I. Introduction

The role of reason, and its embodiment in philosophical-scientific theorizing, is always a troubling one for religious traditions. The deep emotional needs that religion strives to satisfy seem ever linked to an attitudes of acceptance, belief, or trust, yet, in its theoretical employment, reason functions as a critic as much as it does a creator, and in the special fields of metaphysics and epistemology its critical arrows are sometimes aimed at long-standing cherished beliefs. Understandably, the mere approach to these beliefs through organized philosophical activity, however well-intended, is viewed with suspicion by ecclesiastical authorities and the devout.

The attitude towards philosophical inquiry on the part of the Islamic religious community might be thought to typify this reaction. As one of the great prophetic religions, the self-avowed image of Islam is of a tradition which already possesses the truth as set forth in the divine revelation of the Qur’an. What need is there for philosophizing on fundamental matters, e.g., the ultimate nature of reality, the foundations of morality, the modes whereby the divine is connected with the temporal? The structure of creation is already made clear, the "straight path" for living already manifest. How can philosophical activity be anything but a source of divisive controversy, for as it turns its gaze to the foundations upon which the Shari`a (Islamic Law) rests, or to the grounds for religious belief itself, it cannot avoid turning up alternative viewpoints, different perspectives on divine revelation, noting various weaknesses in received
interpretations? In short, isn't the practice of philosophy a threat to Islam's promise of providing a comprehensive way of living devoid of skepticism and uncertainty about the place of a human in God's creation and his or her role in the 'umma (Islamic community)?

This problem is not unique to Islam, nor is it a new one within Islam. We know that it has been debated by Islamic thinkers since the translations of the Greek philosophers began to appear in an organized Islamic world during the 8th Century A.D. At times, when the presumed defenders of tradition came to view Greek-inspired philosophical speculation as heresy, the debate became vociferous. But nothing was settled at that time, and there are at least three reasons why the problem continues to be pressing one for the Islam, indeed, for the future of Islamic Civilization. First, Islam offers a comprehensive way of life; it offers a guide for the conduct of all the fundamental aspects to human life, through which a truly human existence can be achieved. There is no separation of religious concern and guidance from any other human activity, no boundary where the influence of religion is allowed to cease and other concerns and directives take over. In particular, the Shari`a allows no challenges its authority in matters of politics, economics, morality and education, and the very flow of information is to remain under its watchful eye.

Second, not only is the Qur'an, the very foundation of the Shari`a, a holy book, it is the direct and immediate word of God. There can be no question of whether these words issued from God; they did, and there's an end to it. Therefore, any challenge to these words, any doubt about their truth, is absolutely unacceptable. Those who offer it, have stepped outside the bounds of Islam, have refused to carry on dialogue within the sacred tradition, and, for these reasons, are wholly discredited.
The third reason is more concretely related to current times. The Islamic Civilization is currently facing a severe challenge from a vigorous West. Relations between the two have never been smooth, in fact, to both the Western and Islamic mind, the direct contacts have often been hostile and bitter, while relations in times of peace uneasy. The challenge is most obviously felt in its political, economic, and military dimensions, with control of territory and resources at stake. But it takes other forms. At present, there is an increasing encroachment of Western attitudes, values, life-styles, and world-views within the Islamic community, causing great alarm among those who find their identity in Islam. Hence, many Muslims have adopted a defensive posture, with all the conservative intolerance that it tends to bring. This bodes ill for philosophical speculation, especially that which has been nurtured within the texts and traditions of the West. And yet, others, equally concerned about the fate of the Islamic world, doubt that this rigid reactionism is the correct approach, and urge a more flexible stance that permits adjustment in established ways of life and thought yet within the Islamic framework. Between these two groups, the battle over the place of reason and philosophical thought within the Islamic context is waged anew.

I said that the basic problem is not a new one for Islam. Let us step back into history and learn how one Islamic philosopher, Ibn Rushd (Averroes) dealt with it. Perhaps his solution is a relevant one for Muslims in today's increasingly difficult world.

