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**Revival, Reform, and Reason in Islam:  
Alfarabi on the Proper Relationship Between Religion and Politics**

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**Revival, Reform, And Reason in Islam:  
Alfarabi on the Proper Relationship Between Religion and Politics**

by

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This dissertation applies the teachings of Alfarabi to the debate between Muslim revivalists and reformists. Reviewing selected works of Khomeini, Maududi, and Qutb, I argue that Islamist revivalism constitutes a fundamental challenge to rational political science insofar as the former demands subordinating reason to revelation. Next, through a critical analysis of several liberal Muslim theorists, I show that these leading reformists fail to vindicate the role of reason in political matters and therefore leave the Islamist challenge unmet. I subsequently turn to Alfarabi's "Book of Religion" (*Kitāb al-Milla*) with an emphasis on the philosopher's treatment of political science. In doing so, I find that Alfarabi is able to offer a far more compelling response than the liberals to that view of piety on which the Islamist position depends. I therefore suggest that it is Alfarabi, above all, who points modern scholars toward the necessary theoretical foundations of any successful intellectual engagement with Islamism.

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## Introduction

The founding of political philosophy in the Islamic world is properly traced to the tenth-century figure Abu Nasr Alfarabi. Although preceded by roughly one hundred years by the Arab al-Kindi and roughly contemporaneous with the Persian ar-Razi, Alfarabi, whose own ethnic origin remains a matter of dispute, was the first Muslim philosopher to give a central role to politics, and in doing so, reach depths of insight into human nature left unexplored by his forerunners and contemporaries. This turn from natural philosophy and metaphysics to matters of morality and politics mimics the career of Socrates, who “was the first to call philosophy down from the heavens and set her in the cities of men”.<sup>1</sup> The Socratic turn to the human things is therefore reenacted in the Islamic world by Alfarabi's philosophic shift away from his coreligionists.<sup>2</sup> Indeed, Alfarabi makes no attempt to disguise his indebtedness to Ancient Greek philosophy, going so far as to claim that true philosophy “was handed down to us by the Greeks from Plato and

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<sup>1</sup> Cicero, *Tusculan Disputations* V, iv, 1-3; see also Aristotle, *Metaphysics* 987b1-3.

<sup>2</sup> This is not to deny that Alfarabi devotes a great deal of energy to metaphysics and natural science, or that al-Kindi and ar-Razi addressed themselves to political questions. However, politics receives a particular emphasis in the thought of Alfarabi; consider the role accorded political science in the *Enumeration of the Sciences* and *Book of Religion*. Concerning al-Kindi, Butterworth states that he “does raise questions pointing to the need for political philosophy, even though he does not provide sufficient answers to them” (59). Walker speaks of ar-Razi's “value as a negative voice against which an 'Islamic' political philosophy was to develop” (66). Maimonides, in contrast to his singularly high praise for Alfarabi, dismisses ar-Razi as a “mere physician” (226).

Aristotle *only*” (2001, 47, emphasis added). Alfarabi therefore sees himself as engaged primarily in the recovery and reestablishment of true philosophy, as practiced by Plato and Aristotle.

Nevertheless, it cannot be overlooked that Alfarabi occupied a dramatically different historical context from his primary influences. Traveling across the Muslim world over the course of his life in the early years of the Islamic golden age, Alfarabi was far removed, both geographically and temporally, from ancient Athens. And while many dramatic changes had occurred in the roughly fifteen hundred years separating Alfarabi from his Greek predecessors, none is more historically influential, nor more relevant to our present purposes, than the emergence of Islam. By the year 750, little more than a century after the death of Muhammad, Islam had expanded from its birthplace in the Arabian Peninsula to the Indian Subcontinent in the east, to Morocco and Spain in the west, and to the Caucases and Transoxiana in the north. Thus, by the time Alfarabi was writing in the early tenth century, the *Pax Islamica* had been firmly established across three continents.

Alfarabi's corpus displays an impressive span, treating such varied topics as music, metaphysics, and epistemology. But it is in his political works that the philosopher treats the relationship between politics and religion, and thereby speaks most directly to the modern world, a setting in which we are deeply aware of our lack of satisfactory solutions to this perennial dilemma. This dissertation advocates Alfarabi's status as a thinker of the first order, whose teachings are no less relevant today than they were upon their initial authorship over one thousand years ago. To this end, Alfarabi's teaching in



the *Book of Religion (Kitāb al-Milla)*—the work in which he most directly addresses the relationship between human and divine wisdom—will be juxtaposed with the works of the most influential twentieth-century Islamists and liberal Muslim reformists. It is my assertion that a careful study of the *Book of Religion* will reveal that its author possesses a deeper understanding of religion, human nature, and politics than the key figures of the modern alternatives. Before turning to a more detailed account of these alternatives, and of the way they relate to each other and to the thought of Alfarabi, it will be helpful to discuss the special benefits of focusing on political philosophy as it relates to Islam, not just for Muslims or for scholars of Islam, but for students of political philosophy in general.

## Islam and Political Philosophy

The study of Islam brings to the fore certain fundamental questions of political philosophy, questions at which one may doubtless arrive through a study of other religious traditions, but which are nevertheless pointed to with singular immediacy in the revelatory tradition founded by Muhammad: What is the proper role of religion in political society? What jurisdiction ought human wisdom to have in light of claims of divine revelation? How does our ultimate purpose as individuals harmonize with the demands of justice? Islam draws our attention to these problems to an unusual degree because it is monotheistic, legislative, and universalist; each of these characteristics, taken alone, offers fertile ground for investigation into questions of perennial importance, and their conjunction in a single faith lends Islam an exceptional importance for students

of political philosophy.

Monotheism, of course, has not been the historical ally of philosophy, except in rare and fleeting cases.<sup>3</sup> Nor can it make any exclusive claim to the development of philosophic souls; this would be especially absurd to suggest given that the birthplace of philosophy was the thoroughly pagan land of Ancient Greece.<sup>4</sup> Furthermore, there are aspects of human experience that are undoubtedly more directly expressed by the pagan vision of the world than the monotheistic. At the ontological level, given the apparently heterogeneous character of our surroundings, the world may reasonably be supposed to have been the product of a multitude of primal elements or a multitude of gods.<sup>5</sup> At the

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<sup>3</sup> One might be tempted to point to Christian Scholasticism as evidence of a prolonged harmony between philosophy and monotheistic religion. While it is true that the Scholastic tradition ensured that a certain type of philosophy could continue to exist for centuries under the auspices of the Church—a historical circumstance with no counterpart in either the Jewish or Muslim world—it was precisely this official endorsement that ensured that Scholasticism never called into question the most fundamental premises of Christian theological doctrine. The works of Maimonides and Alfarabi, in contrast, are demonstrations of the full potential of philosophy when loosed from the chains of clerical approval.

<sup>4</sup> Although serious reflection on the nature of the world and the place of human beings in it emerged independently in several (perhaps even most) ancient civilizations, it was only, or at least most clearly, in Ancient Greece that the distinction between *nomos* and *physis* was made, first by Thales and then by a series of natural philosophers preceding Socrates. Greece may therefore be considered the birthplace of philosophy, so long as this distinction is considered to be its *condicio sine qua non*.

