

SAINTS AND SKEPTICS: THE MIGRATION OF GREEK PHILOSOPHY FROM EAST TO WEST IN THE MIDDLE AGES

CRISPIN WELLBURN

This paper examines the westward movement of Greek natural philosophy in the Middle Ages, assessing the documentation of many Greek philosophers in Islamic schools and their proliferation throughout the Islamic world. The paper will examine the transfer of Greek philosophy from Islam to Christendom via major thinkers from both cultures, such as Ibn Rushd (Averroes) and Thomas Aquinas. The paper heavily engages with the reception of Greek philosophy from Islamic and Christian Religious leaders. Particularly, the focus will be upon the problems that natural philosophy presented for Islam's and Christianity's respective medieval religious worldviews and whether those ideological problems were resolved or remained.

During the Middle Ages, there was little knowledge of Greek philosophy in the Latin West, whereas in the Muslim world the works of many influential Greek thinkers were well documented. Much of the philosophical heritage that Western thinkers attribute to the Greeks was disseminated to western scholars by Arabic translations and commentaries of Greek works. In the Muslim world, there was an unparalleled collection of translated Greek works. However, despite its availability, teaching Greek philosophy was viewed as nearly heretical by religious leaders. In the West, while few works of Greek philosophy were readily accessible, they were standard curriculum in many universities. Philosophy became essential for the understanding of theology and was assimilated into Christian thought. The differences in reception to Greek philosophy between the two cultures can largely be attributed to their structures of education and limitations of religious authority. Despite these differences notable scholars in both regions learned from and wrote about Greek philosophy and had a measurable impact on the development of thought in both regions.

In the Muslim world, copies of Arabic translations of Greek philosophy and the natural sciences were available to scholars. Translation of these works in the Middle East began with Nestorian Christians translating the original Greek into local languages.¹ Under the Abbasid Caliphs, the House of Wisdom in Baghdad became a center of translation of Greek philosophical texts, spreading them throughout the Islamic world.² Educational institutions such as libraries held vast amounts of information, including Greek philosophy.³ Thanks to the translated works that were studied by Islamic scholars, sciences such as astronomy, mathematics and medicine were more advanced than in the Latin West.⁴ Within the educational realm of the Islamic world Greek writings on natural philosophy were abundant, but were not widely taught.⁵

To understand the relatively non-existent study of Greek philosophy in the Muslim world, particularly in its educational centers, it is vital to comprehend the structure of their houses of learning which differed greatly in structure and formation than those of the Latin West. The main schools of secular education in the Islamic world, known as *madrassa*, were exclusive to all foreign sciences (most schools that officially taught foreign sciences were non-existent by the twelfth century).⁶ The most respected fields of study in the Islamic world were law and theology, the field of philosophy by contrast was outright ridiculed and its teachers persecuted.⁷

A *madrassa* was formed under the law of the *Waqf*. The law pertained to the advancement of education through the founding of new *madrassas*, which was synonymous with advancement of religion in Islam.⁸ The law of the *Waqf* allowed wealthy Muslim benefactors to provide the funds for both the physical establishment and administration of new *madrassas*.⁹ The founder was expected to donate not just land but also the materials and lodgings needed for a *madrassa*.¹⁰ The Law of the *Waqf* gave the founder a huge amount of choice in the administration, preferred study and distribution of funds.¹¹ If Islamic law allowed benefactors the liberty of individual liberties for benefactors, why was Greek philosophy rarely

¹William E Carroll, "Creation and Science in the Middle Ages," *New Blackfriars* 88, no. 1018 (November 2007): 680.

²Carroll, 680.

³George Makdisi, *The Rise of College: Institutions of learning in Islam and the West* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1981), 25.

⁴Edward Grant, "The Fate of Ancient Greek Natural Philosophy in the Middle Ages: Islam and Western Christianity," *The Review of Metaphysics* 61, no. 3 (2008): 507.

⁵Grant, 509.

⁶Makdisi, 10.

⁷Grant, 509.

⁸Makdisi, 38.

⁹Makdisi, 35.

¹⁰Makdisi, 38.