II. The Argument of the "Decisive Treatise"

The Andalusian philosopher Ibn Rushd (1126-1198 A.D.) wrote at a time in which the status of philosophy was in dispute in the Islamic world. During the 10th and 11th Centuries
Islamic thought had reached a high degree of sophistication in the works of Al-Kindi, Al-Farabi, and Ibn Sina (Avicenna). These philosophers borrowed heavily from Greek thought, and the metaphysical framework within which they work was Neo-Platonic. In the work of Ibn Sina, perhaps, Neo-Platonic themes reached their highest stage of development.

This work was not always well received, and opposition soon emerged. This opposition echoed earlier disputes among the Mutikallimun (theologians) on the topics of divine nature, for it was the use of Greek logical categories by the Muʿtazila that result in a perceived threat to the doctrine of divine omnipotence and, consequently, led to reaction among more traditionally-minded thinkers. An extreme reaction set in among certain schools of Islamic jurisprudence, particularly the followers of Malik ibn Anas (d. 795) and Ahmad ibn Hanbal (d. 855). The strict Literalists among the latter, always concerned to have a univocal grounding of the Shari`a in textual authority, pointed to the dangers of rational inquiry into divine nature. Malik, for example, is said to have commented on the Qur'an's reference to God's "sitting on the throne" (Qur'an 7,54 and 20,5) in this way:

"The sitting is known, its modality is unknown. Belief in it is an obligation and raising questions regarding it is a heresy."

A more well-received reaction among philosophically-minded theologians, however, was that of the Ashʿarite school of theology, who countered the Muʿtazila by using the same rational techniques to defend the absolute omnipotence of the divine being.

But it was after this first flurries of this controversy had died down that Al-Farabi (873-950) and Ibn Sina (980-1037) produced their systematic Neo-Platonic metaphysics in which the interpretation of God as the ONE, was given its most rigorous and refined development. Here
Islamic philosophy delivered a vision of divine reality and creation which seemed a considerable leap from the descriptions of God in the Qur'an. It is not surprising that such work would generate yet another Ash`arite reaction, expressed this time in the work of Al-Ghazali (1058-1111) the greatest philosophical critic of Islamic Neo-Platonism. His work *The Incoherence of the Philosophers* was a full-scaled attack on several Neo-Platonist theses, and its warm reception effectively meant the end of Neo-Platonism within the Islamic context.

The battle was being waged anew in Andalusia as Ibn Rushd matured intellectually. Then, at a time when philosophical speculation was favored among the reigning powers, he wrote a detailed reply to Al-Ghazali entitled *The Incoherence of the Incoherence* in which he partly defended Al-Farabi and Ibn Sina and partly developed his own Aristotelian version of neo-Platonism. During this period, he also wrote the *Decisive Treatise on the Harmony between Philosophy and Religious Law (Shari`a)*, which is our concern here.

The treatise begins with the question already posed: what is the attitude of the *Shari`a* (divine wisdom) towards philosophy (science, human wisdom)? Specifically, is philosophical study forbidden, discouraged, permitted recommended, or obligatory according to *Shari`a*? One might wonder why this question should be thought significant enough for an entire treatise; why not settle it straightaway in a single paragraph pending a direct examination of the text of the Qur'an? The problem is that the Qur'an doesn't address the subject in exactly these terms. One might conclude that it leaves the matter open, hence, that it permits philosophical inquiry. But, of course, this answer would not satisfy the literalists who were mindful of the Qur'anic injunction to believe and its self-proclaimed inerrancy. They opposed philosophy as a dangerous innovation, and mindful of them, it is not enough for Ibn Rushd to build a case for the study of
philosophy outside of the Shari`a, or even outside the Qur'an. Instead, he sought an explicit sanction for philosophical thought within the divine text.

