledgement of the fundamental characteristics of our intellectual genealogy is deep-seated:

Medieval Islamic philosophy is not generally regarded as part of the philosophical canon in the English-speaking world . . . [often] considered curiosities deriving from an entirely different philosophical tradition, or preservers of and commentators on the Greek philosophical heritage without a sufficiently original contribution of their own. The

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<sup>1</sup> Maria Rosa Menocal, *The Arabic Role in Medieval Literary History: A Forgotten Heritage* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1987), 1.

reasons for these omissions and for the disparagement of Islamic philosophy are steeped in the often conflicted history of Islam and Christendom.<sup>2</sup>

Southern adds to this analysis by offering insight into the fundamental Christian-Islam question:

The existence of Islam was the most far-reaching problem in medieval Christendom . . . it called for action and for discrimination between the competing possibilities of Crusade, conversion, coexistence, and commercial interchange. As a theological problem it called persistently for some answer to the mystery of its existence, . . . was it . . . a heresy, a schism, or a new religion; a work of man or devil; an obscene parody of Christianity, or a system of thought that deserved to be treated with respect?<sup>3</sup>

So to include the cluttered history of the Middle Ages into the grand product of Western Europe in any meaningful way offered more problems than benefits. And to propose that there might be an Arab-Islamic component to this Western environment was unbearable; the ultimate oxymoron. This kind of reassessment requires the ability and, more importantly, the desire to acknowledge a degree of indebtedness to a culture generally regarded as the epitome of “otherness.”

#### *La Convivencia*

The fact that Arabic philosophers found their last productive arena in Spain may be an accident of history, but it certainly provides the key geographical element in the history of the Western philosophical journey. After the infusion of Muslim rule in al-Andalus beginning in the eighth century, there was parallel anti-Muslim activity from Christian Europeans. The *Reconquista* (English: Re-conquest), was an almost eight-century-long process during which Christians re-conquered the Iberian peninsula from the Muslim and Moorish states. The Umayyad conquest of Hispania from the Visigoths occurred during the early eighth century; the *Reconquista* began almost immediately, in 722, with the Battle of Covadonga. In 1236, the last Muslim center, Granada, and the last Iberian Islamic ruler, Mohammed ibn Alhamar, were finally subjugated by Ferdinand III of Castile.

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<sup>2</sup> Muhammad ali Khalidi, ed., “Introduction,” *Medieval Islamic Philosophical Writings* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2005), xi.

<sup>3</sup> R.W. Southern, *Western Views of Islam in the Middle Ages* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1962), 3.

The term “reconquista” is a politically biased term which points to a recapturing of land from a foreign power. While it is true that at times native Spaniards were fighting against Muslims, more often native Spaniards who had converted to Islam many generations previously were fighting non-native Spaniards from Western Europe. The very fact that this “reconquest” took place over more than seven centuries shows the extent to which the Iberian peninsula was a thoroughly mixed society of Muslims, Christians, and Jews who, rather than constantly in battle and opposition to each other, had learned to live together and learn from each other.<sup>4</sup> *La Convivencia* (literally: “the Coexistence” or “living together”) is the term used to describe the situation just described. From about 711 to 1492, concurrent with the *Reconquista*, Muslims, Christians, and Jews in Spain lived in relative peace together. The term *convivencia* refers to the general religious toleration exhibited between these three faiths and, more importantly for our purposes, the interplay of cultural ideas between the three groups.<sup>5</sup> It was an interplay and fusion of social and cultural forces unique in the medieval world. An example of this interconnection of cultures in Spain is found in the famous quote by al-Zubaidi, “All lands in their diversity are one, and men are all brothers and neighbors.”<sup>6</sup> Even though Christian kingdoms were at war with the Muslims, within the lands not currently under dispute, Christians, Muslims, and Jews lived daily side by side. In cities like Toledo there was a mix of mosques, churches, and synagogues. The intellectual interests treasured by the Muslim rulers were valued by the Christians and Jews.<sup>7</sup>

Under Muslim rule, Christians and Jews were usually tolerated within the mix of society. The same is true when Christians retook Spain with regard to Muslims; less, over time, in regard

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<sup>4</sup> “The Christians under Muslim rule were so closely identified with the culture of the rulers in everything except religion that they came to be known as Mozarabs or ‘arabizers,’” Montgomery W. Watt, *The Influence of Islam on Medieval Europe*, Islamic Studies 9 (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1972), 26. “All talented young Christians read and study with enthusiasm the Arab books . . . they despise the Christian literature as unworthy of attention.” Quoted by Southern, *Western Views of Islam in the West*, 21 from Paul Alvarus, *Indiculus Luminosus*, P.L. CXXI, 555-556, who is cited by Dozy, *Musulmans d’Espagne*, I, 317.

