

Medieval Muslim scholar Ibn Rushd (Averroes)

Influence of his Philosophical Ideas on the West

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For the 1000 years of the Christian era (500 CE-1500 CE), scientific progress in Europe remained dormant due to a dogmatic belief that the scientific theory not mentioned in the bible was a heresy. This period is called the dark ages of Europe. However, during this period Islam (Holy Quran) did not put any restriction on intellectual pursuit and the rationality to understand the world. By the 8th century, Muslims began to acquire all available scientific knowledge from Greeks, Romans, Indians and Persians. Greek and Roman knowledge was preserved from extinction by translation of the known scientific works into Arabic. Baghdad in the east and Cordoba in the west were the most advanced cities in the world and became the seats of knowledge and learning.

Ibn Rushd (Averroes, 1126-1198) is one of the few Muslim philosophers who has had a major impact on western thinking and is regarded as a central link between ancient Greece and the European Renaissance. His commentaries on Aristotle's work were translated from Arabic to Latin and were used as text books of philosophy in the west. Philosophy departments were established under the name of Averroes in the Universities of Paris, Prague, Padua and Oxford. His original work on rationality, reasoning and the relationship between philosophy and theology made a lasting impact on western thinking. He strongly believed that an in-depth study of philosophy enabled man to have a better understanding of religion. He adopted Aristotelian reasoning by analogy, and found it suitable for rational deduction, not only on issues of life but also in religious affairs, including the realization of God. His famous work of philosophy was a response to the serious criticism of philosophers by another great Muslim scholar, Imam Ghazali. Ibn Rushd refuted all arguments made by Al Ghazali against philosophers.

Ibn Rushd's philosophy influenced the transformation of thought in medieval Europe. A hundred years after his death, a group of western scholars known as Averroists declared themselves adherents of Averroes philosophy, which sparked controversy within the Catholic Church. Many of his followers, including the famous poet and philosopher, Dante, were condemned for Averroistic heresies. In spite of setbacks, Ibn Rushd's dogma of harmony between reason and religion prevailed and influenced European thinking. The rise of Renaissance rationalism and humanism is linked to his commitment to the primacy of reason in philosophical and theological discourse. Etienne Gilson writes: "Rationalism was born in Spain in the mind of an Arabic philosopher as a conscious reaction against the Muslim theologians."

In the Muslim world, his philosophy was rejected due to Imam al-Ghazali's work. Ibn Rushd's philosophical writing symbolized intellectual and religious freedom. Muslims are still experiencing this struggle.