¹¹Makdisi, 36.

taught in madrasas? Founders of madrasas were granted intellectual autonomy.¹² This essentially banned the teaching of Greek philosophy in institutions of secular learning, as benefactors were not willing to endanger personal reputation for the sake of education. As opposed to the Latin West, the church and state in Islam were not separated; a secular ruler had to always bear in mind the interests of religious leaders.

Muslim religious leaders did not hold favourable views of Greek philosophy, choosing either to ignore it or to condemn its teaching.¹³ This was primarily because Greek philosophy, especially natural philosophy, was distrusted by religious leaders who controlled the attitudes that the secular Islamic world and its schools held of foreign sciences. Perhaps the most problematic view held by Greek philosophy was that the universe is eternal, which is incompatible with Islamic teaching. William E. Carroll writes in his article, *Creation and Science in the Middle Ages*, that a concern for Muslim theologians was that God's "Divine sovereignty ... of the created order must be protected from the encroachments of Greek logic."¹⁴ The control which the religious class held over secular authority meant that Islamic schools had no feasible way to teach Greek philosophy, because it did not fundamentally accord with the tenets of Islam.

Despite these roadblocks, well-educated teachers of Greek philosophy still existed in the Muslim world, though they were both persecuted by religious leaders and ridiculed within university circles.¹⁵ The students who wished to gain an education in natural philosophy were circumstantially required to do so outside of madrasas. A private education offered the opportunity to learn the teachings of Greek philosophers that did not attract the attention of religious leaders.¹⁶ The existence of many developments in natural philosophy in the Muslim world is impressive given the high degree of persecution and resultant lack of teachers.¹⁷ This advancement is apparent in the effect that Islamic Philosophers' writings had on Western Christendom and its thinkers.

The West had a small selection of translated works by Greek philosophers and eagerly absorbed any amount it could gain access to.¹⁸ There were no significant developments in the European understanding of Greek philosophy until the commentaries of Ibn Rushd (Averroes) on Aristotle were circulated. Averroes, a Muslim philosopher from Cordoba, was harassed by the religious establishment for his views but his commentaries on Aristotle were paramount for an understanding

¹²Makdisi, 36.

¹³Grant, 508.

¹⁴Carroll, 680.

¹⁵Grant, 509.

¹⁶Grant, 514.

¹⁷Grant, 517.

¹⁸Grant, 520.

of Greek philosophy in the West.¹⁹ Averroes's impact on the Christian world is so significant that Raphael places him in his painting *The School of Athens* alongside the very philosophers Averroes' commented on.²⁰ For the Latin world, Averroes came to be seen not just as a Muslim commentator on Aristotle but as a philosopher in his own right.²¹ However, the theological problems that troubled Islamic religious leaders were still an issue for the Catholic Church. Averroes writes that "reconciliation is the real purpose of religion by those verses and hadith which are apparently contradictory. When their universal nature be limited in this manner, those contradictions should vanish by themselves, and all the doubts which were raised before, about the contradictory nature of reason, would disappear."²² The contradictions Averroes speaks of are differences between religion and philosophy. Averroes insists that embracing reason would limit the contradictions between theology and philosophy, which also means embracing Aristotelian ideas such as the eternity of the world. The Church, like the religious institutions of the Islamic world believed in a created world and not an eternal one.²³

The Catholic Church, seeing a rising number of Averrosists at the university of Paris, requested that scholars reject his teachings.²⁴ Thomas Aquinas is the most well-known of these intellectual combatants but other scholars such as Giles of Rome also wrote against the Averrosists.²⁵ However, the church portrayed Aquinas as the singular victor over Averroes.²⁶ Aquinas argued not only on the basis of theology but of reason, using Aristotelian logic as the foundation of his arguments. Aquinas writes that "something exists which is truest, greatest, noblest, and consequently most fully in being; for, as Aristotle says, the truest things are most fully in being."²⁷ Appealing to the authority of Aristotle allows Aquinas to demonstrate that the Greek philosopher's ideas are not fundamentally wrong, only Averroes's interpretation of Greek philosophy is flawed. Despite Aquinas's questionable popularity, Pope John XXII eventually sought to canonize the scholar for his work.²⁸ The granting of a sainthood to Aquinas in honor of his victory over Averroes meant that the Church officially recognized the use of Greek philosophy in tandem with theology.