<sup>5</sup> Of course, many substantial explanations have been offered for the emergence of heterogeneity from a single entity (consider Ibn Sina's *Metaphysics*, esp. Books 8 and 9), but I am here only speaking of the initial, unsophisticated reaction to being presented with a world of multiplicity, which is, at least in most cases,

moral level, to the extent that we so often feel torn between competing loyalties—to family and to fatherland, to ourselves and to our friends, to those we love and to those deserving our love—we may sense that there is, even at the cosmic level, no simple harmony to be found, but rather a conflict of competing divine wills and even competing versions of justice underlying all that exists. And certainly, reflection upon these aspects of the human condition have been encouraged by the theological-poetical works of men such as Homer and Hesiod. Nevertheless, despite the historically antagonistic attitude of monotheism toward philosophy, the invention of philosophy in a pagan land, and the undeniable ability of paganism to speak to certain aspects of the human experience of the world, it is only in monotheism that the ontological and moral aspects of divinity are united in a single entity; Allah is the originator and sustainer of the universe as well as the upholder and final arbiter of justice.<sup>6</sup> Thus, monotheism, by insisting on the utter compatibility of these two distinct aspects of divinity, gives rise to a special line of inquiry: In what way are the principles of morality an inherent part of the very fabric of being? How can the first cause of the universe, one in its essence, be at the same time a providential deity of reward and punishment? What is the relationship between the laws

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likely far from a strict and uncompromising monotheism.

<sup>6</sup> Consider, as a point of contrast, Hesiod's *Theogony*, in which Zeus, the god most responsible for the administration of justice (though questionably just in his own actions) is emphatically not the originator of being, but rather a late arrival on the cosmic stage. Chaos, the first primal force chronologically, is itself explicitly said to come into being, rather than having always existed, and clearly has no providential relationship with human beings, as Zeus does.

of justice and the radically free will of God? Unsurprisingly, we find in the works of the greatest Islamic philosophers attempts to answer precisely these questions.<sup>7</sup> While there is no doubt that serious reflection on the mysterious relationship between morality and divine will can, and as a matter of historical fact did, occur in a pagan context—the question of divine justice is often not far from Socrates' mind, as he is presented in the Platonic corpus—the specific considerations mentioned above are more directly encouraged by a monotheistic theology than a pagan one. Meditation on a first cause requires a pious Greek to move beyond the immediate concerns of reward and punishment; his ultimate fate is in the hands of humanoid divinities, similar to himself not only in their outward form but in their passions, as well. In contrast, a monotheist places his fate in the hands of a radically mysterious and transcendent deity, the sole cause of all that exists. Thus, he is imbued with a deep desire to know what lies at the root of existence. This curiosity is, in the Islamic tradition, innervated by numerous Qur'anic verses exhorting the pious believer to reflect on the world and thereby arrive at the knowledge that there is but one, true God.<sup>8</sup>

Apart from the Qur'an's particular emphasis on reflection, however, nothing said so far would suggest that Islam is more uniquely suited than its fellow Abrahamic faiths to serve as a gateway leading to the most fundamental problems of political philosophy.

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<sup>7</sup> Ibn Sina's *Metaphysics*, part of his voluminous work, *The Healing*, is perhaps the prime example of a philosophic attempt to reconcile God's ontological status as first cause with his moral status as providential guardian and enforcer of justice.

<sup>8</sup> Consider, for example, 3:190-191, 30:8, 45:13.

But of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, it is only the last that has both a legislative component and a universal ambition. Judaism, no less legislative than Islam, is distinctly national in character, with no wider proselytic mission. Christianity, while sharing with Islam a universal character, is typically understood to offer moral guidelines without demanding their political implementation in the form of legislation.<sup>9</sup> It is therefore only in Islam that staunch monotheism, divine legislation, and ambitious universalism are united.

Having already discussed that which sets apart the Abrahamic faiths as a group from polytheistic religious traditions, it remains still to consider the way in which the legislative and universalist aspects of Islam open the door to deep reflection on

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<sup>9</sup> Huntington suggests that “God and Caesar, church and state, spiritual authority and temporal authority, *have been* a prevailing dualism in Western culture” (70, emphasis added). Although Stepan rightly points out that Huntington's claim is “ahistorical,” since religious and political officials in the West “often violated dualism” (214n3), such dualism has a *scriptural* basis in Christianity that it does not so clearly have in Islam. The Christian attitude toward politics to which Huntington refers is best captured by Matthew 22:21 and Romans 13:1, both of which urge believers to respect and obey worldly authorities, and neither of which have a Qur'anic equivalent. Qur'an 4:59 instructs Muslims to obey “those in authority among you,” but this is coupled with an exhortation to refer all disagreements to “Allah and the messenger.” In short, while the New Testament contains rules of conduct that regulate the private lives of believers, this moral law differs from *shari'a* insofar as only the latter clearly requires political implementation and worldly enforcement. Weber, though often simplistic in his description of Islam, rightly observes the religion's “this-worldly” character in contrast to the “world-rejection” of Christianity (Chapter 16). Finally, consider Rondinson, who claims that Muhammad “[combines] Jesus Christ and Charlemagne in a single person” (293).

fundamental human questions. At its heart, Islam is a religion of divine law.<sup>10</sup> This is not to claim that the Qur'an consists only of a series of bare legal edicts; indeed, the vast majority of its verses are distinctly non-legislative, instead offering stirring moral exhortations, instructive stories of prophets and leaders of the past, striking descriptions of the wonders of creation, assurances of God's support of the pious, and promises of perfect justice in the afterlife for both the righteous and the wicked. Nonetheless, existing alongside these elements—all of which find counterparts in the New Testament—are verses of an undeniably legislative character. Thus, the Qur'an enjoins its followers not only to avoid committing adultery, theft, and murder, but to punish these crimes with lashing, amputation, and death, respectively;<sup>11</sup> not only to fight against unbelievers, but to impose a tributary tax upon them (9:29); in sum, not only to practice righteousness in their private lives, but to “enjoin what is right and forbid what is evil” (3:110). The implementation of justice in the world—indeed the remaking of the social order such that it reflects the will of God—is therefore central to the Qur'anic teaching. This political aspect of the Qur'an is further bolstered by the various collections of Sunni Hadith, which

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<sup>10</sup> The liberal Muslim intellectuals discussed further on in the Introduction and presented in much greater detail in Chapter 2 either disagree with this claim outright or understand the political and legislative aspects of Islam in a way that differs dramatically from the traditional understanding. For reasons that will be discussed in Chapter 2, I do not find the former argument, which in its extreme form denies any political character whatsoever to Islam, to be persuasive. The latter argument does not go quite so far, merely insisting that Islam's political nature has been heretofore misunderstood; scholars of this persuasion would therefore not disagree with the simple assertion that Islam is a religion of divine law.

