CHAPTER TWO

ON THE CONCEPT AND HISTORY OF
PHILOSOPHICAL RELIGIONS

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INTRODUCTION

When the medieval Muslim philosopher Averroes, who spent most of his life explaining Aristotle, examined the relationship between Islam and philosophy, he reached the following conclusion:

Since this Law (shari‘ah) is true and calls to the reflection leading to cognition of the truth, we, the Muslim community, know firmly that demonstrative investigation cannot lead to something differing with what is set down in the Law. For the truth does not contradict the truth (al-haqq lā yuddâd al-haqq); rather, it agrees with it and bears witness to it.2

According to Averroes, “demonstrative investigations” are conducted by philosophers. The results they reach, he claims, cannot differ from the content of the shari‘ah, because the truth of the former is the same as the truth of the latter.3

It is instructive to compare Averroes’s assessment of the Muslim Law with the assessment of the Mosaic Law by Paul-Henri Thiry, Baron d’Holbach, an important representative of the French Enlightenment:4

1 I will refer to both primary and secondary sources by author and date of publication. If a translation is my own I give the full original text in a footnote. Where I rely on existing translations I provide references to both the original and the translation, except when references are standardized (e.g., references to Plato, Aristotle, Philo etc.). In the latter case, I will only list the translation in the bibliography. I will often modify existing translations.

2 Averroes 2001, Arabic and English 8–9 (in the edition I use the pagination of the Arabic text corresponds to that of the English translation).

3 This, at any rate, is Averroes’s intention. Strictly speaking, the view that the truth of philosophy does not contradict the truth of religion is also compatible with the weaker claim, proposed for instance by Thomas Aquinas, that revelation contains truths that do not contradict philosophy, but are also not accessible to it.

4 d’Holbach 1776, 87–89: “[D]ès l’entrée de la Bible, nous ne voyons que de l’ignorance et des contradictions. Tout nous prouve que la Cosmogonie des Hébreux n’est qu’un tissu de fables et d’allégories, incapable de nous donner aucune idée des choses, et qui n’est propre qu’à contenter un peuple sauvage, ignorant et grossier, étranger aux sciences,
From the outset of the Bible we see nothing but ignorance and contradictions. Everything proves to us that the cosmogony of the Hebrews is no more than a composition of fables and allegories, incapable of giving us any [true] idea of things, appropriate only for a savage, ignorant, and vulgar people, unfamiliar with the sciences and with reasoning. In the remaining works attributed to Moses, we find countless improbable and fantastic stories and a pile of ridiculous and arbitrary laws. At the end the author describes his own death. The books following Moses are no less filled with ignorance…. One would never come to an end if one attempted to note all the blunders and fables, shown in every passage of a work which people have the audacity to attribute to the Holy Spirit…. In one word: In the Old Testament everything breathes enthusiasm, fanaticism, and raving, often ornamented by a pompous language. Nothing is missing from it, except for reasonableness, sound logic, and rationality which seem to have been excluded stubbornly from the book that serves as guide to Hebrews and Christians.

To be sure, the Enlightenment’s attitude to religion is not monolithic. Materialists like Julien de La Mettrie and d’Holbach who reject religion altogether represent only one side of the spectrum. On the opposite side intellectuals like Mendelssohn and Lessing try in different ways to reconcile their Enlightenment commitments with traditional forms of Judaism and Christianity. In between are Deists like Voltaire, Hermann Samuel Reimarus, and Thomas Paine who can be as acerbic as d’Holbach when it comes to the “fabulous theology” of traditional religion, “whether Jewish, Christian, or Turkish,” while espousing what they consider the “true theology” of reason.

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au raisonnement. Dans le reste des ouvrages, attribués à Moïse, nous verrons une foule d’histoires improbables et merveilleuses, un amas de loix ridicules et arbitraires, enfin, l’auteur conclut par y rapporter sa propre mort. Les livres postérieurs à Moïse ne sont pas moins remplis d’ignorance…. On ne finirait point si on vouloit relever toutes les bêvues et les fables, que montrent tous les paflages d’un ouvrage qu’on a le front d’attribuer à l’esprit saint…. En un mot: dans l’ancien testament tout respire l’enthousiasme, le fanatisme, le délire, souvent ornés d’un langage pompeux; tout s’y trouve, à l’exception du bon sens, de la bonne logique, de la raison, qui semblent être exclus opinionnément du livre qui sert de guide aux Hébreux et aux chrétiens.” Interestingly d’Holbach is aware of the fact that what he describes as the irrational content of the Bible can be reconciled with philosophy by means of allegorical interpretation. See his reference to Origen’s and Augustine’s allegorical reading of Genesis in the note on p. 88. This is Averroes’s solution as well for contradictions occurring between philosophy and the sharī‘ah. See e.g., Averroes 2001, Arabic and English 9–10.

5 For his materialism, see in particular de la Mettrie 1996. On the different trends in the Enlightenment, see Israel 2001 and 2006.
6 See Mendelssohn 1983; Lessing 1886–1924.
7 Paine 1794, 6. For the opposition of “true and fabulous theology,” see the title page of the first edition 1794. See Reimarus 1972; Voltaire 1980 (e.g., articles “Église,” “Fanatisme,” “Religion,” “Superstition,” etc.).