Project:

1. Original Project

In the original application for the NEH Seminar I proposed to broaden and deepen my understanding of ‘Cultural Hybridities’ in their development in Medieval Spain and their influence in Medieval Europe. By enhancing my understanding of Medieval Spain and its cultural and historical context at the time of the development of philosophy up to and including the time of Ibn Rushd / Averroes I expected that chapter 6 “Religion, Ethics and Politics” of my developing book on Averroes would be substantially imbued with greater subtlety and a much more nuanced interpretation as a result of work in the Barcelona seminar. I also expected that work in the seminar would contribute valuably to chapter 7 “The Influence of Averroes” and so too to my work in the “Aquinas and the Arabs Project.” I also indicated that garnering an enhanced understanding of Medieval Spain in its complexity of ‘Cultural Hybridities’ would surely have a profoundly positive influence in how I am able to present religious and philosophical thought in the Middle Ages to my students in courses on philosophy, Christian theology, and Islam at the undergraduate and graduate level.

2. Project Advances While in Barcelona

What in fact came to pass in my studies and discussions with colleagues in the NEH seminar and with scholars from Barcelona, Madrid and elsewhere was in accord with the original project proposal but much more valuable to my work than anticipated. Instead of restricting my studies to Medieval Spain, I found my research moving back to the religious and political foundations of Islam in Spain and North Africa for the sake of understanding the sources of the philosophical and theological thought of Averroes as well as for understanding in a deeper way the sort of influence that his understanding of Islamic theological teachings may have had on the thought of Thomas Aquinas and other theologians and philosophers of the 13th century.

I took advantage of the opportunity to study two recently published books by Allen Fromherz, an NEH seminar participant, on the theologian Ibn Tumart (d. ca. 1130) and on the social historian Ibn Khaldun (d. 1406). The account of Ibn Khaldun was extremely valuable for seeing how later thinkers looked back on and understood the period of the Almohad dynasty in North Africa and Spain. But the book on Ibn Tumart and the development of the Almohad movement was more helpful for contextualizing Averroes in that framework. Fromherz does not have any substantial discussion of the details of the theological
reasoning of Ibn Tumart nor of the theological and philosophical reasoning of al-Ghazali (d.1111) from whose writings and followers Ibn Tumart developed his unique conception of Islam. He also does not have any substantial discussion of Averroes. But his work helped me see the intellectual development of Averroes against the background of the common religious and cultural teachings alive in the years just prior to his entre onto the religious and political scene in Spain and North Africa.

In connection with this I was pleased to meet Maribel Fierro of CSIC in Madrid who has written on Ibn Tumart, the Almohad movement, and Averroes from theological, political and historical viewpoints. Our brief meeting at the World Congress of Middle East Studies taking place in Barcelona was followed by an exchange of articles and some discussion of our mutual interests. Fierro’s work, which I took the opportunity to study more carefully and broadly while in Barcelona, is very much in line with my own independently developing understanding of Averroes not only as philosopher but also as a leading theological expert in the Almohad movement ca. 1178-1184. I may be visiting CSIC in Madrid in Spring 2011 to share some of my work with scholars there.

My work then took two directions at once. (i) I pursued primary and secondary sources on the theological teachings of Ibn Tumart and the religious and political thought of his political successors, Abd al-Mu’min (1130-1163), Abu Ya`qub Yusuf (1163-1184) and Abu Yusuf Ya`qub al-Mansur (1184-1199). With this I also reconceptualized my understanding of Averroes as philosopher into a more complex view of him as philosopher, theologian, physician, and intellectual scholar subtly influential in political matters through his philosophical methodology in religion. (ii) The other direction concerned the influence of Averroes on Latin Europe and its theologians and philosophers. In light of work in (i) I came to see how the rationalist philosophy of Averroes set forth in his Aristotelian philosophical works was also at work in his theological writings in very subtle ways. Averroes, it seems to me, perhaps merely found the Almohad movement to be in accord with his philosophical thinking. For Averroes the primary way to truth is to be found in the methodology of philosophy using the tool of Aristotelian scientific demonstration. The religious writings of Averroes are dialectical in character. That is, they assume to be true certain unproven or unscientific theses, namely, fundamental religious teachings of Islam and other teachings developed by Ibn Tumart, and proceed to reason on the basis of those. For Averroes, however, these religious teachings are the guidelines for those moved by rhetoric or dialectic toward what is right. In contrast, though, philosophers using demonstrative methodology attain to truth in its fullness. And, given that truth cannot
contradict truth, a saying from Aristotle’s *Prior Analytics* that Averroes quotes three times, the consequence is that the truth of philosophy and science is the final arbiter of correct interpretation of religious texts. Now, in this fashion Averroes was in accord with the rationalist approach of Ibn Tumart in many ways, though not completely so. Be that as it may, this methodological approach was subtly conveyed in philosophical writings translated into Latin. And what we find among key figures in Christian theology of the 13th century such as Albert the Great and in particular Thomas Aquinas is a reflection of this same methodology albeit adapted to fit with key theological teachings fundamental to Christianity. M. Fletcher has explored the question of whether theological teachings of Ibn Tumart interpreted by Averroes may in fact be indirectly working in the methodology of Thomas Aquinas who was the first in Latin Europe to propose that theology must be considered a science along the lines of the methodology of Aristotle displayed and furthered by Averroes in his translated works. This issue needs much more exploration and discussion than it has been given up to the present. But I see in this a line of thinking much in accord with my work on Aquinas and the Arabs, something I will be pursuing in detail in the coming year.

3. Conclusion

The NEH seminar in Barcelona has had a very significant influence on my thinking about Averroes and about his influence in Latin Europe. That influence will be made known in several conference presentations I have scheduled for 2010-11, in my work on the book on Averroes, and in my work in the Aquinas and the Arabs. I can add that I had the opportunity to spell out some of this at a conference on Aquinas and the Arabs in Houston, September 18-19, and found what I shared was both surprising to the audience and also very well received.