<sup>11</sup> However, the importance of forgiveness and reconciliation is stressed; see Qur'an 42:40.

attribute to the Prophet Muhammad highly specified commands regarding tax rates, legal punishments, and inheritance laws, among other subjects.<sup>12</sup> And indeed, it is in the life of its founder that the political aspects of Islam find their clearest expression. Although initially restricted to preaching to a small group of followers, Muhammad's prophetic career took an undeniably political turn as a result of the *Hijra*, the forced emigration of the infant Muslim community away from the violent persecution of Mecca toward the hopeful future of Yathrib (later Medina), whose inhabitants sought out Muhammad in order to offer him leadership of the city. From this point on, Islam was no longer a religion of mere private practice, but of political concern; Muhammad was no longer a mere prophet, but a ruler. So singular in its importance to the history of Islam was this event—this turn to the political—that it marks the starting point of the Islamic calendar.

Since Muslims have historically (though not universally) understood God's will as it is communicated to man in his final revelation to take the form of law, faith and politics are inextricably tied to one another in the Islamic context. The strict compartmentalization necessary for liberalism—of private and public life, of opinions

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<sup>12</sup> The major collections of Shi'a Hadith, for their part, are far less legislative in character, unsurprising given that the political victory of the Sunnis soon after the emergence of the sectarian split necessitated the development of an official position on several aspects of governance. Nonetheless, as in the case of the Qur'an, the Sunni Hadith contain a trove of non-legal narrations in addition to those that have direct legislative implications, covering an enormous variety of subjects, including prayer, hygiene, sexual relations, eschatology, and dreams.

and actions—therefore faces a greater challenge in Islam than it ever did in Christianity.<sup>13</sup> From the perspective of ordinary Muslim piety, the problems of political rule are central to the proper exercise of faith. This fact, coupled with a view of God as the ultimate lawgiver, lends a particular emphasis to certain fundamental questions of politics, morality, and theology: What is the role, if any, for prudence, if God himself acts as legislator? Does the divine law lead to happiness in the afterlife exclusively, or does it bring worldly benefit as well? Is the divine law best understood as static, or is it adaptive to changes in political circumstance across time and space? The attempt to answer these questions serves as the most obvious motivation not only for Alfarabi's political works, but also for the works of modern Muslim intellectuals, whether liberal or Islamist.

While it is Islam's political and legislative character that most clearly distinguishes it from Christianity, it is its universalism that most plainly separates it from Judaism. Whereas the Old Testament portrays a God who favors the nation of Israel above all others as his chosen people, the God of the Qur'an castigates the pride of those who assert an exclusive national relationship with God: "Say: 'O you that stand on Judaism! If you think that you are friends to Allah, to the exclusion of (other) men, then

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<sup>13</sup> This is not to suggest that Christianity and liberalism are, or were historically considered to be, simply compatible, as evidenced by the extent to which philosophers like Hobbes and Locke were forced to reinterpret Scripture in novel ways in order to lay the foundations of liberalism. While it is therefore by no means the case that Christianity inevitably gives rise to or even accommodates liberalism, Islam, with its clear interest in matters of state, is less susceptible to such reinterpretation, as the discussion in Chapter 2 of 'Abd ar-Raziq and 'Ashmawi shows.



express your desire for death, if you are truthful" (62:6).<sup>14</sup> The true friends of God find themselves dispersed among all nations, distinguished from other men, not by their ancestry, but by their faith. The Qur'an is therefore intended as a message for the benefit all of mankind, and not merely the Arab people. To this end, it must be brought to the far corners of the world.<sup>15</sup> Far from imposing geographic or national limitations on the expansion of Islamic rule, God commands Muslims to "fight [the disbelievers] until there is no more *fitnah*, and religion, *all of it*, is for God" (8:39).

The universal ambition of Islam, apart from raising practical concerns about the viability of perpetual peace between the Muslim world and its neighbors, emphasizes even further a question of theoretical interest raised by the legislative character of the faith. To what extent can a single code of law apply equally well across dramatically different circumstances? Are all human civilizations similar enough to justify the global implementation of any one code of law? Is human nature such that a consistent core remains despite the tremendous influence of convention, an influence that takes a different shape in every regime? By presenting itself as a faith for all people in all times,<sup>16</sup> Islam presents a significant challenge to those who would assert the existence of

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<sup>14</sup> Interestingly, the Qur'an reiterates in several places the Old Testament claim that the Children of Israel were elevated by God (2:47, 44:32, 45:16). However, they are portrayed as having failed to uphold their covenant with God, thereby relinquishing their status as God's chosen people (2:83, 5:13).

<sup>15</sup> See Qur'an 6:90, 12:104, 21:107, 25:1, 38:87. *Sahih Bukhari* 1.6 narrates Muhammad's attempt to invite the Byzantine Emperor, and by extension his subjects, to Islam.

<sup>16</sup> Indeed, Islam does not view itself as having been founded by Muhammad, but as being the religion of

significant, irreducible differences among human beings who find themselves in vastly divergent social circumstances.

Taken together, the monotheistic, legislative, and universal characteristics of Islam offer fertile ground for students of political philosophy. This study will focus first and foremost on those questions raised by Islam's status as a legislative religion. It is, after all, the ongoing debate over the precise content of this status that most clearly separates liberals and Islamists, and it is through a consideration of the rule of law that Alfarabi advances his most serious insights into the nature of politics and religion. Nevertheless, any attempt to explore the nature of justice and political rule, if not artificially restricted, will inevitably touch upon questions of theology as well. In fact, it may be reflection on the precise character of justice that provides our most direct avenue to knowledge of the divine. This would certainly seem a possibility in the Islamic context; the Qur'an is a text in which God is explicitly said to love those who are just.<sup>17</sup> This study will therefore consider theological questions to the extent that they arise directly out of political considerations.

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Adam. Furthermore, according to the Islamic tradition, every child born is a Muslim, at least to the extent that they are not subject to the distortionary religious teachings of non-Muslim parents (*Sahih Bukhari* 23:440, *Sahih Muslim* 2658; also relevant is Qur'an 30:30). Islam therefore understands itself as the primeval faith of mankind and that toward which all future generations will naturally incline.

<sup>17</sup> 49:9, 60:8.

## Three Poles of Islamic Thought

It is particularly the legislative aspect of Islam that presents a major challenge—perhaps *the* major challenge—to the comprehensive triumph of secular liberalism. For at least some Muslims in the modern world are not satisfied with the legal alternatives to *shari‘a*, believing that God has offered to humanity indispensable and *permanent* political guidance via the Qur'an and the example of Prophet Muhammad. These Muslims are often referred to as "Islamists," "Islamic fundamentalists," or "Muslim revivalists." But these terms, as they are commonly employed, are unhelpfully broad, grouping together under a single name such distinct entities as the Islamic State—dedicated to the establishment of a global caliphate in which heretics are exterminated and People of the Book subdued through taxation—and Jordan's Islamic Action Front, a political party committed to democratic pluralism and which the Islamic State has vowed to destroy, along with all other Islamist parties that do not pledge allegiance to their caliph. The grouping together of such disparate groups under a single title therefore runs the risk of overlooking the tremendous diversity of ways in which Muslims engage with politics. But in spite of this risk (and however distasteful the political purposes for which such generalization is typically employed), "Islamism," even in its broadest use, is not an empty term. For the ground shared by all groups to which this label can reasonably be attached is their commitment to governance that is more or less in line with traditional interpretations of *shari‘a*.<sup>18</sup> Disagreements—even fundamental disagreements—over

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<sup>18</sup> Even this criterion could be questioned on the basis that the Islamic State seems to have a stubborn

questions of wartime conduct, foreign affairs, and the value of democratic institutions can therefore exist among groups that are each, in this basic way, Islamist.

