

VARIA GILSONIANA

Studia Gilsoniana
1 (2012)

JUDE P. DOUGHERTY*

GILSON AND RÉMI BRAGUE ON MEDIÉVAL ARABIC PHILOSOPHY

Étienne Gilson, a humanist! Horrors! Gilson, a Renaissance humanist! Not to be, nor could he sign the *Humanist Manifesto II* promulgated by Paul Kurtz, Sidney Hook, and others such as B. F. Skinner and Francis Crick in 1973. “Humanism” has become a synonym for atheism, or maybe a euphemism or polite way in which atheists speak of themselves to disarm the innocent. Granted that Jacques Maritain speaks of “true humanism,” and that Gilson could be called a true humanist in that sense, I prefer to think of Gilson as an historian of medieval philosophy whose research led him to an appreciation of St. Thomas and to the eventual espousal of the metaphysics of the Angelic Doctor. That, however, did not prevent Gilson from exploring other avenues of thought. His students have said of him that he was willing to do research on any topic at the drop of a hat. Thus we have *Choir of Muses, Heloise and Abelard, From Aristotle to Darwin and Back, and Painting and Reality*. When I was a student, I was privileged to hear the five lectures that Gilson delivered at the National Gallery of Art, lectures which became *Painting and Reality*. The earthy Gilson was something of a treat after the ethereal Maritain, who had given the Mellon Lectures, alas to dwindling audiences only a few years before.

* Dr. Jude P. Dougherty – The Catholic University of America, USA; e-mail: dougherj@cua.edu

Indeed, both of these intellectual giants were Christian humanists, but even to say that may be redundant; Christian gentlemen engaged in the pursuit of wisdom may be all you need to know.

Given contemporary interest in Islam, compelled by the astounding violence perpetrated in its name, I propose to consider what two historians of philosophy, both Frenchmen, writing a generation apart, have to say about medieval Arabic philosophy and the relevance of its study to our own day. I am writing of Gilson, of course, and of a relative newcomer, Rémi Brague, who holds the title, Professor of Arabic Medieval philosophy at the University of Paris. He is the author of *The Legend of the Middle Ages*, published early 2009 by the University of Chicago Press.

A section of Gilson's *History of Philosophy in the Middle Ages*¹ is devoted to what he calls "Arabian Philosophy." Gilson opens his account by recalling that when the Emperor Justinian in 529 ordered the closing of the philosophical schools of Athens, it had unintended effects in what was soon to become the Islamic world. Had Justinian's action been taken earlier, Gilson tells us, the decision would have deprived the Church of the works of St. Basil, of Gregory Nazianzenus, and of St. Gregory of Nyssa, not to mention of less important theologians. Fortunately, by the time of Justinian's action, Greek thought had already gained ground in Asia. By closing the school of Athens Justinian in effect initiated the circling movement, which was to bring Plato and Aristotle to Western Europe via Syria, Persia, Egypt, Morocco, and Spain.² Gilson subsequently pays particular attention—indeed, one may say with great respect, if not homage—to the philosophical work of Alkindi, Alfarabi, Avicenna, and Averroes.

Now is the time for us to remember—he writes—that although these men were philosophers and not theologians, they had a religion, namely Islam, which was not without influence on their philosophical speculation. What is more important, their religion had something in common with Christianity. Like the God of the Old Testament, the God of the Koran is one, eternal, all

¹ Étienne Gilson, *History of Philosophy in the Middle Ages* (New York: Random House, 1955).

² *Id.*, p. 181.

powerful, and creator of all things. Even before the West had full access to the texts of Aristotle, the Arabian philosophers had come up against the problem of reconciling the Greek conception of a necessarily existing universe, ruled by a strictly intelligible necessity, with the Biblical notion of a freely created world ruled by a free and all-powerful divine will.³

Then too, like Christian faith, Islamic faith had the need of an intellectual interpretation, be it only in order to correct the literal interpretation of the Koran upheld by the fundamentalists of those times.⁴ As time went by, Islamic theology progressively separated itself from Greek philosophy, up to the point of repudiating it. Ironically it was the great Christian theologians who were to become pupils of the Arabic philosophers, not the Mohammedan theologians.

