»Höre die Wahrheit, wer sie auch spricht«
Stationen des Werks von Moses Maimonides vom islamischen Spanien bis ins moderne Berlin

Jüdisches Museum Berlin
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Herausgegeben von Lukas Muehlethaler
im Auftrag des Jüdischen Museums Berlin
After having studied previous centuries, anyone approaching the study of the 12th century in the Islamic West – the regions that are now Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia, the western part of Libya and al-Andalus (the Iberian Peninsula) – enters fascinating and somewhat unusual times. What helped to create a cultural milieu in which scholars seemed always to have felt obligated to think and say new things – or old things in new ways? I am referring to scholars such as Ibn Ṭufayl (ca. 1105–1185), Ibn Rushd/Averroes (1126–1198), Maimonides (1135–1204) and the famous mystic Muḥyī l-dīn Ibn ‘Arabī (1165–1240). Of course, some scholars in preceding times shared some of the same intellectual concerns and strove to change habits of thought and ways of doing things they considered to be epistemologically misguided as well as culturally and religiously stifling. But in the 12th century such efforts seem to have passed from the margins to the centre of attention, and they need to be understood within the cultural and religious policies of the Almohad caliphs. Such cultural and religious policies also influenced the intellectual project of Alfonso X (r. 1252–1284), king of Castile, whose father Fernando III had extended Christian rule to most of the territory of the former Almohad Empire. Alfonso X could be said to have been the “last Almohad caliph” in his complex religious, cultural and political projects, consisting of the promotion of new scholars, profound institutional and legislative reform, the direct involvement of the king in cultural policies with the objective of gaining encyclopaedic knowledge, a desire to extend education to the people at large, hence the use of the vernacular, and the flourishing of didactic literature. All this closely paralleled what the Almohad caliphs did.

1 Ibn Masarra (d. 931), Ibn Ḥazm (d. 1056), and Ibn Gabirol (d. 1058) are some such scholars.
The Almohad Revolution

The Almohads did what revolutionaries do: They openly and explicitly marked the break between the old and the new times, often resorting to the use of violence, but also developing an ambitious propagandistic and pedagogical programme to habituate their subjects to the new Almohad beliefs and ways of doing things. They introduced substantial changes in political institutions, coinage, mosques, religious practices, and the world of religious scholarship, changes that came with specific visual and auditory presentations.

Almohad silver coins were minted in a square shape, while the dinar was circular with an inscribed square. These are shapes closely associated with the Almohads, as shown for example in their flags and also in their copies of the Qur’ān. Almohad coins carried no date, as if to indicate that a new era had begun. The new age was symbolised in the texts appearing on the coins, reminding Muslims that “God is our Lord, Muhammad is our Prophet, the Mahdi or Messiah is our imām”, and that ‘Abd al-Mu’min and his descendants were the new caliphs. The centre had clearly shifted from the East to the West.

Almoravid mosques were purified and their decorations destroyed or hidden. Attempts were even made to correct the orientation of some mosques. The call to prayer was made with new formulas, some of them in Berber. Differences of opinion (ikhtilāf) in the field of law were rejected, since there could only be one Truth. Jurists trained in the legal tradition hegemonic in the Islamic West, that of the Maliki legal school, were viewed with suspicion – at least in the early stages of the movement – and the Almohad caliphs tried to replace them with new personnel loyal to the new doctrines, the ūlāma.4

These changes were made possible by the preaching of one man, the Masmuda Berber Ibn Tūmart (d. 1130), who is the Mahdī mentioned in the Almohad coins. His profession of faith (more on this below) constituted the kernel of the Almohad revolution, and everybody under Almohad rule was obliged to learn it by heart, be they Muslim, Jew or Christian. The teaching and explanation of its contents were entrusted to the members of the Almohad religious and political elites, the ūlāma. In fact, the imposition of Ibn Tūmart’s profession of faith – formulated by a ‘rightly guided one’ or Mahdī – was what al-


allowed the first Almohad caliph to dismiss the existing religious elites and to substitute them with new personnel. The *ṭalaba* – a term meaning those who studied and therefore were learned – were recruited from the most promising young men to serve the Almohad political and religious cause in different capacities. Their recruitment started under ‘Abd al-Mu’min, the Zanata Berber and follower of Ibn Tūmart, who eventually emerged as his successor after the Mahdi’s death in 1130 and who, through his military conquests, was the *de facto* builder of the Almohad empire, stretching from Tunisia to al-Andalus.