¹⁹Anthony Kenny, *Medieval Philosophy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 50.

²⁰Koert Debeuf, "Damnatio Memoriae: On Deleting the East from Western History," *New England Journal of Public Policy* 32, no. 2 (2020): 4.

²¹Kenny, 50.

²²Ibn Rushd, "Ibn Rushd on Fate and Predestination," in *Intellectual and Cultural Life, 1200-1300*, compiled by Niall Christie (Vancouver: Langara College, Spring 2021), 6.

²³Debeuf, 2.

²⁴Debeuf, 4.

²⁵Debeuf, 4.

²⁶Debeuf, 5.

²⁷Thomas Aquinas, "Thomas Aquinas: Summa Theologiae," in *Intellectual and Cultural Life, 1200-1300*, compiled by Niall Christie (Vancouver: Langara College, Spring 2021), 3.

²⁸Kenny, 74.

The sentiments of the Church also shifted regarding the place of Greek philosophy in education but there were hindrances that limited the power of the Church in the educational realm. By the time that translations of Greek philosophy arrived in the West, universities had already distinguished themselves institutionally from Cathedral schools.²⁹ The Church attempted to ban the works of Aristotle but failed to prevent their spread;³⁰ eventually secular universities even required an understanding of Greek natural philosophy in order to attain a mastery of theology.³¹ Ultimately it would prove impossible to practice theology in the West without using logic, even if many disagreed with Aristotle's worldview.³² Aquinas himself made the distinction between faith and reason, even if he saw them as complementary rather than contradictory.³³ Most importantly there was no legal expectation that secular education adhere to the teaching of the Church; the institutional separation of Church and university meant that secular subjects could be taught without religious interference. The Church soon found that it was unable to prevent the spread and influence of Greek philosophy and held no real power over the curriculum of universities.³⁴

The spread of Greek philosophy from East to West during the Middle Ages carried with it the intellectual connotations of Islamic philosophers. Western scholars such as Aquinas refuted the previous attachments of Greek philosophy to Islam, using the logical methods inherited from the same Islamic commentators. In its reliance on philosophy, the Church permitted philosophy to become embedded into Western theology. The differing receptions of Greek philosophy in the Islamic and Christian worlds stem from not difference in religion but in institutional structures. Without the separation of church and state, practicing secular philosophy in the Islamic world proved impossible, no matter how many translations of Greek philosophy were in circulation. In the West, the separation of the Church from academic learning meant that the secular hunger for new knowledge went unchecked. This provided the necessary framework for the influence of Greek philosophy upon Catholic scholarship to flourish despite a limited number of translations and the eventual assimilation of philosophy into Christian theology.

²⁹Grant, 520.

³⁰Grant, 515.

³¹Grant, 521.

³²Grant, 522.

³³Kenny, 167.

³⁴Grant, 522-523.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- AQUINAS, THOMAS. "Thomas Aquinas: Summa Theologiae." In *Intellectual and Cultural Life, 1200-1300*, compiled by Niall Christie, 1-13. Vancouver: Langara College, Spring 2021.
- CARROLL, WILLIAM E. "Creation and Science in the Middle Ages." *New Blackfriars* 88, no. 1018 (2007) 678-689.
- DEBEUF, KOERT. "Damnatio Memoriae: On Deleting the East from Western History." *New England Journal of Public Policy* 32, no. 2 (2020): 1-12.
- GRANT, EDWARD. "The Fate of Ancient Greek Natural Philosophy in the Middle Ages: Islam and Western Christianity." *The Review of Metaphysics* 61, no. 3 (2008): 503-526.
- IBN RUSHD. "Ibn Rushd on Fate and Predestination." In *Intellectual and Cultural Life, 1200-1300*, compiled by Niall Christie, 1-13. Vancouver: Langara College, Spring 2021.
- KENNY, ANTHONY. *Medieval Philosophy*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007.
- MAKDISI, GEORGE. *The Rise of Colleges: Institutions of Learning in Islam and the West*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1981.
-
-