

**WHAT INTEGRATION IS NOT:  
THE STRANGE CASE OF SATURDAY BELIEVERS**

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It is sometimes helpful to try to understand a process or exercise or term by reference to what it is NOT. And the point I wish to make emphatically in these remarks is that whatever faith and learning integration may be, there is at least one thing that it surely and categorically is not.

I refer to a sinister academic stance taken in the world of Islam many years ago, a Muslim legacy that haunts us and tempts us and lurks just behind the work that you will be doing in this seminar.

The geographical setting of this story is Europe and the Middle East; the chronological setting is the High Middle Ages (twelfth and thirteenth centuries AD). If you have studied the history of civilization you will recall that very strong winds of change were blowing through that region of the world in that period of time.

The invigoration took various forms—political change (faint anticipations of modern statehood), economic change (the revival of towns that had been stagnant and deserted), artistic change (with Gothic architecture supplanting Romanesque architecture), educational change (with universities overtaking the cathedral and monastic schools), clerical change (the confusing intrusion of Mendicants—the two groups of begging friars or brothers, Dominicans and Franciscans, who didn't quite fit the traditional distinction between regular clergy and secular clergy).

But those changes pale in comparison with the one I have in mind. *Something energizing and yet threatening occurred in the realm of ideas.* Putting it in general terms so as not to overburden ourselves with the details, let us call it the *reappearance—and reappearance in languages usable by scholars (meaning Latin above all) of classical (pre-medieval) materials that had disappeared over the centuries.* (When we use the word “disappeared,” of course, we mean physically lost and then found OR physically available but not, until the era in question, in the right language).

We will take this dramatic event, the reappearance of classical materials, as a fact and not try to tell how it came about, which, in itself, in an intriguing chapter in the history of ideas.

What we MUST say about it is that in this trove of recovered materials the writings of Aristotle, the third (after Socrates and Plato) of the philosophical giants of ancient Greece, were the most exciting ingredient. A recent commentator, Ralph McInerney, puts it this way: “Pagan philosophy had been known largely by hearsay for centuries, snippets culled from...a few books of Aristotelian logic, a partial translation of Plato's Timaeus [one of his famous dialogues]. Suddenly, as it must have seemed, a vast library of erudition drops from the heavens. What to make of it was an understandably pressing matter.”

Can we verbalize the exact challenge that the “arrival” of Aristotle posed? Answer: it raised what might be called the question of compatibility or accommodation: does Aristotelianism lend itself to the faith (whatever that faith might be) such that it can become the preferred philosophical foundation or structure or edifice of the faith that the work of Plato, often as reformulated in Neoplatonism, had once provided? Can reason, understood to mean Aristotle, be reconciled with faith, understood to mean orthodoxy? Can they come together, or be brought together, in a grand and sustainable synthesis? AND can this happen under the special urgency of the moment, which was not simply the natural impulse of theologians to imbibe the new discoveries but the undeniable fact that Aristotelianism, even when shorn of the commentaries that were often attached to it, conflicted with the prevailing theologies at crucial points?

By this I do not mean simply that it was a novel approach to reality, but it was certainly *that*—which alone gave pause. As one commentator has put it, “With the introduction of Aristotle and the new focus on the visible world, the early Scholastics’ [scholars] understanding of “reason” as formally correct logical thinking began to take on a new meaning: Reason now signified not only logic but also empirical observation and experiment—i.e., cognition of the natural world. With the increasingly extended scope of the philosopher’s intellectual territory, the tension between reason and faith was now radically heightened. A constantly growing multiplicity of facts about concrete things had to be integrated with the demands of ... doctrine.” (Richard Tarnas, pp. 177-178).

In addition to this general perspective, this new appreciation of the natural world, there was outright conflict between some of the secular ideas and orthodoxy. We need not belabour this, for it gets complicated, but examples would include the questions of whether the soul is immortal, whether the world is eternal, and whether a divine Being providentially intervenes in the affairs of man.

I was careful in a previous paragraph not to identify the faith in question, for the problem of reconciliation that I am talking about challenged all three of the traditional monotheistic faiths—Christianity, Judaism, and Islam.