**Ibn Tūmart’s Profession of Faith**

Ibn Tūmart had taught his profession of faith in Berber to his followers, who were mostly Berbers. After ‘Abd al-Mu’min expanded Almohad rule to new territories, the profession of faith had to be learned by everyone who became his subject. This was because it was claimed that it contained the one and only Truth, and that it was the Truth because it had been formulated by ‘the impeccable leader and acknowledged rightly guided one’.

The term Almohads derives from *al-muwahhidūn* (Unitarians), that is, those who believed in the unconditional unity of God. This was the main message contained in the profession of faith proclaimed by Ibn Tūmart, together with the rejection of anthropomorphism. Different versions were prepared in order to make its contents accessible to different categories of people. The Almohads wanted to extend it as far as possible, as indicated by the fact that versifications of the Almohad profession of faith were made in order to facilitate its memorization. As long as their rule lasted – from the times of ‘Abd al-Mu’min until Marrakech surrendered to the Marinids in 1269 – Ibn Tumart’s profession of faith circulated widely in the territories of the Almohad Empire.

The Almohad profession of faith insists on God’s unity, eternity, incommensurability and omnipotence. It states that God exists in an absolute man-

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ner, that He is known by the necessity of reason, that He is the Creator of hu-
ankind, and that He as Creator of everything cannot be compared to His 
creation in order to avoid falling into anthropomorphism. Ibn Tūmart’s pro-
fession of faith ends by stating that God will be seen on the Day of Judgement 
but without comparison or modality, and that the Prophetic mission is con-
firmed by miracles. It is unclear whether these last two sections were always 
part of the text. The Almohad movement was a revolution that underwent dif-
ferent stages, and in this process doctrines and the narrative of events were 
subject to change. In any case, the Almohad profession of faith is concerned 
with, and concentrates on, God and His unity. The treatment of prophecy, rit-
ual, divine law and eschatology normally found in Islamic creeds is absent 
here, except for the above-mentioned reference to the vision of God in the 
afterlife and Muḥammad’s miracles. The abbreviated versions (the murshi-
das) focus exclusively on God’s unity and omnipotence. This strong empha-
sis on God’s unity was theoretically acceptable to Jews as well, but not to the 
Christians, who according to the Muslims were responsible for the sin of di-
viding Divine unity into three parts (tathlith al-wahdāniyya)⁸. In his “Letter 
on Forced Conversion”, addressed to the converted Jews of Almohad lands, 
Maimonides stated that “there has never been a persecution as remarkable as 
this one, where the only coercion is to say something”.⁹ What I am suggesting 
here is that the original version of the Almohad profession of faith may not 
have included any reference to the Prophet Muḥammad, so that it would have 
appeared even more acceptable to the non-Muslims. In any case, both Mus-
lims and non-Muslims were in fact forced to convert to “Almohadism” as con-
densed in Ibn Tūmart’s profession of faith.

While in the case of Muslims they were forced to renounce the pluralistic 
religious scenario of Sunnism for one specific interpretation of the message of 
Islam, in the case of Jews and Christians they had to renounce their religion 
altogether. But why demand such forced conversion that affected Maimonides 
among many other Jews in the Islamic West?¹⁰ It is one of the most striking 
and puzzling decisions made in the early stages of the Almohad revolution, 
as it meant the abolishment of the dhimma status that had protected the Jews

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⁸ This expression is taken from a 12th-century Muslim polemical work against Christi-
anity: Thomas Burman, Tathlith al-wahdāniyah and the Twelfth-Century Andalusian 

⁹ Esperanza Alfonso, Islamic Culture through Jewish Eyes. Al-Andalus from the Tenth to 

