Chapter 7

Reason, Faith, and Politics

A Journey to Muslim Andalusia

As many times before in human history, reason and faith are at loggerheads today. What renders our contemporary situation distinctive, however, is the intensity of the confrontation and the radicality of opposing claims. Ever since the Enlightenment, modern philosophy—trusting in “unaided” reason alone—has launched an assault on traditional dogmas and all kinds of rationally unvalidated premises and beliefs. The situation is further aggravated by the steady advances of modern science and the premium placed in our time on scientific and technological expertise—a premium that militates against any reliance on untested assumptions (thereby equating faith with ignorance). Unsurprisingly, the modern assault on faith has engendered a vigorous counter-offensive against modern rationality, an offensive operating both inside and outside of academia. In academic and literary circles, this offensive tends to take the form of a radical fideism (sometimes curiously allied with philosophical agnosticism)—a posture bent on debunking philosophical reasoning as such in favor of an untrammeled spirituality or self-styled transcendentalism. In more concrete social contexts, anti-rationalism often surfaces as a wholesale attack on modern forms of public life, an attack drawing inspiration from premodern autocratic or “theocratic” conceptions of politics. To a large extent, the revolutionary upheavals of modernity thus continue to shape contemporary thought and practice, now on a global scale: akin to post-revolutionary France, many societies around the world today are internally split—into the factions of the “Black” and the “Red,” that is, the factions representing respectively traditional faith and emancipatory reason.1
Viewed against this background, the relation between reason and faith is not merely of detached scholarly interest, but reveals itself as part of a profound historical drama. This does not mean, of course, that there is no room for scholarly inquiry; in fact, there is today a sprawling literature on the topic.² What is frequently neglected, however, is the contextual character of the topic—the aspect that there is a third dimension operative in the reason-faith relation. This dimension is the domain of politics or political praxis, a domain powerfully molding the character of the relation. The constellation of factors is clearly evident in the case of Islam. As most people will agree, the conflict between reason and faith is nowhere as intense and troubling today as in the context of Islamic civilization. This clash and its repercussions provide ample grist for Western media and journalistic denunciations of “fundamentalism.” What media accounts usually ignore, however, is the fact that this same Islamic civilization also provides resources for tackling the conflict and for nurturing a fruitful, though always tentative reconciliation under politically tolerant auspices. To discover these resources it is necessary to travel back in time to the great age of Islamic philosophy, particularly to the period of Moorish or Arabic Spain. The following presentation hence takes the form of a “journey to Andalusia,” more specifically: a journey to that flourishing Andalusian empire that, at its height, counted among its luminaries the great philosopher Ibn Rushd, known in the West as Averroes. The discussion proceeds in three steps. The first section explores the arguments that Ibn Rushd himself advanced on the topic of the relation between reason and faith (or philosophy and religion), mainly in a text popularly known as Fasl al-maqal or simply Fasl. In a second step, attention shifts to Ibn Rushd’s broader political conception in which the nexus of philosophy and religion necessarily played a major part. By way of conclusion, an effort will be made to draw out the implications of Ibn Rushd’s arguments for contemporary intellectual and political tensions in the Muslim world and, beyond that, for the emergence of a multicultural global polity.

Philosophy and Faith as “Milk-Sisters”

Before proceeding further, some historical recollections seem in order. Ibn Rushd—whose full name was Abu'l W alid Muhammad ibn Ahmad ibn Muhammad ibn Rushd—is also known as the philosopher of Cordoba, which then was a center of “Western” Islam (comprising the Maghrib and Southern Spain). He was born in Cordoba in 1126 into a distinguished family of lawyers—his grandfather and father having