It is this approach to the faith, which takes with the utmost seriousness the binding character of divine law, that forms the first pole of the present study. The thinkers chosen to represent Islamism are united in their belief that the coercive capacities of the state ought to be exercised for the sake of implementing *shari‘a* upon society at large. Furthermore, while these Islamists are willing to recognize the necessary role of human wisdom in matters of jurisprudence, they assert with distinct clarity that reason must remain subordinate to the express dictates of revealed law. This attribution of legal sovereignty to God rather than man, denying as it does the ability and indeed the right of the human mind to provide comprehensive guidance for political life, is of course incompatible with secular-liberal notions of political legitimacy and thus represents a fundamental challenge to it.<sup>19</sup>

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disregard for traditional Islamic legal rulings. However, while IS has certainly shown no compunction about replacing longstanding precedent with their own edicts—as for example when the group issued a fatwa justifying execution by immolation—they nevertheless attempt to justify their various legal rulings with reference to parts of the Islamic tradition, even when overturning broad historical consensus. The infamous fatwa on burning, for example, refers to the writings of the medieval Shafi scholar Ibn Hajar al-Asqalani.

<sup>19</sup> On the relationship between liberalism and secularism, March states: “political liberalism is committed to a certain form of secularism.” Further on: “because legitimate political power ought to justify itself to all persons subject to it, public deliberation ought to be conducted in terms of a 'public reason' that is accessible to all persons regardless of their religious beliefs” (10). Hashemi: “Liberal democracy requires a form of secularism to sustain itself” (1). Although liberal government takes its bearings by reason, rational

However, to describe Islam as though it were merely oppositional to modern liberalism is to ignore Muslim theory and practice that diverges in key respects from Islamism. Many pious Muslims denounce the Islamist political agenda entirely, rejecting the belief that Islam requires either the eventual or immediate replacement of secular political institutions with specifically Islamic ones. Therefore, Islamic liberalism, although it has not received popular attention in the West to match that of Islamism, must be incorporated into any comprehensive description of Islamic political thought as it exists today.

The liberal understanding of Islam finds its best expression in the works of a series of reformist intellectuals writing in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. These authors offer a dramatically different understanding of Islam and the prophetic career of Muhammad than is given to us by the Islamists. For according to the former, the Islamists are fundamentally mistaken in asserting that Islam requires of its followers commitment to a particular *political* program or institution, rather than mere commitment to a particular set of theological and moral claims. Furthermore, these liberals accord reason an authoritative role in guiding political life, opposing directly the Islamist claim that reason is emphatically incapable of fulfilling this function. As a result of this highly positive appraisal of reason,<sup>20</sup> the reformist understanding of Islam is in agreement with liberalism with respect to what is perhaps the most fundamental political question: do

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government need not be liberal, as Plato (in the *Republic* and the *Laws*) and Aristotle (in the *Politics*) show us.

<sup>20</sup> As I argue in Chapter 2, this positive appraisal is heavily qualified and, in some respects, undermined by other positions adopted by the liberal reformists.

human beings possess sovereignty as rational creatures, or does sovereignty instead lie in the hands of a being who exceeds our merely human understanding in his perfection and who, on that basis, is rightfully owed our humble obedience?

While the modern debate regarding the proper relationship between Islam and politics largely takes place between the two poles discussed above—revivalist Islamism on one hand and reformist liberalism on the other—*both* of these perspectives are challenged by a far older (albeit heterodox) tradition,<sup>21</sup> one that has its roots in the dawn of the Islamic Golden Age. For in the writings of Alfarabi, the fountainhead of Islamic political philosophy, we find an understanding of the proper relationship between politics and religion that diverges from both Islamism and liberalism. It is true that Alfarabi's conclusions display a great deal of similarity to those of the liberal Muslim theorists. For the former asserts, as do the latter, that reason must be accorded the authoritative role in guiding political life. Nevertheless, Alfarabi's justification for this claim—and therefore, for his rejection of the theological view that would require instead submission to the extra-rational commands of an omniscient deity—differs fundamentally from the justification offered by modern reformists. Furthermore, it is the argument of this dissertation that Alfarabi offers a far more compelling answer to the challenge raised by Islamists to political rationalism than can be found in the works of modern liberal reformists.<sup>22</sup> Thus, Alfarabi provides a genuine third alternative, one that is ignored at our

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<sup>21</sup> For a description of the historically antagonistic relationship between Islamic philosophers and political-religious authorities, see Rahman 3, 32-34.

<sup>22</sup> Although Alfarabi preceded Islamism by roughly one thousand years, he was not unaware of that particular

own peril, given the urgency of attaining clarity on a question of such immediate practical importance.

## Why Alfarabi?

Since the medieval Islamic philosophic tradition yielded several thinkers of the first order, it is not immediately clear why a focus on Alfarabi to the exclusion of philosophers such as Ibn Sina and Ibn Rushd is justified. While it is certainly the case that the works of either of these subsequent thinkers would produce highly illuminating results if juxtaposed with modern Islamist and reformist writings, Alfarabi offers the peculiar benefit of universal rhetoric; that is, in contrast with Ibn Sina and Ibn Rushd especially,<sup>23</sup> Alfarabi restricts himself to making general observations about the phenomenon of religion as such, rather than commenting on Islam specifically.<sup>24</sup> This characteristic of his writing offers two distinct advantages. First, although this study addresses most directly specific questions of *Islamic* political thought, it is intended to reveal certain facts about the human political experience more broadly, such as can be better achieved through an interpretation of Alfarabi's more generalized presentation than an interpretation of his philosophic successors' comparatively specialized rhetoric.

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form of piety on which the Islamist position depends. For this reason, his political works can be read as an anticipatory critique of Islamism. Binder: "Islamic fundamentalism, though a relatively modern movement, has its doctrinal roots in the earliest period of Muslim history" (170).

<sup>23</sup> Consider Book 10 of Ibn Sina's *Metaphysics* as well as the many Qur'anic references scattered throughout Ibn Rushd's *Decisive Treatise*.

<sup>24</sup> However, as I will argue in Chapter 3, below, Islamic sources are never far from his mind.

Second, while the Islamists and liberals reviewed in this dissertation offer competing visions of Islam grounded in their divergent interpretations of Muslim sources, it is their universal, extra-religious claims about the nature of morality, justice, and happiness that are often more illuminating and that will, on this basis, be the focus of this dissertation. Thus, the more general perspective of Alfarabi will serve to emphasize, by way of comparison, the universal claims made by twentieth-century Muslim thinkers.