¹⁰ For a thoughtful discussion of a polemical episode in the life of Maimonides, see Joel L. 
Kraemer, Maimonides: the Life and World of One of Civilization’s Great Minds, New 
and Christians living under Muslim rule for centuries.11 Five elements need to be taken into account in order to understand the religious, legal and political context that could have precipitated such an unprecedented policy:

a) **Eschatology**, the conviction that the appearance of the Mahdi would bring about the disappearance of religions other than Islam.

b) **The influence of Shi‘i Isma‘ili**, represented by the Fatimid caliph al-Ḥākim’s persecution of the dhimmīs, which also has to be related to eschatology.

c) Influence of the belief that all human beings possess an innate nature (*fitra*) that corresponds to Islam, whereas being a Jew or a Christian depends on the family into which one has been born.

d) The idea that **the territory ruled by the Almohads was a new Ḥijāz**. In the same way that the Prophet Muḥammad forbade the presence of any religion other than Islam in the territory of the Arabian Peninsula – and more specifically in the Ḥijāz, where the sacred towns of Mecca and Medina were located – the Almohads may have thought that the same prohibition applied to the territory where the doctrines of their founder the Mahdī now reigned supreme.

e) The Almohads could have also been influenced by **the legal doctrine of the jurist al-Ṭabarī** (d. 923), according to which once demography had become favourable to the Muslims, they would no longer be in need of non-Muslims – and could therefore abolish the dhimma pact completely.12

In my view, what the Almohads did was purporting to have recovered the original monotheism from which Jews, Christians and Muslims had departed. Previous monotheists were not so much forced to convert to the new religion, but rather to “rediscover” their true innate nature, to return to their *fitra*. This would make sense of the reports that, in the first stages, the Almohads engaged in debates with the Jews in different localities in order to convince them of their religious truth and thus bring about their conversion.13

The real emphasis was not so much on the fact that the Almohad Truth was a revival of the Prophet Muḥammad’s message and of the Revelation brought to

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both Jews and Christians, but that it was identical with God’s order or disposition (*amr Allāh*).\(^{14}\) The Almohad Truth was the universal religion of mankind to which every human being had to adhere. This Almohad conviction had to do with their Messiah or Mahdī, an infallible *imām* who was the Rightly Guided One and the one who could lead others to the right path, but also with the stress that a certain trend within Almohadism placed on reason and on man’s ability to perfect himself and reach a true understanding of God. I return to this point shortly.

To summarize, what the Almohads originally did was to force the population of the lands they had conquered to convert to what they viewed as the universal religion, one that could be reduced for the masses to a very basic understanding of God’s unity and eternity – and one that had been brought to humankind by a man, Ibn Tūmart, endowed with infallibility. That basic faith was enough to save, a conviction that we can find also in Maimonides,\(^{15}\) for whom proselytism had a symbolic value because it announced the return to original monotheism and hence was a sign of the imminent arrival of the End of Days.\(^{16}\)

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**The Truth and Man’s Access to It**

While Ibn Ṭufayl’s (d. 1185) close links with Almohadism are generally accepted,\(^{17}\) the nature of such links in the cases of Averroes, Maimonides and Ibn ‘Arabi has been the subject of varied interpretations. Underlying such interpretations seems to be a reluctance to accept the connection of three major intellectual figures who greatly influenced Christianity, Judaism and Islam in a Berber Muslim dynasty that is mostly associated with fanaticism and violence. Thanks to recent scholarship on the Almohads, it is slowly becoming more and more evident that they have to be acknowledged as having set in motion an exceptional and sophisticated political, religious and intellectual


\(^{15}\) In his “Letter to Hasdai Ha-Levi”, he says that “There is no doubt that every man who ennobles his soul with excellent morals and wisdom based on the faith in God, certainly belongs to the men of the world to come ... The basis of all things is (knowledge) that nothing is eternal save God alone ...” English translation in: Isadore Twersky (ed.), A Maimonides Reader, New York, Behrman House 1972, pp. 477–478.

