Islamic and Jewish Adaptations of the Platonic Model
in Medieval Spanish Philosophy
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In June, I returned to Bowdoin after spending a semester in Granada, Spain, where I spent the semester exploring the intricacies of the Islamic Empire that spanned over seven centuries of the city’s history. As a History major, I soaked up the vibrant chronicles etched onto the walls of the Alhambra, the bends of the Arab quarter, and the caves of the Sacromonte. On a field trip to Córdoba, I found myself standing in the doorway of the Center for Sephardic Jews, housed in the building where Maimonides’ father lived nine hundred years ago, staring up at the street name on the corner: “Averroes.” To the untrained eye, this intersection might have passed as the kitschy commemoration of influential Andalusian figures. “Influential” might be an understatement here: Averroes, a Muslim judge, wrote commentaries on Aristotle that earned him the title of “The Commentator” in subsequent Aristotelian discourse and rationalized the incorporation of Classical philosophy into theology. Maimonides adopted Averroes’ approach to rationalize Jewish Law in his Guide of the Perplexed, which has become a cornerstone of Jewish theology and earned him the name of “The Second Moses.” In the Western world, Averroes’ work in particular gave rise to some of the earliest forms of secular philosophy. Standing there, I knew it was not a coincidence that Averroes’ street passed right by Maimonides’ family’s home. Still, I wanted to know more about how two philosophers with supposedly divergent religious views could both use temporal philosophy to shape their respective worldviews.

Although the bulk of Averroes’ and Maimonides’ work centers on Aristotle’s theories on the human soul, their political ideals hinge on Plato’s Republic. Through his exploration of the ideal society, Plato presents a genuine meritocracy in which individuals function according to their natural capacity and virtuous upbringing. I found Maimonides’ and Averroes’ uses of Platonic philosophy particularly interesting, as this utopia looks nothing like the society in which they lived. In 12th century Andalusia, ethnicity and religion branded individuals, essentially separating Jews and Muslims into distinct professional and social worlds ruled by their corresponding religious laws. Even more contradictory is Plato’s vision of the philosopher, in which the best-educated and most virtuous individual rules over the multitude and takes on a nearly godlike status. This image challenges religious philosophers, such as Averroes and Maimonides, to reconcile their belief in the Platonic model with their spiritual submission to God. In Maimonides’ Guide of the Perplexed and Averroes’ Commentary on Plato’s Republic, each crafts a role for the philosopher within religion. Rather than becoming a god himself, the philosopher acts as a spiritual guide for the less-capable public. I found these models particularly striking, as both philosophers stepped away from Plato’s utopian approach and addressed the philosopher as a part of their own society. Moreover, the theoretical patterns in their models highlight the culture of collaboration among religious groups in Andalusia and explain, at least partly, why the Center for Sephardic Jews sits at the corner of Averroes Lane.

Ultimately, this fellowship was a fantastic opportunity to keep exploring Spanish history, even if there were not any tapas involved. Before I settled on my final topic, I read texts from a number of Jewish and Muslim philosophers and was transported back to Granada with every book that I opened. What is more, Professor Denery agreed to entertain an unconventional idea of mine: in the fall, I will continue my research in two consecutive independent studies, one in history and one in theater, in which I transform my study of Averroes and Maimonides into a contemporary, full-length play. I have always wanted to bring cross-cultural dialogue to the stage, and this summer’s fellowship has provided me with an invaluable springboard to do so.

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