H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Majid Fakhry. *Averroes (Ibn Rushd): His Life, Works and Influence.* Oxford: Oneworld Publications, 2001. xvi + 187 pp. $23.95 (paper), ISBN 978-1-85168-269-0.

Reviewed by Eric Ormsby (Institute of Islamic Studies, McGill University)
Published on H-Mideast-Medieval (December, 2003)

Averroes Unveiled

Averroes Unveiled

Despite the increasing importance and relevance of the thought of Abu al-Walid Ibn Rushd (1126-1198), or "Averroes" to contemporary Islamic thinkers, there has not been any reliable general introduction to his work and thought in English for non-specialist readers. The historian of Islamic philosophy Majid Fakhry has now attempted to remedy this defect with a concise, meticulous, but quite readable overview of the Andalusian master's life and writings. This is the first volume in a new series on major philosophers, theologians, and mystics in the Islamic tradition, which Oneworld Publications is inaugurating, and it bodes well for the success of the series that it begins so auspiciously.

In his *Guide for the Perplexed*, Ibn Rushd's younger contemporary Maimonides spoke of an "Andalusian philosophy," a philosophy, that is, that shared certain common assumptions derived largely from Aristotle. Maimonides himself was strongly influenced by this conception, in general, and by Ibn Rushd, in particular. The assumptions shared by Maimonides, a Jew, and Ibn Rushd, a Muslim, not only drew on a common language, Arabic, but went beyond doctrinal affiliations to envision a faith articulated and buttressed by a scrupulous and yet reverent rationalism. Maimonides is no doubt unusual, and perhaps unique, in having been influenced in almost equal measure by Ibn Rushd as well as by his arch-adversary, Abu Hamid al-Ghazali. Fakhry does not mention this curious fact but he does draw attention to the deep affinities that linked Ibn Rushd with his Jewish compatriot; as he notes, "readers of Maimonides tended to find Averroes particularly intriguing and to look upon the former as the disciple of the latter" (p. 132). I mention this because of the strange and anomalous position which Ibn Rushd has come to occupy in the history of Islamic philosophy; on the one hand, as the summation and summit of Aristotelianism in Arabic and on the other, as a dead-end figure who left neither followers nor lasting influence in the East. Moreover, his importance has too often been gauged by his effect not only on Maimonides but on the Latin Scholastics, and especially St. Thomas Aquinas, to whom his commentaries mediated the first close reading of Aristotelian texts. Dante, who places him with the virtuous pagans in the antechamber to hell, describes him not as a philosopher but as "he who made the great commentary" (*che il gran commento feo*), by which he meant, of course, commentary on Aristotle.

It is good therefore to have an introduction which seeks to approach Ibn Rushd on his own terms, as a philosopher worthy of study and admiration in his own right. This Fakhry does very well, even if the constraints of his format prevent him from entering deeply into any one issue. Instead, Fakhry arranges his study in eleven chapters which deal with the life and works, Ibn Rushd's reactions to and critiques of Muslim Neoplatonists and Ash'arite theologians, respectively, and which then delve into the philosopher's own thought, beginning with logic and proceeding through natural science to the realms of metaphysics and ethics; in addition, Fakhry devotes a chapter to Ibn Rushd's legal and medical works and concludes with two chapters that explore the legacy of "Averroes" in the west, with an entire chapter devoted to his impact on St. Thomas Aquinas. There is a rather brief bibliography of original Arabic works and secondary scholarly literature.

Fakhry writes very clearly, avoiding excessive technical terminology and presenting the major arguments succinctly but carefully. Sometimes he enlivens his account with dry strokes of wit, as when he remarks, on the subject of God's knowledge of particulars (and quoting a question from Aristotle's *Metaphysics*), "'Are there not some things about which it is incredible that [God] should think?' adding with a melancholy sense of despair, in his effort to spare God the indignity of idle curiosity, so to speak, 'For there are even some things which

it is better not to see than to see"' (p. 22).

Fakhry knows the texts well in the original Arabic and in their various Latin and Hebrew permutations, and it cannot have been easy to reduce such complex and subtle thought for newcomers to scholastic argumentation. Too often, it must be said, his recapitulations are overly bland and fail to capture the dynamism of the arguments. Moreover, Fakhry should have drawn attention to the rather remarkable courage and even audacity which Ibn Rushd often demonstrated. His arguments, for example, in the noble work known as *The Decisive Treatise* (*al-Fasl al-maqal*) to the effect that the study of philosophy is not merely allowable but "obligatory" (*wajib*) remain astonishing, all the more so in that he, a chief *qadi*, employs classical Islamic legal terminology to defend the indefensible. His further arguments for the eternity of the world, using proof-texts from the Qur'an itself, are not only ingenious but boldly innovative; that he escaped the spite and outrage of the Maliki jurists with nothing more drastic than imprisonment tells us something about the complicated and often baffling intellectual world of the Almohads, about which Fakhry might have said more as well.

As useful and welcome as this introduction is–and I certainly intend to use it in teaching Ibn Rushd–it is unfortunately marred by evidences of haste and carelessness in the text, ranging from inconsistencies in transliteration of Arabic names and words to a rather high proportion of typos and outright errors. The system of transliteration appears haphazard; for example, subscript dots for certain Arabic letters are correctly affixed on some pages and mysteriously omitted on others. It would have better to omit diacritical marks entirely than to supply them so randomly. Arabic words and names are often given incorrectly: *taharh* instead of *taharah* (p. 120), *jiziyah* instead of *jizyah* (p. 121), Al-Marakushi instead of Al-Marrakushi (p. 174), among other possible examples. There are outright errors of fact; thus the Latin translator Michael the Scot, who translated Ibn Rushd between 1220 and 1230, is given a deathdate of 136 (clearly a typo; p. 133) and the Jewish savant Shem Tob Ben Joseph Falaquera is mangled as Falquera (p. 132; the index has it right but garbles "Ben" to "Bem"). It seems odd as well to date the Mihnah to 827, perhaps five years too early (p. 13); and surely it is gratuitously harsh to describe Ahmad ibn Hanbal as a "tradition-monger" (p. 13). In the bibliography (p. 171), Miguel Asin Palacios's 1914 book *Abenmassara y su escuela* is given as *Ibn Massura y su escuela*. The contemporary German scholar G. Endress is turned into "G. Endrell" (p. 172). With respect to the bibliography, certain important scholars are inexplicably omitted, such as Barry Kogan and Alain de Libera, both of whom have made fundamental contributions to the modern understanding of Ibn Rushd.

Such errors can of course be easily corrected in future editions and do not seriously detract from what is a cogent, clear, and highly useful study.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the list discussion logs at:
http://h-net.msu.edu/cgi-bin/logbrowse.pl.

Citation: Eric Ormsby. Review of Fakhry, Majid, *Averroes (Ibn Rushd): His Life, Works and Influence.* H-Mideast-Medieval, H-Net Reviews. December, 2003.
URL: http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=8578

Copyright © 2003 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at hbooks@mail.h-net.msu.edu.