\(^{16}\) Alfonso, Islamic Culture through Jewish Eyes, p. 104.

experience that changed the Islamic West, influenced the Islamic East in ways still to be fully explored, and most especially Latin Christendom and Judaism. Within this understanding, to accept the ‘Almohadism’ of Ibn Ṭufayl, Averroes, Maimonides and Ibn ‘Arabi becomes less controversial, especially if we take into account that the second Almohad caliph, Abū Ya’qub Yūsuf (r. 1163–1184), initiated a move towards philosophy in order to overcome the limitations of Mahdism. Only then did Averroes start to write his commentaries on Aristotle with the caliph’s backing, in order to make his philosophy more accessible.18 Averroes was ‘recommended’ to the caliph by Ibn Ṭufayl,19 the author of the extraordinary work “The self-taught philosopher”, which he wrote during the reign of Abū Ya’qub Yūsuf, whom he served in various capacities. Ibn Ṭufayl’s work should be considered an Almohad text, even if it is in fact much more than that. One of the ways of reading this work is precisely as a political tract20 that proposes how to advance the Almohad movement after the establishment of the empire, while also being alert to the limits of the revolution in terms of the truths available to different kinds of people.

The tale deals with a child who grows up on an island without any contact with other human beings and by the mere observance of nature and the reasoning of his intellect reaches both a philosophical and mystical understanding of God.21 Later on, Ḥayy encounters a man, Absâl, who had grown up on another island where the inhabitants were followers of the teachings of a prophet. Absâl was interested in the allegorical interpretation of those teachings, and drawn as well to retirement and meditation, this being the reason he had originally arrived on Ḥayy’s island. Absâl taught him to speak his language and then learned from Ḥayy how he had achieved knowledge of that Truth that he, Absâl, was striving to reach. Ḥayy and Absâl then decided to move to Absâl’s island in order to teach that Truth to its inhabitants. They were ruled by Sâlamân, a former friend of Absâl, who was also a scrupulous believer, but who was mostly interested in the literal meaning of the proph-

21 What follows reflects how I have benefited from the various contributions included in: Lawrence Conrad (ed.), The World of Ibn Ṭufayl. Interdisciplinary Perspectives on Ḥayy ibn Yaqqān, Leiden, Brill 1996.
et’s teachings. Soon, Ḥayy and Absāl realised that they could not change Sālamān’s people – even that it was not desirable to change them – and therefore decided to return to their chosen isolation.

Ibn Ṭūfayl’s book teaches that not everyone can be a “unitarian” (muwāḥhid), and that those who succeed will always be ghurabā’, i.e., strangers among the other believers. The majority, in fact, need what religion is there to offer them.22 When Ḥayy was taught about religion by Absāl, he did not find any discrepancy between the prophet’s teachings and what he had discovered on his own by means of reason. Nevertheless, he could not but wonder why that prophet had often used allegories in the description of the divine world, something that led men to anthropomorphism. Ḥayy’s wonder was based on his belief that all men were endowed with penetrating intelligence. He soon learned that even Absāl’s friends were unable to understand what he tried to teach, because they limited themselves to knowledge acquired through chains of authority. Ḥayy finally came to realize that there were different types of people, and that some of them needed the guidance found in the revelations received by prophets. True knowledge should not be taught to those incapable of understanding it. Another matter is to what extent their knowledge of religion itself can be improved, for example, whether the masses should be left to their anthropomorphic beliefs or whether they should be obliged to learn a correct creed.23

Ibn Ṭūfayl’s pupil Averroes was also a member of the Almohad talaba, having written a commentary of Ibn Tūmart’s creed and also a work explaining how he had been recruited by the Almohads and how he had entered the ranks of their scholars.24 As is well known, Averroes described three different ways in which knowledge could be acquired: rhetorically, dialectically and philosophically. The philosopher cannot make philosophers out of everyone, in the same way that the doctor whose aim is “to preserve the health and cure the diseases of the people, by prescribing for them rules which can be commonly accepted”25 is unable to make them all doctors. Averroes was, however, convinced that the masses should be better educated than they had been until then. He did not speak directly to the people, but in his theoretical writings he

24 Maribel Fierro, Debating Again on Averroes and the Almohads, forthcoming, originally a paper presented at Marquette University (November 2011) and at the EHESS, Paris, 22 May 2012 (Séminaire de Pierre Bouretz). I wish to thank Prof. Richard Taylor and Prof. Maurice Kriegel for the opportunity to present my work and the debate that ensued.
outlined “the manner in which the caliphs and the more learned classes of society should speak to them” and one “of the ways in which Ibn Rushd’s commentary on the Republic differs from Plato’s original is in the emphasis on the educational task of the ruler.”