<sup>5</sup> Jerrilynn Denise Dodds, et al, eds., *Convivencia: Jews, Muslims, and Christians in Medieval Spain* (New York: George Braziller: 1992).

<sup>6</sup> Omayma Abdel-Latif, “Bridging the Divide,” *Al-Ahram*, November 7–13, 2002, <<http://weekly.ahram.org.eg/2002/611/focus.htm>>, accessed September 4, 2007.

<sup>7</sup> See the scholarly research on *convivencia* in Chris Lowney, *A Vanished World: Muslims, Christians, and Jews in Medieval Spain* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006).

to Jews. When the Christian ruler Alfonso VI conquered Toledo, he promised the Muslim inhabitants that they could continue their religious practices. In Toledo, the church of Santa Maria la Blanca was even shared for a while: Muslims using it on Fridays, Jews on Saturdays, and Christians on Sundays. Talented Jews and Muslims held important positions in the court of the Christian kings. Alfonso X even granted some foreign scholars the title of *caballero*, gentlemen or knight. One of the most important of these connecting cultural links during the period of *convivencia* involved translation of Arabic texts into Latin.

### *Translations and Commentaries: Arabic into Latin*

Before the availability of Islamic learning, the Western mind had to be satisfied with fragments of the Roman schools which had been cobbled together by western teachers like Boethius, Marianus Capella, Bede, and Isidore. As far as knowledge of Greek literature, before the twelfth century the language of Plato and Aristotle was virtually unknown. Even the Greek alphabet was lost. “At the hands of the medieval scribe a Greek word becomes gibberish or is omitted with *grecum* inserted in its place—it was ‘all Greek’ to him.”<sup>8</sup> The Muslim expansion into Spain brought with it a new worldview and new arenas of learning previously unrealized in Europe. In the realm of philosophy, they brought the entire body of Aristotle’s writings as well as an extensive library of commentaries on Greek thought. The recovery of this ancient learning, supplemented by what the Arabs had gained through their own observations, constituted an opportunity for an intellectual rebirth of Europe.

The twelfth century saw a major search by European scholars for new learning, which led them to the Arabic fringes of Europe, to the intellectually rich deposits found in Islamic Spain. For them, Toledo was a special intellectual jackpot, being the seat of scholarship in Spain under the Arabs. The conquest of Toledo by Christians led to the establishment there of the capitol of the Kingdom of Castile. That city became the most important center of Arabic-Latin translation.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Charles Homer Haskins, *The Renaissance of the 12<sup>th</sup> Century* (Cleveland: The World Publishing Company, 1957), 280.

<sup>9</sup> Charles Burnett, “The Coherence of the Arabic-Latin Translation Program in Toledo in the Twelfth Century,” *Science in Context* 14 (2001): 249-288. “Nor was Latin the ideal medium for rendering all the subtleties of the originals [in Greek]. The lack of a definite article made it impossible to deal with many abstract expressions.” L.D. Reynolds and N.G. Wilson. *Scribes*

That the history of Western philosophy is strongly dependent on texts written in Arabic is attested to by the sheer volume of works that were translated, perhaps numbering in the thousands. Ferdinand III, king of Castile and Leon, encouraged the sharing of languages, and on his death in 1252, he was enshrined with an epitaph in Latin, Spanish, Hebrew, and Arabic, all languages part of his Spanish kingdom. His son, Alfonso X set up the school of translators in Toledo to continue this work. It is during this period that the thousands of Arabic loan words made their way into the Romance vernaculars.

Specifically, the translations of Averroes' works by translators like Michael the Scot helped bring the Greek philosophical tradition into the mainstream of Latin thought. "In the Christian West, Latin translations of many of his [Averroes'] *Long Commentaries* . . . served to play a fundamentally important role in teaching the Latins how to read Aristotle with sympathy and insight."<sup>10</sup> Fletcher summarizes this section well:

The learning of the Islamic world was discovered, appropriated, colonized by western scholars, and made widely accessible by means of translation into Latin, the international language of scholarship. This was one of the turning-points in the intellectual evolution of mankind . . . The traffic was all one way. Moorish Spain was the donor, western Christendom the eager recipient.<sup>11</sup>

The advantage of the Arabic Aristotelian works over the Greek works was also seen in the dynamic tradition of commentary and teaching that remained current and viable through the period of translation.<sup>12</sup> As Watt says,

The Arabs were no mere transmitters of Greek thought, but genuine bearers, who both kept alive the disciplines they had been taught and extended their range. When about 1100 Europeans became seriously interested in the . . . philosophy of their Saracen

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*and Scholars: A Guide to the Transmission of Greek and Latin Literature*, 3rd ed. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991), 121

<sup>10</sup> Taylor, "Averroes: Religious Dialectic and Aristotelian Philosophical Thought," in *The Cambridge Companion to Arabic Philosophy*, ed. Peter Adamson and Richard C. Taylor (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 196.

