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How the Heretics and Muslims Saved Western Civilization

Paul V.M. Flesher

We often talk about the foundation of Western Civilization as a combination of Christianity with Greek philosophy and science. The Old and New Testaments were joined by the philosophical, biological, mathematical, medical and other writings of Aristotle, Plato, Plotinus, and other Greek thinkers. But that combination did not go straight from Greece to Italy, France, England and the other European countries. Instead it occurred in a round about manner that went first through the entire Muslim world, from the furthest east to the further west, and would not have taken place at all if it had not been for a group of heretics which the Christian Church outlawed.

From the founding of Christianity onwards, Christianity went through cycles of persecution every few decades. Finally, after three centuries of persecution, a man rose to the top of the Roman Empire who favored the Christians rather than killed them. This was Emperor Constantine, who promoted the Christian Church and called the first in a series of all-church councils in 326 AD. At these councils, the bishops defined Christian orthodoxy and belief. In doing so, they declared that beliefs that did not follow the Orthodox line were invalid. Obviously, this applied to Greek religion and to Greek philosophers and scientists like Plato and Aristotle, but it also applied to many branches of Christianity itself. These were declared heresies.

One large group of outlawed heretics was the monophysite churches in Syria, who spoke not Greek but Aramaic. After being expelled from the Orthodox Church, these Christians translated the Greek Philosophers into Aramaic for their own use.

By the sixth century AD, the Mediterranean world was in an uproar. In the eastern Roman Empire, Christian persecution of the pagans, both religious and philosophical, was in full swing. In the western Empire, Italy, Spain and other regions were undergoing their fourth invasion by nomadic tribes from the hinterlands. Having suffered through the Goths, the Visigoths and the Vandals, the western

empire was now collapsing under the onslaught of the Lombards. Much of the old world was being obliterated.

In the seventh century, invaders from the new religion of Islam swept across the eastern Mediterranean shores, westward across North Africa and into Spain. In Syria, the Aramaic versions of Plato and Aristotle were translated into Arabic and entered into Islamic culture. By the ninth century, Islam in Baghdad and Persia had a thriving philosophical tradition based on Aristotle and Plato. These sciences were often set in opposition to Muslim theology.

At this time, western Islam did not welcome such "foreign" philosophy, but by the twelfth century, Aristotle's and Plato's writings were highly influential in important Muslim circles. In Spain, the Muslim philosopher Averroes not only wrote works demonstrating the compatibility of Islamic thought and law with the philosophical and scientific systems of these two Greek thinkers, but also composed commentaries on the Greek philosophical writings.

Because of the controversy of some of Averroes' interpretations, his works were taken into the Christian world, particularly France. There, his commentaries were translated into Latin and published alongside the Latin versions of Plato and Aristotle. These publications were used extensively by medieval scholars and so Averroes became an important influence on Christian thinkers such as Thomas Aquinas and other key intellectual figures.

In the Christian world of medieval Europe, then, Averroes' work had two important results. First, it stimulated and laid the intellectual foundations for the European Renaissance. Second, before the Renaissance got into full swing, many Christian followers of his work found themselves being burned at the stake, as heretics. But if it had not been for the Muslims and the heretics, Western Civilization as we know it never would have been born.