Education and Encyclopaedism

Education was clearly a major concern of the Almohad revolution. If the Almohads wanted to change religious beliefs (anti-anthropomorphism) and practices, they had to extract people from their former beliefs and practices. In the early stages, the Almohads resorted to coercion and violence, but since the very beginning, they also used preaching and debates in order not to coerce, but rather to convince. After the initial impulse of the revolution, education seems to have become the prime target.

Ideally, the ṭalaba had to be able to engage in independent religious and legal reasoning, as servile imitation of late precedents (taqlīd) was censured. In connection with the need to train them, the Almohad caliphs promoted the production of encyclopaedic works collecting everything that was known at the time about a particular subject, as well as didactic works, often in versified form, and this in practically all disciplines.

Non-coercive education of the masses had to be done by oral means, such as the public reading of caliphal letters, sermons and preaching. The Almohads had official preachers and promoted the writing and delivery of sermons. There is evidence of an increase in the production and circulation of Qur’ān copies. The dimensions of the square-formatted Almohad Qur’āns is an indication that the book was not perhaps meant to be a “pocket book”, but rather was meant to facilitate its reading in diverse settings and perhaps its transportation. There is also more abundant information about copying activities.

All these transformations should be connected with the Almohad need to educate the educators entrusted with the spread of Almohad doctrines and practices. The Almohad promotion of the writing of didactic works often in


versified form – leading to a production of didactic materials for which I do not find any parallel in previous periods – must have been directed to the training of the ṭalaba and ḥuffāẓ.

Of course, the use of didactic verse was not exclusive to the Almohads, given the crucial role of memorisation in Muslim teaching and scholarship. The popularity of didactic verse can be detected especially in the 13th century, although since the time the madrasa flourished throughout the Arabo-Islamic world, didactic versifications became a widespread instrument in the scholastic tradition. Under the Almohads we find versifications in almost every field, including Almohad creeds, medicine, the five pillars of Islam, mathematics, grammar …

The Almohad period experienced not only a flourishing of didactic verse, but also of encyclopaedism. Concern for compiling the extant knowledge in well organised and user-friendly works can be detected – again – in almost every field: Qur’ānic exegesis, grammar, adab, medicine, botany, astronomy, agriculture, magic and so on. Averroes can be considered an encyclopaedist in the rational sciences, and the same can be said of his contemporary Muḥyī l-dīn Ibn ‘Arabī in the field of Sufism. It is in Ibn Ṭufayl and in the more philosophically oriented of the Almohad intellectual elites that we find encyclopaedism at its best, that is, concern not only for compiling everything known until that moment of each discipline, but more importantly concern for establishing the general principles of those disciplines, as indeed Averroes and Maimonides did.

Averroes openly directed his criticism against those jurists who were too attached to the opinions of their predecessors and thus measured knowledge by quantity, not quality, comparing them to shoemakers who accumulate huge quantities of shoes of different sizes but are incapable of making a shoe of the size required. All the authors mentioned so far (Ibn Ṭufayl, Averroes, Maimonides, Ibn ‘Arabi) were interested in the principles of each discipline and not in casuistry. Behind this concern that produced the originality and depth found in their writings lies the impulse unleashed by the preaching

of the Berber Ibn Tūmart, whose doctrine was described by one of the earliest non-Almohad sources at our disposal as a madḥhab fikr, a path of rational discovery.

Abstract
Die almohadische Revolution und ihre Auswirkungen auf die jüdischen Gemeinden des islamischen Westens


Inwieweit wurde Maimonides’ intellektuelle Ausbildung von der almohadischen Revolution beeinflusst?