Relying on Alfarabi as a foil against which the shortcomings of Islamist and liberal thought can be shown also has the benefit of clarifying how much must be given up, from the perspective of orthodox piety, if a truly consistent rationalist outlook is to be adopted. There is much in the writings of Alfarabi that many pious Muslims would object to, such as the explicit subordination of religion to philosophy. While claims such as this are softened considerably in the presentation of later Islamic philosophers, it is precisely the unyielding rationalism of Alfarabi that makes him a more fitting point of contrast with modern Muslim thought than the more rhetorically moderate philosophers who succeeded him in following centuries.

Offering these particular justifications for focusing on Alfarabi as the sole representative of the medieval rationalist tradition, however, raises another difficulty. If Alfarabi is useful as a foil to modern Islamists and liberals precisely insofar as his arguments are general in character, why focus on a Muslim philosopher at all? What special suitability for this study do the works of Alfarabi possess that is not also possessed, perhaps to a greater extent, in the works of Plato or Aristotle? Alfarabi himself clearly regarded these two predecessors with the highest esteem, devoting a large portion



of his energy to interpreting and presenting the true meaning of their respective teachings.

There are, in fact, three closely related but distinct reasons for privileging Alfarabi over his Ancient Greek predecessors in a study such as this. First, Alfarabi's works discuss a religion that is monotheistic, corresponding directly to Islam in a way that the works of Plato and Aristotle do not. This is significant due to the political implications of monotheism discussed earlier. The pantheons of Ancient Greece meant that religious injunctions were localized in a way impossible with a religion such as Islam. Athena was the protector and patron deity of Athens, not of Hellas as a whole. Second, the figure of the prophet-founder in Alfarabi's works offers a much more compelling philosophical portrait of the Prophet Muhammad than anything found in Plato or Aristotle. Although Greek religions had no shortage of prophetic legislators, no single figure from Ancient Greek legend properly corresponds to Muhammad. The last prophet of Islam was the sole vessel for the literal word of a single, all-powerful God, and it was through his mouth only that this God communicated his will to humankind. Finally, the works of Alfarabi deal with a legislative religion, significant for reasons discussed above. While the mythic founders of Sparta and Crete, for example, certainly played a legislative role, their laws were neither as comprehensive nor as lasting in influence as those communicated by Muhammad. Thus, because the works of Alfarabi address a religion that is uncompromisingly monotheistic, founded by a prophetic figure of central importance, and fundamentally legislative, he offers a more useful foil to Islamist and liberal Muslim intellectuals of today than any non-Muslim philosopher.

## Outline of the Work

As stated previously, the aim of this dissertation is to demonstrate that Alfarabi offers a more compelling defense of political rationalism in the face of the challenge it receives from Islamism than is found in the works of liberal Muslim reformists of the twentieth century. Before this superiority can be demonstrated, it will be necessary to describe in some detail the Islamist challenge to political rationalism as well as the liberal response to it. The first two chapters of this dissertation are therefore devoted, respectively, to these goals.

In Chapter 1, I offer an overview of modern Islamism, focusing on three key twentieth-century works: *Governance of the Jurist* by Ruhollah Khomeini, *The Islamic Law and Constitution* by Abul A'la Maududi, and *Milestones Along the Way* by Sayyid Qutb. These authors represent three separate geographic locations and each gave birth to distinct political movements: Khomeini led the Islamic Revolution of Iran that resulted in the successful overthrow of the Shah and his replacement with Khomeini himself as Supreme Leader; Maududi was the founder of the *Jamaat-e-Islami*, still politically active to this day in his home country of Pakistan; and Qutb exerted a deep influence on the Muslim Brotherhood, a party only very recently driven back underground by the military apparatus in his home country of Egypt. As is apparent from the political consequences of these authors' works, they have in common a desire to see Muslim society governed in accordance with a strict, traditional version of *shari'a*. This chapter seeks to illustrate four major, interrelated themes contained within these Islamist works: first, that Islam is inherently a political and legislative religion; second, that whatever political function

reason may have, it must remain subordinate to the express dictates of revelation; third, that explicit legal commands contained in the Qur'an and Hadith are eternally valid; and fourth, that the divine law produces for its followers not only happiness in the afterlife, but worldly benefit as well. The liberal objection to the first two of these themes as well as Alfarabi's exploration in the *Book of Religion* of the tension between the last two themes will feature heavily in the subsequent chapters. Thus, the summary contained in Chapter 1 lays the necessary foundation for the analysis that follows.

In Chapter 2, I turn to modern Islamic liberalism, investigating the attempts of 'Ali 'Abd ar-Raziq, Muhammad Sa'id al-'Ashmawi, Muhammad 'Abduh, Muhammad Iqbal, Ziauddin Sardar, and Abdolkarim Soroush, six of the modern period's most influential Muslim reformists, to defend the role of reason in Islam and thereby encourage a movement away from rigid legalism in religious matters. I attempt to show that these attempts, and therefore the broader approaches to Islamic reform of which they are representative, fall short of offering a compelling refutation of the Islamist alternative, either because they deny the fundamentally political character of Islam ('Abd ar-Raziq and 'Ashmawi), limit in critical ways the ability of reason to comprehend divine law ('Abduh and Iqbal), or succumb to historicist relativism (Sardar and Soroush).

In Chapter 3, I review existing scholarly literature on Alfarabi's *Book of Religion* before offering an original, comprehensive interpretation of the work. Specifically, I argue that Alfarabi is engaged throughout the *Book of Religion* in a dialectical conversation with that view of piety that demands the subordination of prudence to revealed political guidance. In making this argument, I oppose existing interpretations of

the work, which assume that Alfarabi simply ignores the theological alternative to the strictly rational account of religion that he provides. Taking up just over twenty pages in Arabic, the *Book of Religion* is a remarkably dense and profound text. Moreover, of all of Alfarabi's works, it speaks most directly to the ongoing debate between Islamists and reformists. Thus, while I refer in various parts of this chapter to other political works by Alfarabi, I remain centrally focused on the *Book of Religion*.

Having articulated the three positions that form the subject of this study, I begin Chapter 4 by investigating the key ways in which Alfarabi differs from the liberal reformists discussed in Chapter 2. Specifically, I argue that by affirming the political nature of religion, the unmatched capacity of reason to attain truth, as well as the trans-historical character of science, even or especially political science, Alfarabi offers a defense of reason that is more consistent and persuasive than can be found in the works of these reformists. Then, in the second half of the chapter, I apply the teaching of the *Book of Religion* to the claims of modern Islamists. I argue that these Islamists, by insisting that divine law achieve worldly good for its followers in a rationally comprehensible way, open themselves up to the dialectical movement contained within Alfarabi's text. But beyond merely viewing Islamism through the critical lens provided by Alfarabi, I consider also what arguments Islamism could marshal in its own defense, thus creating a dialogue between medieval rationalism and modern religious zeal.

