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The Historical Development of Averroist Thought in the Italian Intellectual Sphere (14th–16th Centuries)

التتبع التاريخي للفكر الرشدي في الساحة الفكرية الإيطالية خلال القرنين الرابع عشر إلى السادس عشر الميلاديين

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Abstract:

This article examines the development of Latin Averroism between the fourteenth and sixteenth centuries, focusing on the transmission of Averroes' thought from philosophy to the political and cultural spheres. It highlights the rise of Political Averroism and its role in advocating the distinction between reason and faith and the autonomy of temporal authority from ecclesiastical power, as reflected in the writings of Jean de Jandun, Marsilius of Padua, and Dante Alighieri. The study also explores the persistence of Averroist thought during the Italian Renaissance through debates led by Pietro Pomponazzi and Agostino Nifo concerning the immortality of the soul and the relationship between philosophy and theology. It concludes that Latin Averroism significantly shaped European rational thought and contributed to the intellectual transformations that paved the way for modernity.

Keywords: Averroes; Political Averroism; Renaissance; University of Padua; Reason and Faith.

المخلص:

يتناول هذا المقال تطور الرشدية اللاتينية خلال القرنين الرابع عشر والسادس عشر، مركزاً على انتقال فكر ابن رشد من المجال الفلسفي إلى المجالين السياسي والثقافي. ويسلط الضوء على نشأة الرشدية السياسية ودورها في الدفاع عن التمييز بين العقل والإيمان واستقلال السلطة الزمنية عن السلطة الدينية، كما تجلّى في كتابات جان دي جاندان، ومارسيلو البادوي، ودانتي أليغييري. كما يناقش استمرار حضور الفكر الرشدي خلال عصر النهضة الإيطالية من خلال الجدل الذي أثاره بيترو بومبوناتي وأغسطس نيفوس حول خلود النفس والعلاقة بين الفلسفة واللاهوت. ويخلص المقال إلى أن الرشدية اللاتينية أسهمت في ترسيخ النزعة العقلية داخل الفكر الأوروبي، ومهدت للتحوّلات الفكرية والسياسية التي صاحبت الانتقال إلى العصر الحديث، بما يعكس عمق التأثير الذي تركه تراث ابن رشد في الحضارة الغربية. الكلمات المفتاحية: ابن رشد؛ الرشدية السياسية؛ عصر النهضة؛ جامعة بادوا؛ العقل والإيمان.

1. INTRODUCTION

During the fourteenth century, Averroism and its concepts underwent a remarkable development. After the philosophical theories embraced by the Averroists—especially those concerning the intellect, matter, and creation—had reached maturity, their applications began to extend into the political sphere, giving rise to what became known as "**Political Averroism.**" This new current devoted much of its effort to combating the temporal authority of the Church. This significant philosophical shift constituted an indication of the beginning of Averroism's ascendancy in a number of European universities, most notably the Universities of Oxford in England and Padua in Italy.¹

As for the most prominent leaders of Averroism during this century, one may mention the French philosopher **Jean de Jandun**. Jandun was among the most fervent adherents of Averroes, maintaining that his own ideas and doctrine were nothing more than a continuation of the teachings of the great Arab philosopher, whom he described as: "*the most perfect, complete, and illustrious friend and defender of philosophical truths.*"² He replaced Aristotle's works with Averroes' commentaries upon them, thereby paving the way for the School of Padua to inaugurate a distinct study devoted to the ideas of Averroes rather than those of Aristotle. Jandun studied Averroist philosophy in the Faculties of Arts and Theology at the University of Paris before moving to the University of Padua in Italy.

He was particularly concerned with responding to Thomas Aquinas's criticisms of Averroes' philosophy and continued his intellectual activity until his death in 1328.³

It should also be noted that the **University of Padua**, founded in 1222, belonged to the Venetian Republic, a state renowned for its wealth as well as its independence from ecclesiastical authority⁴.

Marsilius of Padua (*Marsilio da Padova*) is regarded as the most prominent standard-bearer of Political Averroism at this university⁵. Born in the city of Padua around 1275, he received his education under the founder of Averroism at the University of Padua, the philosopher and physician **Pietro d'Abano**, whose bones were burned by the Inquisition after his death as punishment for the radical philosophical views he had espoused. He subsequently moved to the University of Paris to complete his studies, where he became acquainted with the Averroist Jean de Jandun. In September 1312, he was elected Rector of the Faculty of Arts and remained in office until 1313, after which he returned to Padua in 1315⁶.

In 1324, he returned to the University of Paris, where he composed his celebrated work, in which he set forth his political ideas from an Averroist perspective, entitled **Defensor Pacis** (*The Defender of the Peace*). In this treatise, Marsilius distinguishes ⁷

between two forms of life: the temporal life, whose affairs are governed by kings according to philosophical teachings, and the eternal life, which falls under the care of the clergy, headed by the Pope, in accordance with the teachings contained in the sacred texts. Yet, despite affirming the existence of an afterlife, he acknowledges that its true nature cannot be demonstrated rationally; rather, it is accepted because of the social function that belief in it performs among the common people, as it encourages citizens to remain peaceful and to uphold

moral values. From this, it becomes evident that Marsilius's recognition of the clergy did not imply that they possessed the right to interfere in political affairs, since their role was merely advisory. Thus, Marsilius advocated the separation of religion from the state and struggled to detach the Church from the temporal affairs of society, arguing that the city was capable of governing itself through the intellectual efforts exerted by philosophers⁸.