We almost always think of the challenge in terms of the Latin West and hence in terms of Christianity or Christian orthodoxy. And in that context we relate how Albert the Great and especially his illustrious student at the University of Paris, Thomas Aquinas, in the short run met the challenge successfully and magnificently. In the long run, of course, their synthesis dissolved into its parts.

But I advise that we focus rather on Islamic regions, for here is where “ownership” of the Aristotelian materials lay, and here is where their reconciliation with orthodoxy, in this case the Muslim faith, began years before Aristotle’s writings even reached the new universities of Western Europe.

Of course, the world of Islam also interests me for reasons unrelated to my topic. First, we are preoccupied these days with the war on terror and the arguably connected war in Iraq. Not all Muslims are terrorists, of course, but most terrorists are Muslims. Second, when the history of civilization is put in world perspective, which is currently in vogue among historians, it turns out that by nearly any standard

Western Europe in the Middle Ages was not the pre-eminent civilization. Bernard Lewis writes thusly: “During the centuries that in European history are called medieval, the most advanced civilization in the world was undoubtedly that of Islam. Islam may have been equalled...by India and China, but both of those civilizations remained essentially limited to one region and to one ethnic group, and their impact on the rest of the world was correspondingly restricted. The civilization of Islam, by contrast, was ecumenical in its outlook and explicitly so in its aspirations.” (p. 25)

There is ample reason, in other words, to look beyond the Christian West as I am endeavouring to do in this paper.

Returning to our topic, the Islamic scholar Averroes (Arabic name Ibn Rushd, 1126-1198) is the person I wish to highlight. This very philosophically inclined judge and physician working in Cordoba, the center of Islamic studies in Spain, did—or is alleged by his followers to have done-- something damaging, but his action called forth, eventually, a response that was constructive. Those are the two themes that I want you to become aware of, and then to invoke as you see fit, or if you see fit, in the life-long process of integrating faith and learning. (His main work is peculiarly entitled *Incoherence of the Incoherence*).

#### **First, the action taken.**

We must look hard for it, for it was not the thrust of Averroes’ work. The major or guiding principle of his work was that there is one eternal truth. Depending on your level of education, he held, this one eternal truth can be accessed in two ways—by use of revelation (in his case, the Koran) or by use of natural knowledge (in his case, the newly acquired works of Aristotle). Each leads upwards to the apex, such that no clash need be feared. Philosophy and theology harmonize.

*They do so, that is, in almost every inquiry. Occasionally they do NOT harmonize, and this caveat or disclaimer is what I am wanting to highlight. Aristotle and Islam were not entirely reconcilable. And when Averroes, who was wedded to both, found the two in conflict, the potential consequences were not just theoretical. Heresy was punishable, even by death, in his culture. To clear himself of suspicion, therefore, a strategy of self-defence was called for.*

The double-truth concept apparently met this need. Consider “X” to represent a particular proposition. What Averroes apparently held was this: X can be true philosophically but false theologically, and vice versa. Through the eyes of reason, for example, X is the case, but through the eyes of religion something different and even opposite (let us call it “Y”) may be the case. Putting it concretely in terms of an actual proposition: it is both the case, depending on your point of view, that the world is eternal (as Aristotle held) and that the world had a distinct beginning in time (as sacred writing indicates). What results, in any case, is two firmly held contrary truths about the same thing. (Logicians tell us that this is an untenable violation of the law of noncontradiction whereby something cannot be X and not-X at the same time and in the same sense, but we will stop short of any further abstraction).

Do not write off as scholastic and pedantic Averroes’ apparent strategy of self-defence, for the parallels with modern thinking are poignant. Just as behaviourally we

can be saints on Saturday and sharks at work, so also conceptually we can affirm something in church or church-operated classrooms and deny it in favour of something different for the “secular” balance of the week. The latter might be dubbed “Saturday believers.” It is as if to say that “when I wear my believing cap, this is what I conclude, but when I wear my thinking cap, that is what I conclude.” I think of a friend of mine who is “safely” creationist before his students at church and school, frankly evolutionary amongst his colleagues and in the laboratory, and amazingly contented with his form of scholarship.