<sup>11</sup> Fletcher, *Moorish Spain*, 147, 174.

<sup>12</sup> Charles Burnett, "Arabic into Latin: The Reception of Arabic Philosophy into Western Europe," in *The Cambridge Companion to Arabic Philosophy*, ed. Adamson and Taylor, 374-375.

enemies, these disciplines were at their zenith; and the Europeans had to learn all they could from the Arabs before they themselves could make further advances.<sup>13</sup>

Hollister and Bennett offer a helpful commentary on the relation between Islam and the twelfth-century Latin revival: “Although the monastic schools from which these Europeans came belie the notion of a deeply asleep Europe kissed awake by an Arabian prince, there is no doubt that the intellectual development of medieval Europe was profoundly stimulated by the richness of Islamic libraries and the wisdom of their scholars.”<sup>14</sup>

The Christian translator Adelard of Bath provides a clear example of the shift in European sensibilities with the addition of Arabic derived texts. What he acquired from the Arabs was a rationalist’s mentality, what might be later called “secular thinking,” although this generation still worked within theological constructs. He developed a feel for observation and experiment. In a letter to his nephew, he wrote these telling words:

It is a little difficult for you and me to argue . . . I, with reason for my guide, have learned one thing from my Arab teachers, you, something different; dazzled by the outward show of authority you wear a head-stall [a halter] . . . without seeing why or where they are being led, and only follow the halter by which they are held, so many of you, bound and fettered as you are by a low credulity, are led into danger by the authority of writers.<sup>15</sup>

#### *Averroes and Aquinas*

Importantly, even the critics of Averroes and his brand of Aristotelianism,—Aquinas included—could not escape the influence of the great Arabic thinker. “Their understanding of Aristotle (again including Aquinas) was conditioned by Averroes’ interpretation.<sup>16</sup> Eby and Arrowood concur; “It is of particular interest that Moslem scholars contributed to the development of Christian thought by furnishing opposition to Christian theologians . . . In later centuries, the scholastic theologians of the Roman Catholic Church elaborated their own system

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<sup>13</sup> Watt, *The Influence of Islam on Medieval Europe*, 43.

<sup>14</sup> C. Warren Hollister and Judith M. Bennett, *Medieval Europe: A Short History*, 9th ed. (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2002), 100.

<sup>15</sup> Adelard of Bath: “The Impact of Muslim Science; Preface to His Very Difficult Natural Questions,” *Medieval Sourcebook*, Paul Halsall, March 1996, Fordham University, <<http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/source/adelardbath1.html>>, accessed September 8, 2007.

<sup>16</sup> Norman F. Cantor, *The Civilization of the Middle Ages* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1963), 5.

in refuting the doctrines of Islam.”<sup>17</sup> This kind of understanding of the dependence of Aquinas on Averroes prompted Renan to conclude that Aquinas owed “almost everything” to Averroes.<sup>18</sup>

Gilson gives Averroes the distinction of having established the “primacy of reasons” or a purely philosophical rationalism long before the official beginning of the Renaissance. He writes that rationalism was “born in Spain, in the mind of an Arabian philosopher, as a conscious reaction against the theologism of the Arabian divines.”<sup>19</sup> Gilson goes on to add that Averroes “bequeathed to his successors the ideal of a purely rational philosophy, an ideal whose influence was to be such that, by it, even the evolution of Christian philosophy was to be deeply modified.”<sup>20</sup>

In support of this strong claim, we have the contemporaneous testimony of the British philosopher Roger Bacon (d.1294), who spent most of his adult life at the universities of Oxford and Paris. He wrote in the *Opus Majus*, commenting on the Arabic contributions to the revival of Greek thought in Western Europe: “But the larger portion of the philosophy of Aristotle received little attention, either on account of the concealment of the copies of his works and their difficulty or unpopularity or on account of the wars in the East, till after the time of Mohamet [Mohammed] when Avicenna and Averroes and others recalled to the light of full exposition the philosophy of Aristotle.”<sup>21</sup>

Typically, philosophy textbooks move from the classical Greek philosophers immediately to the Middle Ages, commonly directly to Aquinas. This historical jump of about 1600 years ignores the rich and varied history of philosophy that belongs to the intermediate period; it does no justice to the course of Western thought around the dual roadblocks of post-Rome Europe and Byzantium nor through the auspices of Arabic thinkers and the Islamic Empire. Aquinas completes the philosophical circuit in that his work was closely influenced by that of Averroes,

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<sup>17</sup> Frederick Eby and Charles Flinn Arrowood, *The History and Philosophy of Education: Ancient and Medieval* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1940), 698.