From this period onward, the separation between Church and State gradually became a political reality⁹. It is also apparent that Marsilius employed Averroes' ideas in the political sphere, particularly the thesis concerning the separation of reason and faith, to support his political argument calling for the distinction between the spiritual and the temporal realms, and consequently between the Church and the State¹⁰.

Dante Alighieri likewise transferred Averroist ideas from philosophy into the realm of politics in his treatise entitled (Alighieri Dante) **De Monarchia** (*On Monarchy*). In both this work and his **Divina Commedia** (*The Divine Comedy*), it becomes evident that Dante was profoundly influenced by Aristotle and his commentator, Averroes. Through ideas inspired by Ibn Rushd, he launched an attack on the Church¹¹, openly and remarkably boldly advocating the separation of religion from the state. In both works, Dante addresses two fundamental issues: first, the necessity of a single emperor to secure temporal happiness; and second, the necessity of preserving the independence of spiritual authority from temporal authority. Dante further asserts that respect for human rights is itself an expression of respect for the divine will, and that the emperor should not derive his authority from the Pope. He ultimately concludes that philosophy is the sole means of attaining worldly happiness, whereas theology serves as the path to

eternal happiness. In this respect, Dante differs from other Averroists in that he acknowledges the existence of the afterlife. Nevertheless, in his *Divine Comedy*, he consigns the Pope to Hell while admitting the Averroist **Siger of Brabant** to Paradise¹².

Averroism had become such a widespread intellectual culture among the Venetian elite that anyone who neither embraced it nor was acquainted with its teachings came to be regarded as traditionalist or reactionary. This may be inferred from the conversation reported by the Italian humanist **Petrarch** with one of the Averroists. During the exchange, Petrarch cited **Saint Paul**, whereupon the Averroist frowned in contempt and declared: *"Keep that kind of teacher for yourself. As for me, I have my own teacher, and I know in whom I believe."* He then continued: *"Ah! Remain a good Christian if you wish; as for me, I do not believe a single one of all these fables. Your Paul, your Augustine—and all those people to whom you attach such importance—were nothing but chatterers. Ah! If only you were able to read Averroes, you would perceive how far superior he is to all those buffoons."*¹³

This passage carries multiple implications. It reveals the extent to which Averroist thought had come to dominate the minds of the educated elite, encouraging them to challenge the traditional culture represented by figures such as Paul, Augustine, and Petrarch. Nevertheless, one should not overlook the fact that such statements could scarcely be proclaimed openly during that period, as doing so might have led to death. The exchange in question was merely a private conversation that took place between Petrarch and one of his visitors in his home.

1. Latin Averroism during the Fifteenth and Sixteenth Centuries

Latin Averroism accompanied the European Renaissance and constituted one of its principal intellectual currents from the

fifteenth century onward. Italy was the first European region to enter this new age, while **Padua** emerged as the stronghold of Latin Averroism throughout the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. Its university became a leading center of the intellectual awakening that would spread across Europe. Despite the issuance of a papal decree at the **Fifth Lateran Council** in Rome in 1512, prohibiting Averroist doctrines, the sixteenth century nevertheless witnessed a shift in favour of Averroes. The fruits of this development were manifested in the emergence of figures who represented this current in Italy, among them **Pietro Pomponazzi** and **Agostino Nifo**.¹⁴

a. Pietro Pomponazzi (1462–1525)

Pomponazzi is regarded as the most renowned professor at the University of Padua during this period. His guiding principle was that *"one and the same proposition may be true for the theologian without necessarily being true for the philosopher; and we are capable of believing, by an act of will, what reason finds no justification for, thereby submitting ourselves to religion while being aware of the invalidity of its doctrines."* He published a work entitled **On the Immortality of the Soul**, in which he denied the immortality of the soul. He later declared his submission to the religious doctrine affirming immortality as the final resolution of the issue. Nevertheless, the Inquisition¹⁵ ordered the book to be burned, while Pomponazzi himself escaped persecution through the protection of one of the cardinals.¹⁶

In his treatise **On the Immortality of the Soul**, composed in 1516, Pomponazzi argues that immortality is not one of Aristotle's doctrines. In doing so, he appears to be responding to **Saint Thomas Aquinas**, who had maintained the contrary position, and perhaps even challenging the Church by invoking the very philosopher whose authority it had embraced. In addressing this question, Pomponazzi departs from the position of Averroes and his followers, who

maintained that the material intellect, like the agent intellect, exists separately from the body, and that the human soul—inasmuch as it participates in intellectual knowledge—possesses an impersonal immortality. Instead, he endorses the view of **Alexander of Aphrodisias** (*Alexandros Aphrodisieus* that the material intellect resides within the soul and is*) **hylic**, that is, merely a bodily disposition prepared to receive the influence of the separate agent intellect. Consequently, the human soul perishes together with the body.