This article does not permit more than a cursory glance at Gilson's treatment of the Arabians, but a few notes may be in order. Gilson begins with Alkindi (d. 873), lauding him as the first great Arabian philosopher, an encyclopaedist whose writings cover almost the whole field of Greek learning, i.e., arithmetic, geometry, astronomy, music, optics, medicine, logic, psychology, meteorology, and politics. Alfarabi (870-950), who flourished a generation later in Baghdad, is presented as the second great name in Arabic philosophy. Although Alfarabi was considered primarily a logician, his theological works are compared with those of the major thirteenth-century Christian theologians. Gilson credits him with understanding the ontological implication of Aristotle's logical distinction between the notion of "what a thing is" and the "fact that it is," thus introducing into philosophy the epoch-making distinction between essence and existence. Gilson admires Alfarabi's ability to adapt to what he calls "the overwhelming richness of Greek philosophical speculation to the nostalgic feeling of God characteristic of the Orientals."⁵

Turning to Avicenna (980-1037), who comes on the scene approximately a century and a half later, Gilson will say,

³ Id., p. 184.

⁴ Id., p. 183.

⁵ Id., p. 185.

By his religious inspiration and his mystical tendencies Avicenna was destined to... (become) for the Christian theologians of the Middle Ages both a great help and a perilous temptation. His whole system was a striking example of the possibility of a natural and philosophical explanation of the world, crowned by a no less natural and philosophical doctrine of salvation.⁶

Indebted to Alfarabi for the essence/existence distinction, Avicenna treats existence as an accident not as the principle of being, as, for example, Aquinas did in his doctrine of being. Avicenna, in turn, will be criticized by Averroes for permitting an undue influence of the religious notion of “creation” upon the philosophical notion of “being.” Gilson offers this discussion as a striking example of the mutual implications of logic and metaphysics. Given Avicenna’s unquenchable intellectual curiosity, he left a complete philosophy that included major treatises in physics, psychology, and metaphysics. Avicenna’s interpretation of the composition of material substances in the *Physics* became the focus of lively discussions among the Scholastics. Aristotle had said that the component forms of a compound substance remain in it in potency. Avicenna interprets Aristotle’s position as meaning that the substantial forms remain unchanged in the compound. The issue thus framed can still generate lively discussion in college classrooms.

Much of Avicenna will be reinterpreted by the Christian theologians of the thirteenth century. Although Avicenna was careful to leave revealed theology an open door, he did not succeed in placating Islamic theologians. The steady theological opposition met by Moslem philosophers of that period did not stop the development of philosophy. Gilson believes that opposition is one of the reasons why philosophy migrated from the East to Spain, where its foremost representative became Averroes (1126-1198)⁷, a Spanish Arab known during the Middle Ages as the “Commentator” in recognition of his extended commentaries on Aristotle. Born in 1126 at Cordova, Averroes studied theology, jurisprudence, mathematics, and philosophy. The author not

⁶ Id., p. 188.

⁷ Id., p. 216.

only of the influential commentaries on Aristotle, he wrote works on medicine, astronomy, and philosophy. One of his major efforts was his attempt to determine the mutual relations between philosophy and religion. Averroes's solution to the problem, in my judgment, is virtually a treatise in the philosophy of education. The Koran, he held, is addressed to mankind as a whole, but men differ in their level of intelligence and ability to understand. All have the right and duty to study and interpret the Koran to the extent to which they are capable. As Gilson summarizes the position,

The one who can understand and interpret the philosophical meaning of the sacred text should interpret it philosophically, for its most lofty meaning is the true meaning of revelation, and each time there appears any conflict between the religious text and demonstrative conclusions, it is by interpreting the religious text philosophically that harmony should be reestablished.⁸

A discussion of the influence of Averroes on medieval philosophy and Renaissance humanism is beyond the scope of the present enquiry. Suffice it to say that he spawned an entire school of thought known as Latin Averroism. Although St. Thomas often takes note of Averroes's opinions, he was not enamored with his status as a commentator and accused him of being "less a peripatetic than a corruptor (depravator) of peripatetic philosophy."

Gilson's primary interest in the Arabian philosophy was its influence on medieval theology. A half-century later Rémi Brague, confronted with a resurgent and militant Islam, focuses on the medieval origins of the contemporary Islamic challenge to Western civilization.

I turn now to Rémi Brague's *The Legend of the Middle Ages: Philosophical Explorations of Medieval Christianity, Judaism, and Islam*.⁹ The premise that animates his enquiry is that the Middle Ages is a period of history that has something to tell us about ourselves. In an autobiographical note, Brague tells the reader how his classical studies led him out of his early work on Plato and Aristotle to a serious study of the Middle Ages and a professorship in Arabic medieval philoso-

⁸ Id., p. 218.