<sup>18</sup> Renan, *Averroès et l’Averroïsme*, cited by Majid Fakhry, *Averroes, Aquinas, and the Rediscovery of Aristotle in Western Europe* (Georgetown University: Edmund A. Walsh School of Foreign Service, 1997), 5.

<sup>19</sup> Etienne Gilson, *Reason and Revelation in the Middle Ages*, (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1938), 37.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 38.

<sup>21</sup> Roger Bacon, *Opus Majus*, trans. Robert Belle Burke (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania, 1928), 63.

as both a protagonist and antagonist, but without doubt adopting the method of commentary modeled by Averroes. “St. Thomas Aquinas, whose achievement it was to show that reason and revelation could coexist in a Christian philosophy, explicitly cited Averroes no less than 503 times in the course of his work”<sup>22</sup> Not only did Aquinas lean on the work of Averroes, but the careful investigator can find influences from other Arabic scholars in Aquinas’ work as well. For example, the arguments for the existence of God built by al-Farabi are remarkable similar to Aquinas’ own proofs; al-Farabi’s work on the attributes of God are also obviously seen in Aquinas’ list and description of divine characteristics.<sup>23</sup>

In the altarpiece done by Traini for the Church of Saint Caterina at Pisa (1345), Aquinas is shown seated with an open book, his own works. Above him is Christ, Moses, Paul, and the four Gospel writers. On either side of Aquinas, and slightly lower, stand Plato and Aristotle, with their books open for him to read. Directly below Aquinas sits Averroes. The message of this artwork clearly shows that the great doctor of the Church, Aquinas, while subservient to Christ and the saints of church history, is influenced by the great Greek philosophers of ages past. That Averroes, the Muslim, is placed in a secondary, humble position is appropriate for this Christian painting; that he is pictured at all indicates to what extent this Arab philosopher was part of the greater discussion of faith and reason.

### *Hesperus is Phosphorus*

It is interesting, as it is unfortunate, that as the Renaissance progressed, the appreciation for Arabic roots faded. As Christianity and Islam grew further apart geographically, their shared cultural streams dried up as well. For example, the Italian scholar, Pico della Mirandola (1463-1494), who was himself well-versed in Arabic, says, “Leave to us in Heaven’s name Pythagoras, Plato, and Aristotle, and keep your Omar, your Alchabitius, your Abenzoar, your Abenragel.”<sup>24</sup> While in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries there had been professors of Arabic in several European universities, when a student asked about instruction in Arabic in Salamanca, he was

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<sup>22</sup> Fletcher, *Moorish Spain*, 134.

<sup>23</sup> Eugene Myers, *Arabic Thought and the Western World* (New York: Frederick Ungar Publishing Company, 1964), 17-30, based on Robert Hammond, *The Philosophy of Al Farabi and its Influence on Medieval Thought* (Cynthiana, KY: The Hobson Book Press, 1947).

<sup>24</sup> Quoted by Watt, *The Influence of Islam on Medieval Europe*, 80.



told, “What concern have you with this barbaric language, Arabic?”<sup>25</sup> The beginnings of Western ignorance and repression of Islamic philosophical ties begins with these kinds of culturally-biased assumptions that divided East and West.

Briffault argues, perhaps too enthusiastically, that the real Renaissance should reflect the direct impact of Islamic civilization.

It was under the influence of the Arabian and Moorish revival of culture, and not in the fifteenth century, that the real Renaissance took place. Spain, not Italy, was the cradle of the rebirth of Europe . . . The debt of Europe to the “heathen dog” could, of course, find no place in the scheme of Christian history . . . It is highly probable that but for the Arabs, modern European civilization would never have arisen at all; it is absolutely certain that but for them, it would not have assumed that character which has enabled it to transcend all previous phases of evolution.<sup>26</sup>

The key to this article has been the emphasis laid upon the often ignored role that the Islamic Empire played in transmitting, translating, and transforming Greek philosophy in such a way as to make it available for adoption by Europe in the high Middle Ages. Without these other voices, our Western views are impoverished and less than truthful and suffer from a self-induced psychosis of cultural xenophobia. Without admission of these other views, we delimit what it means to be fully human within a global context.

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

<sup>26</sup> Robert Briffault, *Making of Humanity* (London: G. Allen & Unwin Ltd, 1928), 188-191. In support see, S.D. Goitein, “Between Hellenism and Renaissance—Islam, the Intermediate Civilization,” *Islamic Studies* 2 (1963): 217-233; and C. Burnett and A. Contadini, eds., *Islam and the Italian Renaissance* (London: The Warburg Institute, 1999).