He also authored a work entitled **On Fate, Free Will, and God's Foreknowledge of Creatures**, completed in 1525, in which he argues that human freedom is confirmed by experience, whereas divine providence belongs to the realm of faith, and that the two cannot be reconciled. After his death, another of his works was published in 1556 under the title **On the Causes of Marvelous Natural Phenomena, or The Book of Incantations**, in which he states: *"Miracles are extraordinary events accompanying the rise of religions; nevertheless, they are natural events, although their explanation requires a depth of knowledge of nature that human beings do not ordinarily attain."*¹⁷

However, his assertion that the human soul perishes together with the body proved to be one of the most dangerous doctrines from the Church's perspective. It generated intense debates between the followers of Alexander of Aphrodisias and those of Averroes. It is therefore not surprising that the Pope encouraged one of the Averroists, namely **Agostino Nifo**, to oppose Pomponazzi.¹⁸

b. Agostino Nifo (Agostino Nifo)

Agostino Nifo was an Italian philosopher and commentator of the Renaissance. He was born in **Japoli** in **Calabria** (*Calabre*) around 1473 and died in 1538. He is regarded as one of the leading Averroists of the Renaissance period. Among his works is a treatise entitled **On the Intellect and the**

Demon (*De intellectu et daemonibus*), which caused considerable controversy at the University of Padua. In this work, he defended his master's doctrine concerning the unity of the intellect, arguing that there exist no separate intellects other than those governing the motion of the celestial spheres.

Despite the boldness of his Averroist views, the Pope found no more suitable figure than Nifo to confront the other Averroist, **Pomponazzi**, who had categorically asserted that *"the human soul perishes together with the body."* From the Church's perspective, Nifo's daring doctrines were preferable to the radical and openly defiant views advanced by Pomponazzi. Nifo was also celebrated as an interpreter of Averroes. Renan states concerning him: *"If Averroes alone truly understood Aristotle, Nifo alone truly understood Averroes."*¹⁹

The conflict between Nifo and Pomponazzi became one of the reasons behind the Church's voluntary recognition of Latin Averroism through its support for the works of Agostino Nifo. This Averroist philosopher thus became a defender of ecclesiastical traditions and their spokesman. Averroism no longer represented merely a philosophical doctrine; rather, the title "Averroist" came to be applied even to those most devoted to religion. Consequently, the Church openly and vigorously encouraged the study of Aristotle and acknowledged that Averroes was his greatest commentator.

• Cesare Cremonini (1550–1631)

Cesare Cremonini is considered one of the professors of the University of Padua and the last representative of its Latin Averroist school. He was born in **Centi**, near the city of **Ferrara**, in 1550. Among his works is **On the Heavens**, which contains several philosophical ideas reflecting his unmistakably Averroist orientation. These include the eternity and necessity of the world, the denial of creation, the assertion that the close union between soul and body undermines

spirituality, the rejection of both immortality and divine providence, and the view that God is merely a final cause. With his death²⁰

in 1631, the dominance of Averroist philosophy in Europe came to an end.

3. CONCLUSION

A close examination of the development of Latin Averroism in Europe demonstrates that it was far more than a passing episode in the history of the reception of Islamic thought. Rather, it constituted a profound intellectual movement that contributed significantly to reshaping philosophical, political, and religious debates within European society. Averroes' commentaries on Aristotle evolved from purely philosophical texts into authoritative intellectual references within European universities, particularly those of Padua, Paris, and Oxford, where they helped establish scholarly traditions that enjoyed a degree of independence from ecclesiastical authority.

The present study has shown that the fourteenth century witnessed a major transformation in Averroist thought through the emergence of what has been termed **"Political Averroism."** Drawing especially upon the Averroist distinction between reason and faith, its proponents defended the autonomy of temporal authority from spiritual authority, as clearly reflected in the writings of Marsilius of Padua and Dante Alighieri. In this respect, Averroism contributed, directly or indirectly, to the

formulation of early conceptions of the separation between Church and State.

The study has further demonstrated that Latin Averroism did not lose its influence during the Renaissance; rather, it entered a new phase of intellectual debate in Italy. Discussions concerning the immortality of the soul, the relationship between philosophy and theology, and the limits of reason and faith became central themes in the works of thinkers such as Pietro Pomponazzi and Agostino Nifo. These controversies redefined the place of Averroism within European culture, transforming it from a movement perceived solely as a challenge to ecclesiastical authority into an integral component of broader intellectual debates that, at times, even received support from the Church itself.

It may therefore be concluded that the influence of Averroes in Europe extended well beyond the role of an Aristotelian commentator. Averroism emerged as one of the principal currents contributing to the development of medieval and Renaissance European thought, fostering rational inquiry, strengthening the autonomy of philosophical investigation, and paving the way for the intellectual and political transformations that characterized modern Europe. Although the Latin Averroist school came to an end with the death of Cesare Cremonini in 1631, its intellectual legacy endured as a lasting testimony to the depth of cultural interaction between Islamic thought and the Latin West.

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