He begins in the strongest possible way. If the study of philosophy is nothing more than "the study of existing beings and reflection on them as indications of the Creator," he writes, then it is clear that this study is either obligatory or recommended by the Shari`a. How so? Here Ibn Rushd quotes several passages from the Qur'an including, "Reflect, you have vision" (59,2); "Have they not studied the kingdom of the heavens and the earth, and whatever things God has created?" (7,185); and "Do they not observe the camels, how they have been created, and the sky, how it has been raised up?" (88, 17-18). He thinks it is indisputable that such texts call for the "study of beings by the intellect and reflection on them." Of course, such reflection requires the use of reasoning and the drawing of inferences to determine what is actually implied by the explicit pronouncements over the subject-matter in question, presumably, in the best way that we can. In order to do this, i.e., to use our reasoning effectively, we must study the conditions of valid inference and how the best type of reasoning, namely, demonstrative reasoning, differs from the lesser forms of rhetorical and sophistical reasoning. But then we must engage in the study of logic, including an examination of the best texts written on the subject, e.g., those of Aristotle, and as Aristotelian logic blends into Aristotelian metaphysics and epistemology, it follows that one must study the traditional branches of philosophy in order to carry out the Qur'an's injunctions. Of course, the study of metaphysics is sanctioned anyway, for how else can we understand the relations of Creator to created -- upon which we are instructed to reflect -- if not in terms of metaphysical categories?
Now, on the surface, this is an very bold, if not incredible, piece of reasoning. How can Ibn Rushd offer it so quickly and expect acceptance? Sensitive to this concern, he sought to buttress his remarks by independent arguments. What is critical for the happiness of any human being, he wrote, is assent to God's creation and to the truth of divine revelation. Assent is the product of reflection, and for different types of human beings different modes of reflection are appropriate. The Shari`a summons each person to assent in a manner appropriate to him or her. For those in the intellectual class, in particular, demonstrative reasoning is the proper modality of assent since lesser forms of reasoning will not be sufficient -- hence they are referred to as the "demonstrative class." It is precisely for the purpose of engendering assent, then, that the Qur'an encourages reflection among the demonstrative class of persons, so that they might "see" and understand how the multiplicity of beings is, indeed, a product of divine creation.¹

Now a problem arises. There is only one Truth, and there are no contradictions within it. The Shari`a is true, but so are the discoveries of philosophy. Are there not cases in which the two conflict? What happens when they do? How can the unity of Truth be maintained? Consider the Qur'an's descriptions of God's "sitting upon" his throne, or of God's possessing a "hand." At face value, these commit us to saying that God is bodily, hence material. Yet philosophy teaches that all bodies, particularly living bodies with hands, are temporally finite and doomed to decay. Moreover, philosophy shows that God must be a purely spiritual substance in order to possess the infinite attributes of omnipotence, omniscience and the like that the Qur'an ascribes. How do we deal with the conflict before us?

Ibn Rushd's answer is familiar. The conflict is only apparent; we must understand that some texts in the Qur'an cannot be taken literally, that is, taken in their apparent meaning (zaher
an-nutq) but, instead, require interpretation (ta'wil). If they require interpretation then they must possess a hidden meaning (baten an-nutq) in addition to their apparent meaning, and it is only when we engage in interpretation that we can discern their hidden meanings and, thereby, preserve the unity between Shari’a and philosophy. Such passages are to be viewed as metaphorical or allegorical. Ibn Rushd appeals to the Qur’an itself in justification of the idea that the texts must contain hidden meanings and not every statement in it can be taken literally. In the third Sura of the Qur’an, verse 7, there is a reference to ambiguous verses in contrast to clear and unambiguous verses. Ibn Rushd also cites the Sunnah (traditions) as sanctioning interpretation.