⁹ Trans. Lydia G. Cochrane (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009).

phy. Any French man or woman who studies medieval philosophy, Brague says, is perforce an autodidact, given the absence of medieval studies in the French curriculum even at the university level. It is not without reason that Étienne Gilson founded his influential Pontifical Institute of Medieval Studies not in France but in Toronto.

Brague opens his enquiry with a set of distinctions rarely encountered in contemporary literature, i.e., between theology in Christianity and Kalam in Islam, between philosophy in Christianity and falsafa in Islam, elaborating on the terms and the difference in understanding they make.

Addressing the genesis of European culture, Brague acknowledges,

Europe borrowed its nourishment, first from the Greco-Roman world that preceded it, then from the world of Arabic culture that developed in parallel with it, and finally from the Byzantine world. It is from the Arabic world, in particular, that Europe gained the texts of Aristotle, Galen, and many others that, once translated from the Arabic into Latin, fed the twelfth-century renaissance.¹⁰

Later the Byzantine world provided the original version of those same texts, which permitted close study and alimeted the flowering of Scholasticism. Where would Thomas Aquinas have been, he asks, if he had not found a worthy adversary in Averroes? What would Duns Scotus have contributed if he had not taken Avicenna as a point of departure?

As Gilson points out, Islamic philosophy is usually seen as beginning with Alkindi, around the ninth century, and ending with Averroes, around the twelfth century. Brague similarly observes that no one contests the fact that Muslims continue to think after Averroes, but what remains to be defined is to what extent that thought can be called “philosophy.” There are in history highly respectable works that one would never call philosophical, but which one would nevertheless describe as “wisdom literature” or “thoughts.” Martin Heidegger, Brague tells us, would place “thought” on a higher plane than philosophy. Brague is

¹⁰ Id., p. 37.

particularly sensitive to the broader cultural context in which philosophy is developed. He finds that the opinions generally admitted within a given community provide the basis on which philosophy is built. Those opinions are historically conditioned and they come in the final analysis, he maintains, from the legislator of the community. All medieval works were affected by this phenomenon. Within Christianity, revelation is the all important communal bond. "Muslim and Jewish revelations, which are presented as laws, do not pose the same problems as Christian revelation."¹¹ Reconciling religion and philosophy is an epistemological problem in Christianity, and may even be a psychological one, but in Islam and Judaism reconciling religion and revelation is primarily a political problem. Unlike Islam and Judaism, Christianity includes the Magisterium of the Church whose teaching is granted authority in the intellectual domain.

The institutionalization of philosophy, Brague points out, took place under the tutelage of the Church and remains exclusively European. There was indeed something like higher education in all three Mediterranean worlds, but the teaching of philosophy at the university level existed neither in the Muslim world nor in Jewish communities. Jewish philosophy and Muslim philosophy were private enterprises. It is usual to compare the great philosophers of each tradition, for example, Averroes, Maimonides, and Thomas Aquinas, but the difference is that St. Thomas was one of many engaged in the same corporate activity, standing out, it is true, among countless obscure figures. Within Islam there is no corpus of canonical texts that lend themselves to *disputatio*. To illustrate the difference, Brague remarks,

You can be a perfectly competent rabbi or imam without ever having studied philosophy. In contrast, a philosophical background is a necessary part of the basic equipment of the Christian theologian.¹²

Leo Strauss, acknowledging the status of philosophy in Christianity on the one hand and Islam and Judaism on the other, regards the institutionalization of philosophy as a double-edged sword. The offi-

¹¹ Id., p. 49.

¹² Id., p. 50.

cial acknowledgment of philosophy in the Christian world made philosophy subject to ecclesiastical supervision, whereas the precarious position of philosophy in the Islamic-Jewish world guaranteed its private character and therewith its inner freedom from supervision. Brague contests Strauss on this point as would any Catholic scholar who has pursued a philosophical vocation.