Finally, in the Conclusion, I consider how Alfarabi appears from the perspective of modern readers. For however capable of offering lasting guidance in the face of perennial human problems Alfarabi may be, the medieval philosopher lived in a world far

different from our own. Thus, whatever lessons we are able to draw from a serious engagement with his works must be supplemented by a consideration of uniquely modern circumstances. To this end, I briefly consider the extent to which the *Book of Religion* is compatible with modes of political practice that are particularly characteristic of modernity:<sup>25</sup> democracy, liberalism, pluralism, and secularism. Although it becomes apparent from such an undertaking that the religious reform to which we are pointed by the text is not simply liberal or democratic, I argue that the teaching contained in the *Book of Religion* ought not to be dismissed on this basis, as doing so would close to us the possibility that Alfarabi, even or especially as he departs from modern political commonplaces, has something of great importance to teach us.

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<sup>25</sup> This is not to deny the existence of pre-modern examples of these political phenomena, nor to suggest that the modern world is, or will soon be, entirely won over by them; rather, I merely mean to indicate their increasing ubiquity and importance on the world stage since the Enlightenment.

## Chapter 1: Major Themes in Twentieth-Century Islamism

Islam has received considerable attention from political and legal theorists in the last few decades. Much of this scholarship has focused on the religion's alleged compatibility or incompatibility with liberal democracy.<sup>26</sup> While scholars have generally refrained from offering simplistic answers to this question, rightly recognizing that the world's second most popular religion ought not be reduced to any one of the myriad interpretations to which it has historically been subject,<sup>27</sup> such a research orientation is not itself wholly unproblematic. For by investigating primarily the extent to which Islam can accommodate liberal democracy, such studies run the risk of paying insufficient attention to the more basic question of whether or to what extent Islam *should* accommodate liberal democracy.<sup>28</sup> Objectivity requires that the ever-present temptation to presuppose the choiceworthiness of the familiar (and subsequently present it as a normative standard to which the unfamiliar must conform), be resisted as much as possible in the course of investigating the proper relationship between religion and politics.

The interpretation of Islam that is most clearly at odds with liberal democracy, and which has on that basis received ample attention,<sup>29</sup> is that offered by Islamists or

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<sup>26</sup> For example: Binder, An-Na'im, Moussalli, Abou El Fadl, Khatab and Bouma, Hashemi, March.

<sup>27</sup> Asad 7-8; El-Zein 227; March 68.

<sup>28</sup> March 4-6, Esposito (1984) 348-349.

<sup>29</sup> Consider especially the treatment of Islam in Huntington and Fukuyama.

Muslim revivalists.<sup>30</sup> For in the works of the most serious Islamists, the inherently political and therefore public nature of Islam is a major theme. Nor is this putative aspect of their religion regarded as a weakness or a quality in need of reform; rather, it is taken as a sign of God's providence that he has revealed through his chosen prophet a comprehensive way of life for all of humanity.<sup>31</sup> Moreover, in the eyes of Islamists, this way of life rightfully demands our obedience as a product of divine wisdom; merely human reason must ultimately subordinate itself to the will of God.<sup>32</sup> According to this view, Islam cannot be reconciled with liberal democracy while remaining true to its essence.<sup>33</sup> Islamism therefore presents an alternative and simultaneously a challenge to that political arrangement whose alleged superiority constitutes the starting point of much academic and popular literature.<sup>34</sup> This chapter, and in fact this dissertation as a whole, seeks in part to correct this tendency by taking seriously the Islamist claim that reason is not the ultimate arbiter of political matters and grappling with the consequences of that claim.

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<sup>30</sup> On the distinction between “Islamist” and “fundamentalist,” see Euben and Zaman 3-4; Shepard 364n2; Roy 31, 120. I use “revivalist” in the sense of Esposito (1999) 16-17

<sup>31</sup> Khomeini 28-30; Maududi 46-49; Qutb 69.

<sup>32</sup> The precise relationship between reason and revelation has long been debated within Islam. For the Ash‘arite position, see Al-Misri 2-3. For a summary of the Mu‘tazilite position, see Martin and Woodward, Introduction.

<sup>33</sup> Khomeini 55-56; Maududi 138; Qutb 150-151.

<sup>34</sup> For a frank discussion of the presuppositions on which his own work is based, see Binder, 1-4. Similar assumptions are present in many similar studies even when not stated with Binder's clarity.

There is no shortage of political theory research on Islamism.<sup>35</sup> It is not the purpose of this chapter to offer an original interpretation of Islamist political works, but rather to briefly distill and analyze four major, interrelated claims contained within them: first, that Islam is inherently a political and legislative religion; second, that whatever political function reason may have, it must remain subordinate to the express dictates of revelation; third, that explicit legal commands contained in the Qur'an and Hadith are eternally valid; and fourth, that the divine law produces for its followers not only happiness in the afterlife, but worldly benefit as well. Chapter 2 will investigate various attempts by liberal Muslim reformists to argue against the first two claims. Following this, I turn in Chapter 3 to consider Alfarabi's exploration in the *Book of Religion* of the necessary tension between the third and fourth claims. The summaries contained in this chapter therefore lay the requisite foundation for the analysis that follows.

There are, of course, several aspects of Islamism that are not captured by these four propositions. Not under consideration, for example, is the significance for Islamists of the inherently transnational character of Islam and the resulting critique of Westphalian sovereignty,<sup>36</sup> nor the emphasis on armed conflict as a legitimate means to

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<sup>35</sup> For a general overview of Islamism, see, for example, Euben, Roy, Kepel, Tibi.

<sup>36</sup> Although an implicit internationalism does characterize the works of Khomeini, Maududi, and Qutb, it must be remembered that each of these figures first sought political change within existing nation-states: Khomeini in Iran, Maududi in India/Pakistan, and Qutb in Egypt. These figures should therefore be distinguished from the founders and leaders of those transnational Islamist movements, such as ISIS, that seek the immediate abolition of national borders that they reject as illegitimate.



defend the interests of the Muslim world against the imperialist aggression of the West. It should therefore be understood that the themes explored in this chapter are in no way sufficient to describe Islamism in all its complexity. And while the topics of international relations and wartime conduct in Islamic thought certainly deserve their own full treatments, the themes I have chosen to focus on in this study each relate directly to the complex relationship among religion, law, and reason and are therefore no less worthy of focus. Indeed, it is disagreement about how to resolve the competing claims of religion and reason in the political sphere, and not disagreement about state sovereignty, that most fundamentally distinguishes Islamism and liberalism.<sup>37</sup>

For elaboration upon these themes, I rely on the works of Ruhollah Khomeini, Abul A'la Maududi, and Sayyid Qutb, who collectively offer the most serious and influential argument on behalf of Islamism in the twentieth century.<sup>38</sup> Khomeini's *Islamic Government (Velayat-e Faqih)*, also known by the title *Governance of the Jurist (Hokumat-i Eslami)*, is a collection of four essays, compiled from thirteen speeches delivered by him over a nineteen-day period in early 1970, nine years before the Islamic Revolution that would implant him as Supreme Leader of Iran. This written compilation, published with the approval of Khomeini himself, represents his clearest statement on the proper relationship between Islam and politics. Maududi's *The Islamic Law and Constitution (Islam ka nazariya-i siyasi)* was initially compiled during the author's time

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<sup>37</sup> For liberalism's ambiguous relationship with state sovereignty, see Ikenberry, Franceshcet.