The passage at Qur’an 3,7 is particularly crucial. There we are informed that while certain verses are clear and unambiguous (ayat muhkamat) others are ambiguous or obscure (ayat mutashabihat). The latter are metaphorical and, consequently, have a hidden meaning. But who is qualified to do the interpreting? Indeed, who knows or has access to the hidden meanings? In that very verse reference it is made clear that not everyone knows the interpretation, though certainly God does, and perhaps also, those who are "well-grounded in learning." Here is a serious controversy. In one reading of verse 7, only God is said to know the interpretation, whereas in the other reading, both God and those who are well-grounded in learning (rasikhun fil-‘ilm) know the interpretation. That is, the very verse in which the clear/ambiguous distinction is drawn is itself is ambiguous! The ambiguity is syntactical, and to fix the alternative readings requires close analysis of the Arabic text. While the syntactical ambiguity can be approximated in English, it cannot be captured exactly because English lacks the Arabic system of verbal inflection. Here is one way to bring out the ambiguity:
He it is who has sent down to thee the Book; in it are verses basic or fundamental (of established meaning); they are the foundation of the Book; others are allegorical. But those in whose hearts is perversity follow the part thereof that is allegorical; seeking discord, and searching for its hidden meanings. And no one knows its hidden meanings except God and those who are firmly grounded in knowledge they say: "We believe in it, the whole of it is from our Lord:" and none will grasp the message except men of understanding.

What are we to make of the ambiguity of "And no one knows its hidden meanings except God and those who are firmly grounded in knowledge they say"? Most contemporary readers of the Qur'an will deny that there is any ambiguity, since the text possesses a disambiguating device, a punctuation mark 'ٰ' (waqfa lazim) which is placed after the occurrence of 'God' and indicates a stopping point or pause. With it, the passage naturally receives this paraphrase: ". . . none know the interpretation except God, and those who are firmly grounded in knowledge say . . .". Now 'ٰ' is not a full stop which marks the end of a sentence; but it is used to indicate a pause in the actual processing of the information, particularly in reading. Noting that the Qur'an was, and still is, a text designed for recitation, such a mark is vital in determining how the phrasing should go. So interpreted, the pause after 'God' suggests that only God knows the interpretation, and those who are firmly-grounded in knowledge agree with that, saying "we believe in it . . ."

But Ibn Rushd disputes this reading and pointedly asserts that this is not where the pause belongs but, rather, after the phrase 'firmly-grounded in knowledge,' in which case the passage should be read as ". . . none know their interpretation except God and those who are firmly grounded in knowledge; they say, "we believe in it . . ."". Is Ibn Rushd suggesting that we alter
the sacred text itself? Plainly not. He is well aware that the insertion of these punctuation marks came relatively late in the canonization of the text of the Qur'an. Whereas the actual words comprising the text were settled upon in the mid 7th Century A.D., there emerged alternative readings of the verses (at least seven such). One particular reading came to be favored by the 9th Century, and the pauses such as that in 3,7 were canonized at that point. But a significant minority of commentators on the text disputed this reading, in particular, the commentator Ibn Mujahid, who urged that stop comes after 'those who are firmly grounded in knowledge' as it is in the reading of Ibn Mas'ud. Ibn Rushd favored this reading, and in so doing entered into the exegetical debate that already existed in Qur'anic exegesis (tafsir).

A few points can be raised on his behalf here. First, if we did not allow interpretation, we would be at a loss to explain why ambiguous verses even appear in God's revelation -- what is their purpose? If only God can understand their meanings what function can they possibly serve in setting forth the straight path. Why should the book designed to reveal the straight path contain statements which no human can possibly understand and profit from? Second, without allowing those well grounded in learning to interpret we would then be hard-pressed to explain other passages in the Qur'an, for example, 6,98 and 6,105, where it is said that signs are given to those who know. Third, Ibn Rushd is convinced that Islam is for everyone, regardless of their intellectual capacity. Everyone must assent. The simple-minded folk who have no time or opportunity for intellectual disputes take the images and stories at face value. It is they who must simply believe and not question; they are not capable of grasping the hidden meaning. For this reason, they must not be permitted to interpret sacred text (and on this point Ibn Rush is emphatic, citing both the Qur'an and the Sunnah in support). Others can be told that there is a
hidden meaning of certain texts, but that the meaning is not for them to know. They too must believe and not seek further. For both classes of people, the stop in Qur'an 3,7 belongs exactly where it is in the canonical version. Only those of the demonstrative class are permitted to engage in interpretation, and for them, the stop comes after the phrase 'firmly-grounded in knowledge'. If interpretation were not allowed to them, they could not possibly assent, and they, their commitment, and their services would be lost to Islam. Therefore, interpretation must be allowed to them in order that they will continue to qualify for membership in the Islamic community and that their services retained. And if interpretation is to be allowed, so must philosophical investigation be allowed.

