Averroes and Dante

Henry Stratakis-Allen
Averroes (an overview)

- Averroes (1126-1198) was embroiled in a debate over whether Aristotelianism had a place in Islamic thought
- The *ashari* doctrine of his rival, al-Ghazali (1058-1111), completely triumphed over all rival (Sunni) doctrines
- Al-Ghazali’s thought has dominated the Islamic world ever since, and he is revered as a ‘renewer of the faith’
- Aristotelians who became very famous in the west, such as Avicenna, Averroes, Maimonides, and ibn Khaldun were, as a result, not generally read in the Middle East until the twentieth and even twenty-first centuries.
- They are known in the Islamic world as the *falsafa*, or ‘philosophers’

- **Double Truth**: the belief that the study of religion and philosophy produces different results
  - an extremely controversial doctrine advocated by Averroes, although ‘truth does not contradict truth’
  - Al-Ghazali (or at least his followers) essentially rejected the idea that the philosophical truth even existed

- **Pre-Eternity of the World**: the belief that the world has always existed and is eternal
  - traditionally an Avicennist and then an Averroist doctrine
  - al-Ghazali argued that the earth was created at a specific point in time
  - some also believed that the Qur’an was created at a specific point in time, although not Averroes
  - this belief has become associated with the Shi’ites, while Sunnis (al-Ghazali, Avicenna, and Averroes) disavow it.
Averroes in the West
The Positive Reception:

- Siger of Brabant (c. 1240 – c. 1284)
  - criticized Papal infallibility
  - targeting by Thomas Aquinas
  - accepted Averroes’ doctrine in full, making him a radical
  - condemned by the church in 1270 and 1277

- Michael Scot (1175–1232) (Toledo School of Translators)
- Boethius of Denmark (13th c.)
  - denied the Resurrection, forced to flee Paris
Some Important Doctrine

• Unity of Intellect (Monopsychism – the doctrine that all people share one intellect)
  - Fiercely and consistently attacked by Thomas Aquinas and the church, it was a subject of long-term debate.
  - It was supported by some Sigerists and associated with Siger, although he advocated a restricted interpretation.
  - The church saw it as contradicting the immortality of individual souls and was banned by the Condemnations of 1270.
  - Dante’s belief in Unity of Intellect may have been the foundation of *De Monarchia*, which was later banned during the Counter-Reformation.

• Double Truth
  - Everyone considered two distinct areas of study: religion and philosophy (including natural science).
  - Some argued that there were two truths, a religious and a philosophical one, and that they may be contradictory.
  - Others argued (the accepted belief) that there was one truth that could be reached two ways (by theology and by philosophy).

• Eternity of the World and Man
  - Siger taught that the world and the human race are eternal and were not created at a specific point in time.
  - In the Islamic world, this doctrine took the form of Pre-Eternity (of the world) which Averroes supported.
  - This belief contradicted both the doctrine of Creationism (shared by Islam and Christianity) and the Last Judgement.

Thomas Aquinas had three primary targets: Unity of Intellect, Eternity of the World and Man, and the Scope of Divine Providence (more so a Christian issue due to the centrality of Christ’s miracles, although it was discussed in the Islamic world as well).
Averroes in the West
The Negative Reception (two currents):

• Thomas Aquinas (Fourth Sphere of Paradise)
  - he viciously attacked Averroes over a period of decades

• Condemnations of 1270
  - lead by Etienne Tempier, bishop of Paris
  - for the first time in over 50 years, the University of Paris banned some Averroist and even Aristotelian doctrines
  - specifically targeted Siger of Brabant and his colleagues
  - Aquinas was even an implicit target, as he had drifted further towards Aristotle
  - in 1268, Aquinas had to return to Paris because his reputation was under siege

• Condemnations of 1277
  - primarily targeted Aristotle (Thomist teachings briefly became very controversial)
  - in 1270 Tempier banned 15 teachings, in 1277 he banned 219
  - triggered a ‘furious, continent-wide debate’, also involved and condemned Siger
Siger of Brabant in the *Paradiso*

133  ‘This fire, from whom thy glance returns to me
134  Shines from a spirit grave in thought, who knew
135  Sorrow; for him death came too tardily;
136  ‘That’s the eternal light of Sigier, who,
137  Lecturing down in Straw Street, hammered home
138  Invidious truths, as logic taught him to.’

-Paradiso, Canto X (Thomas Aquinas speaking)

“Probably Dante knew of (Siger) only from the chronicler as a persecuted philosopher.”
-Encyclopaedia Brittanica, 1911

• Controversies of the 1270s were well known among Catholic intellectuals and Dante knew Averroes
• It seems unlikely that he was not aware of Siger’s beliefs, and he was almost certainly aware of the controversy between Thomas Aquinas and the Averroists, having read Aquinas
• Dante seats Siger directly beside his rival at Paris, Thomas Aquinas, to his left
• The ‘Straw Street’ is a reference to the *Rue du Fouarre*, where Aquinas found Siger lecturing after being sent to preach against him and Averroes in Paris
• One interpreter explains her view that the theme of the canto is reconciliation (of various thinkers)
Conclusions

• The philosophical debates of the day could be ‘continent-wide’, according to some scholars

• Dante probably knew Averroes’ philosophy very well and appreciated it

• It should not be assumed that he included any philosophers, Averroes, Avicenna, Thomas Aquinas, or Siger of Brabant, for arbitrary reasons

• Just as Michael Scot was placed in hell for his supposed practice of magic and not for his translations, Averroes was placed in Limbo because of his religion, probably not his philosophy