<sup>38</sup> For the particular importance of these three thinkers to the intellectual framework of modern Islamism, see Rane 500; Akbarzadeh 1; Faksh 3-4.

in prison and thus without his supervision. The subsequent edition of the book, however, was approved by Maududi himself. The essays and speeches contained therein offer a comprehensive view of Maududi's understanding of the nature and importance of an Islamic regime, as well as the continuing relevance of Islamic law to the needs of political society.<sup>39</sup> Finally, Qutb's *Milestones Along the Way (Ma'alim fi al-Tariq)* was written during a prison sentence that would endure until the author's execution by hanging in 1966. By far the most infamous work of Qutb's in the West, it offers his most dramatic statement on the necessity of Islamic government.

While these authors do not agree on all particulars, they display general accordance with respect to the four themes described above; for this reason, their views may be presented together. Indeed, despite differences of nationality and (in the case of Khomeini) sect, these thinkers are united by a common goal: the replacement of secular regimes in the Muslim world by Islamic regimes, abiding by a strictly conservative version of Islamic law. In the case of Khomeini, this goal was met; the 1979 Iranian revolution saw the ouster of the secular, Western-backed Shah and his replacement by an explicitly Islamic regime headed by Khomeini himself. Maududi, for his part, founded the *Jamaat-e-Islami*, an Islamist party still active to this day in his home country of Pakistan. Finally, Qutb was a formative influence on the Muslim Brotherhood in the movement's early years,<sup>40</sup> a movement that has only recently been driven back

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<sup>39</sup> Euben and Zaman: "no figure has influenced the political vocabulary of Sunni Islamism more than Mawdudi" (79).

<sup>40</sup> Although as Binder notes, Qutb's influence was especially strong on the militant, as opposed to the

underground by the military apparatus in Egypt after a brief stint as the ruling party following the elections of 2012.

Since the ideas presented in this chapter will be subjected to the scrutiny of liberal reformists in Chapters 2 and Alfarabi in Chapters 3 and 4, they are presented here with minimal editorializing. Khomeini, Maududi, and Qutb must first be allowed to speak for themselves if the challenge they pose to political rationalism is to be fully understood. I have therefore restricted myself, in this chapter, to making clarifying remarks in order to elucidate certain claims whose meaning and importance are perhaps not immediately self-evident.

### The Political Character of Islam

Islam begins from the premise that all that exists is the intelligent creation of God.<sup>41</sup> The earth and everything that is in it are fully under his control. Man is no exception, for in nearly every aspect of his life, he is never free, not even for a single moment, from “God's inexorable Laws of Nature” (Maududi 47).<sup>42</sup> Such brute facts of

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moderate, wing of the Brotherhood. See Binder, 172 ff. for a discussion of the tensions within the movement and Qutb's place within them.

<sup>41</sup> Throughout this chapter, any claims about Islam should be understood to represent the religious understanding of Islamists only, although they may incidentally overlap with mainstream Muslim beliefs.

<sup>42</sup> Maududi presumably means that the laws of nature are “inexorable” from the perspective of human beings and not that God himself is incapable of altering them. Immediately before this statement occurs, Maududi strongly suggests that God is omnipotent; according to his account, the universe is God's creation and “functions completely under [his] control” (46–47). There is no textual basis for attributing to Maududi the

fate as “the growth of a human being, his conditions of health and disease, and his life and death” are beyond man's control, and with respect to them he obeys God's authority perforce (Qutb 57). The sole exception to this otherwise total and irresistible submission to God is our capacity for free choice in the moral sphere; we have been granted the ability to choose whether to obey God or to reject his commandments and in doing so “rebel against Him and our true nature” (Maududi 47).

We are naturally driven to exist in harmony with the rest of creation and thus to be a meaningful part within the larger whole. But as we lack knowledge of “all the laws of the universe,” we are “incapable of making laws for a system of life which can be in complete harmony with the universe” (Qutb 101). The political art, or the art of properly guiding human life, is therefore necessarily tentative as long as it is not informed by comprehensive metaphysical knowledge. Since such knowledge belongs to God alone, it is reasonable that, with respect to voluntary matters, we “make the Divine Law the arbiter,” thus bringing the voluntary and involuntary aspects of our lives into harmony with one another (Qutb 57). This is precisely what Islam asks its adherents to do. The pious believer is simply he who recognizes the absolute sovereignty of God in the moral sphere, just as we cannot help but recognize God's sovereignty in the physical sphere. A Muslim society is composed of such human beings and therefore represents a collective agreement to “limit its volition to the extent prescribed by the All-Knowing God” (Maududi 49).

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position that God is himself subject to natural necessities.

The Islamic political order can therefore be distinguished from all others in that it replaces the sovereignty of man, or some portion thereof, with the sovereignty of God.<sup>43</sup> In doing so, Islam addresses “the root-cause of all evil and mischief in the world,” which is “*the domination of man over man*, be it direct or indirect” (Maududi 133, emphasis in original). Deliverance from worldly masters requires that “[God’s] laws be enforced and that the final decision in *all* affairs be according to these laws” (Qutb 68, emphasis added). It is therefore incumbent upon Muslims to “accept the *Shari’ah without any question* and reject all other laws *in any shape or form*” (Qutb 49, emphasis added).<sup>44</sup> Authority to legislate is not given to any particular class of people, whether priests or other so-called “spokesmen of Allah” (Qutb 68). Islam therefore rejects theocratic rule in which “a priestly class, sharply marked off from the rest of the population, exercises unchecked domination and enforces laws of its own making in the name of God” (Maududi 139). Indeed, the establishment of divine law presupposes “the abolition of man-made laws” altogether, even or especially the laws of those men who falsely claim to speak on behalf of God (Qutb 68). By disposing of these merely human attempts to claim sovereignty, Islam acts as the great liberator of mankind. For although Muslims must submit completely to the authority of God, it is precisely in doing so that they declare their freedom from the rule of other men, as well as the rule of their own desires

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<sup>43</sup> Judaism and Christianity also claim to replace human sovereignty with divine sovereignty, but neither Maududi nor the other Islamists would recognize this claim as legitimate, inasmuch as these faiths are based on revelations that have been, in the Muslim view, altered by human beings.

<sup>44</sup> Qutb immediately goes on to add: “This is Islam. There is no other meaning of Islam.”

(Qutb 67). Paradoxically, it is only through submitting to God that man experiences meaningful freedom.