III. The Relevance of Ibn Rushd's argument to contemporary Islam

Let us briefly apply the message of Ibn Rushd to the contemporary dilemma facing the Islamic world. Dramatize it in the strongest possible terms: Islamic Civilization is facing a challenge from Western Civilization, a challenge from a civilization which is currently more powerful (militarily, economically, and politically), and which constitutes a threat to its own survival. Given this challenge, Islamic civilization faces at least these alternatives for response; (1) absolute submission to the West, overt acknowledgment of Western hegemony and values, and the adoption of Western modes of belief and behavior; (2) passive withdrawal and an avoidance of outright conflict, that is, inwardly refusing to submit to Western ways, yet offering no resistance to the current Western economic and political hegemony, patiently awaiting its demise; (3) rejection of the West by means direct confrontation and adoption of positive
measures to curb or expunge its influence; or (4) some type of adaptation to, or accommodation of, Western intellectual and spiritual influence.

Anyone who knows the current state of affairs in the contemporary Islamic world will rule out alternative (1). Alternative (2) carries with it the risk of having Islamic values being overwhelmed, of having Islamic peoples being converted to Western ways, first in behavior, then in intellectual matters, then in religious commitment. To avoid either (1) and (2), alternative (3) has gained increasingly many adherents among Muslims, though it too permits various modalities with different outcomes. It involves a refusal to accommodate Western ways -- perhaps an outright return to traditional Islamic values, as called for by the currently popular Islamic reviver movement (typified by the late Ayatollah Khomeni). But this is a risky venture. The Islamic world is unlikely to succeed if it turns to outright isolationism. There will be continual efforts by the West to encroach upon the Islamic domain to insure access to Middle Eastern oil or to contain the spread of a hostile and militant Islam, and it is doubtful that isolationism will be very popular or even possible. A wholesale confrontation, on the other hand, a direct attempt to impose a military defeat upon the Western intruders and expel Western influence, seems equally unlikely given Western military predominance, at least for the next half-century. A prolonged war of attrition, especially with the inevitable clash with Israel, would undoubtedly have more a more serious impact on the future of Middle Eastern peoples, on Islam itself, than it will upon the West. For the next few decades, aggressive confrontation seems a dubious prospect for the Islamic world.

The unlikely prospects for success suggest that Islamic Civilization would presently find a safer course in alternative (4), adaptation. But this can occur in different ways. In itself,
'adaptation' can mean various things, ranging from total submission, to mimicry, to pragmatic defensive strategies. Also, use of the term raises questions about what to adapt to, Western hegemony? Technology? Values? Life styles? Political structure? World views? Whatever the course of action to be favored here, my claim is that the best prospects for the survival of Islamic Civilization lie in discovering some mode of accommodation, some formula for an adaptation to Western influence while preserving what is essentially Islamic. To do so, some intellectual flexibility must be allowed, rigid insistence upon traditional formulae relaxed, and philosophical discussion allowed free reign, at least within institutions of higher education. If this does not happen, Islam is in danger of collapsing under direct pressure from the West, perhaps through overwhelming external defeat, or through internal dissensions about how to respond. If it attempts to accommodate the Western intrusion through pragmatic adaptive measures, including tolerance of new ideas representing novel approaches to pressing problems, it must learn to deal with the Qur'an and the Sunnah with a mixture of respect and adventure.

The question is whether Islam can adapt? My claim is that it can insofar as its approach to the Shari`a is a flexible one, that is, if it does not view this tremendously rich body of legal thinking as a rigidly fixed canon that refuses to tolerate the efforts to secure insightful interpretations. Only then can Islamic world retain its own intellectual talent and prevent defection to what might seem to be a more vigorous West. On this score, the argument of Ibn Rushd carries a relevance that extends far beyond disputes about Medieval metaphysics, Qur'anic exegesis, or Arabic grammar.