Brague offers a chapter on the importance of the study of nature. From the point of view of Ibn Khaldun (1332-1406), “The problems of physics are of no interest to us in our religious affairs or in our livelihoods. Therefore we must leave them alone.”¹³ Physics, he held, must not bother us because it cannot be applied to the two domains that are truly important to us: this life and the life to come. Averroes, by contrast, will say that the study of nature is obligatory because knowledge of nature leads to knowledge of its Author. The real goal is to know God, the Creator, through His creation. Thomas in the *Summa Contra Gentiles* devotes two chapters to the pertinence of the study of nature for theology and suggests that scientific knowledge of nature has the added effect of freeing one from the superstitions of astrology. Brague adds, “Thomas’s intention (among others) is not far from that of Epicurus, who sought to calm human anguish, one of the most dangerous types, which is anguish before celestial phenomena.”¹⁴

A succeeding chapter addresses the difference between Christianity and Islam from the Muslim point of view. Ibn Khaldun is again taken as an authoritative source. In Ibn Khaldun’s view, as presented by Brague, within the Muslim community the holy war is a religious duty because of the universalism of the Muslim mission and the obligation to convert all non-Muslims to Islam either by persuasion or by force. In consequence the caliphate and royal authority are rightly united in Islam so that the person in charge can devote his available strength to both objectives at the same time.

The other religious groups—Ibn Khaldun finds—do not have a universal mission and the holy war is not a religious duty to them, save only for pur-

¹³ Id., p. 75.

¹⁴ Id., p. 86.

poses of defense. It has thus come about that the person in charge of religious affairs in other religious groups is not concerned with power politics. Royal authority comes to those who have it by accident, and in some way that has nothing to do with religion and not because they are under obligation to gain power over other nations.¹⁵

Holy war exists only within Islam, and furthermore, Ibn Khaldun insists, it is imposed by Sharia.

Its theological warrant aside, Brague asks, how is jihad viewed from the vantage point of Islam's greatest philosophers? He puts the question to three Aristotelians: Alfarabi, Avicenna, and Averroes, all of whom profess belief in Islam. All three permit the waging of holy war against those who refuse Islam, Alfarabi and Averroes against the Christians, Avicenna against the pagans he encounters in Persia. Alfarabi, who lived and wrote in the lands where the enemy was the Byzantine empire, draws up a list of seven justifications for war, including (1) the right to conduct war in order to acquire something that the state desires to have but is in the possession of others, (2) the right of combat against people for whom it is better for them that they serve but who refuse the yoke of slavery, and (3) the right to wage holy war to force people to accept what is better for them if they do not recognize it spontaneously. Averroes, writing in the farthest Western part of the Islamic empire, approves without reservation the slaughter of dissidents, calling for the total elimination of a people whose continued existence might harm the state. Avicenna condones conquest and readily grants the leader of his ideal society the right to annihilate those who being called to truth reject it. In general the philosophers express no remorse about widespread bloodletting, and Brague offers some additional examples. Alfarabi has nothing to say about the murder of "bestial" men. Avicenna suggests that the religious skeptic should be tortured until he admits the difference between the true and the not true and is penitent. And Averroes advocated the elimination of the mentally handicapped.

¹⁵ Id., p. 124.

The last chapter of *The Legend of the Middle Ages* is entitled, “Was Averroes a *Good Guy*?” The answer seems to be yes, in spite of the fact that he condoned the extermination of the handicapped, favored the execution of heretics, and sanctioned what today is called ethnic cleansing. But Brague leaves it to his reader to decide.

Finally Brague has some interesting things to say about the possibility of dialogue between Christians and Muslims. In the Middle Ages true dialogue between Islam and Christianity was extremely rare. Raymond Lull made an attempt to arrange something of the sort at Bougie and was stoned to death for his pains. However, the desire for dialogue is noble. One should hope that there can be dialogue between religions in the future. But, unfortunately, there is no historical precedent for a projected dialogue between Islam and Christianity. What little dialogue we can speak of has been more of a literary genre than a reality. And even as a literary genre, attempts to treat the other with equity, and even perhaps to understand him, sadly, remain the exception.¹⁶

* * *

GILSON AND RÉMI BRAGUE ON MEDIEVAL ARABIC PHILOSOPHY

SUMMARY

Given contemporary interest in Islam, compelled by the astounding violence perpetrated in its name, the author considers what two historians of philosophy, Étienne Gilson and Rémi Brague, writing a generation apart, have to say about medieval Arabic philosophy and the relevance of its study to our own day.

KEYWORDS: Étienne Gilson, Rémi Brague, medieval Arabic philosophy, Christianity, Islam.

¹⁶ See Jacques Maritain, *De l'église du Christ. La personne de l'Église et son personnel* (Paris: Desclée de Brouwer, 1970) [*On the Church of Christ: The Person of the Church and Her Personnel*, trans. Joseph W. Evans (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1973)].