All of us can be and sometimes shamefully are fragmented in how we act and think, but the ideal towards which we strive is to be whole, unitary, comprehensive and integrated.

### **Second, the response elicited.**

In the thirteenth century, Averroism spread to the West, where it was Latinized and Christianized. Although it was soon (1277) to be condemned by the Bishop of Paris, the movement flourished for a time at the University of Paris under Sigerus of Brabant. Claiming philosophically some views that were not orthodox put them, the Latin Averroists, at risk, but they escaped the charge of heresy—and the penalty of banishment—by invoking the double theory of truth. “X” was philosophically the case, they averred, but of course “Y” was theologically the case.

Inevitably, these machinations caught the attention of Thomas Aquinas—whose vast and profound work I do not pretend to fathom. And apparently in response to the Latin Averroists, Aquinas reiterated an idea—advanced earlier by Augustine of Hippo and still earlier by the apostle Paul—that we must never forget.

The idea arises in the context of Aquinas’ discussion of “natural theology” and is indeed the premise or presupposition of such theology. If only those who philosophize about the natural world, Aquinas seems to exclaim, had been attentive to and responsive to this premise or presupposition! He is indicting, of course, the recent followers of Aristotle.

I am referring to the concept of *general revelation*. Natural theology, which is “knowledge of God gained through an understanding of the external world,” (R.C. Sproul, p. 74) comes by way of, or by means of, God’s two-fold revelation of Himself (implication: NOT via unaided reason or an unassisted intellect). First, to all of humanity He has revealed himself through nature. (We think of Psalm 19 in this context: “The heavens declare the glory of God, and the sky above proclaims his handiwork”). Second, to all of humanity He has revealed himself in our minds and hearts, giving us an innate or intuitive sense that God exists (which reminds us of John Calvin’s reference to the “awareness of divinity” that resides in all people ). To repeat, general revelation is God’s self-disclosure in nature and man, a phenomenon not obscured by sin and a phenomenon that stands in addition to and apart from the details of *special revelation* that we find in God’s Word. By virtue of it—general revelation—“science and theology, so far from being separated and opposed to one another, are actually in perfect agreement—because all truth is God’s truth. Science and theology both presuppose God’s divine revelation; and they both meet, as it were, at the top.” (Sproul, p. 83).

General revelation tempts us into some fascinating inquiries. For example, if no one can plead ignorance as an excuse for not obeying God—not even the person who knows nothing about the Bible—have we found the basis of the universal sense of guilt that psychology suggests? To carry the speculation a little further: when contemplating the proclamation of the Gospel to the world we worry about the poor, innocent people who have died before hearing it, but according to the concept of general revelation “there are no innocent people, nor have there ever been any innocent people in the entire history of the world, for all people have received a clear revelation of the Creator.” (Sproul, p. 78). Of course, they may have suppressed it, choosing not to worship the living God. To propitiate for such sin, God dispatched his Son into the world. And there is the curious intersection between the notion of general revelation and Philip Yancey’s latest book reporting how life on earth, life at its most ordinary and mundane, can veritably mesmerize one—if one is attentive—with indices of the invisible and transcendent. And the curious intersection between the notion of general revelation and Harry Lee Poe’s belief that “We do not have to bring religion to the contemporary academy any more than Paul had to bring religion to Athens. The issues of religion, the topics of conversation that are religious in nature, are already there.” (Poe, p. 21). That all knowledge is latently religious was C.S. Lewis’ contention as well. (Poe, p. 50).

But speculation is not the point of this essay. The point, rather, is that I do not wish to be a Saturday believer with a bifurcated worldview. It helps me to know that there is a history behind such a questionable stance. And it helps me further to know that the image of God is so firmly and universally implanted that such a stance should not be necessary.

In your honourable work as Christian educators shun the double-truth wherever possible and covet the simply incredible scope of God’s revelation.

### Essential Reading

- Fakhry, Majid. *Averroes: His Life, Work*. London: Oneworld Publications, 2001.
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