From this perspective, whatever differences exist between various merely human regimes are emphatically secondary; of far greater significance is the more fundamental division between regimes that recognize and submit to the sovereignty of God and those that do not. Thus, democratic regimes, which rest on popular sovereignty, are in this decisive respect identical to the regime of Pharaoh, who claimed to be the “highest Lord” of his subjects (Maududi 130) and who is repeatedly singled out in the Qur'an for particular reproach.<sup>45</sup> Thus, “Islam, speaking from the view-point of political philosophy, is the very antithesis of secular Western democracy” (Maududi 138). The people, as a political class, are no more justified in claiming sovereignty than is a tyrant, for in neither case is proper respect accorded to God, who alone retains the right of legislation.

In contrast to a secular-democratic regime, a truly Islamic society adopts divine law as the authoritative guide for its collective life; politics and religion, properly understood, are inseparable. This is evident from even a cursory examination of the Qur'an and Hadith, which are far more concerned with the management of society than with matters of “ritual worship” (Khomeini 29). In this way, Islam is emphatically distinct from Christianity as it is popularly understood, the latter consisting merely of “a collection of injunctions pertaining to man's relation to God” (Khomeini 29).<sup>46</sup> This is not

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<sup>45</sup> See, for example, 2:49, 69:9, 73:16.

<sup>46</sup> Khomeini distinguishes this type of “nominal” Christianity from true Christianity, which is presumably more comprehensive in scope.

to deny that Islam, too, possesses ceremonial aspects through which believers express their relationship with the divine. But even these ceremonial aspects have “social and political functions” (Khomeini 81). For example, the gathering of Muslims on a weekly basis for the Friday prayer and on an annual basis for the *hajj* “exert a political as well as moral and doctrinal influence” by fostering a spirit of brotherhood within the community (Khomeini 81). These assemblies offer fertile ground for the development of “the ideological and political movement of Islam” (Khomeini 81). Such was the case during the time of the first Muslims, when “entire armies used to be mobilized by Friday sermon and proceed directly from the mosque to the battlefield” (Khomeini 81). In short, Islam is “a comprehensive religion providing for *every* aspect of human life” (Khomeini 28, emphasis added). Indeed, the injunctions brought down by Muhammad are breathtaking in their wide applicability to human affairs, “extending from even before the embryo is formed until after [man] is placed in the tomb” (Khomeini 30).

Divine law requires for its successful implementation and enforcement “the coercive powers and authority of the state” (Maududi 56). For it is only “with the force and the resources ... of the State” that Muslims can “establish virtue, eradicate evil ... and administer justice” (Maududi 165). In its all-embracing nature, “the Islamic State bears a kind of resemblance to the Fascist and Communist states” (Maududi 146). Nevertheless, Islam does provide a protected space for human liberty; within the “Divine Limits,” laid out by God, man is free to act as he wills (Maududi 142). Whereas fascism and communism are both forms of dictatorship that seek to suppress individual liberty, the Islamic State instead steers a “middle course” (Maududi 146) between the

overbearing control of totalitarianism and the excessive permissiveness of Western democracy (Maududi 152).

The standard to which all Islamic regimes must aspire is provided by none other than Muhammad himself; it is incumbent that “The entire Muslim population runs the state in accordance with the Book of God and the practice of His Prophet” (Maududi 139). Nor can there be any legitimate doubt that Muhammad's role as prophet necessarily involved the assumption of political power. During his lifetime, Muhammad “fulfilled *all* the functions of government,” establishing laws, appointing governors and judges, sending emissaries to foreign powers, and conducting war and peace (Khomeini 18, emphasis added). Furthermore, Muhammad “designated a ruler to succeed him in accordance with divine command” (Khomeini 41), thus indicating the enduring need of the Muslim community for executive leadership.<sup>47</sup> On the basis of both the Qur'an and the historical example of Muhammad's prophetic career, the inherently political character of Islam is clearly established.

### Subordination of Reason to Revelation

The unchallengeable legal sovereignty of God necessarily results in the strict subordination of reason to the explicit commands communicated by revelation. Islam demands—and in fact takes its name from—“submission to the revealed law and surrender of one's freedom to it” (Maududi 72). With respect to those matters that have

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<sup>47</sup> The successor, for Khomeini, is of course ‘Ali ibn Abi Talib, Muhammad's cousin and son-in-law and the rightful successor to the Prophet from the perspective of Shia Muslims.



been explicitly legislated by God in the Qur'an, Islam “denies in the clearest terms the light of man to exercise *any* discretion” (Maududi 72, emphasis added). Believers are characterized by such a “spirit of submission” that “as soon as a command is given, the heads are bowed, and nothing more is required for its implementation except to hear it” (Qutb 46). In accepting “the theoretical foundation of Islam” (Qutb 57)—that there is no deity worthy of worship other than God—Muslims necessarily acknowledge that they “should not decide *any* affair on their own but must refer to Allah's injunctions concerning it and follow them” (Qutb 58, emphasis added). Thus, the Qur'an states, “It is not for the faithful, man or woman, to decide by themselves a matter that has been decided by Allah and His messenger, and whosoever commits an affront to Allah and His messenger is certainly on the wrong path” (Maududi 72-73, citing Qur'an 33:36).

The Qur'an offers man foundational knowledge about his place in the world, such as can be found in no other source. Through the gift of revelation, God explains to man “the secret of his existence and the secret of the universe surrounding him ... who he is, where he has come from, for what purpose and where he will go in the end” (Qutb 37). With respect to those questions that most urgently concern us, the inability of the unaided human intellect to provide sufficient answers is underlined by the capacity of divine inspiration to do precisely that. Furthermore, divine guidance is necessary for even the most basic *moral* clarity, since “morality can *only* be built on faith,” and faith in turn requires “that Allah's sovereignty *alone* extend over hearts and consciences in human relationships and morals” (Qutb 43-44, emphasis added). Though we are tempted to trust that we correctly perceive right and wrong, revelation is the ultimate standard against

which our moral intuition must be measured. Thus, “Religion is to be a criterion, to approve what is good and to discard what is evil” (Qutb 97).

Submitting to divine guidance, even when its wisdom is not apparent to us, is conducive to our own good: “If at any time men think that their good is in going against what Allah Almighty has legislated, then ... they are deluded in their thinking” (Qutb 97). We are therefore best able to attain our proper end when our behavior is brought into conformity with the will of God. It is, for this reason, a critical error to depend too heavily upon human wisdom, with all its attendant limitations. The insignificance of human knowledge when compared to divine wisdom, if appreciated fully, leads us to instead place our trust in the comprehensive knowledge of God, for “Allah knows, and [we] do not know” (Qutb 97).

But what is the basis of our trust that the guidance offered in the Qur'an is, in fact, the product of divine wisdom and therefore worthy of being obeyed? For the choice to subordinate our own perception of what is good (either in the sense of being morally correct or being beneficial) to the particular injunctions of a text is sensible only insofar as we are confident that the text reflects a wisdom higher than our own, as would be the case if its author were omniscient. While we may be tempted to judge the genuineness of any purportedly divine law on the basis of its effects in the world, relying on this criterion obviously presupposes that we have knowledge of what ends are properly sought by law, thus begging the fundamental question. In order to avoid this circularity, faith that the Qur'an represents genuine divine wisdom must not be predicated on our merely human perception of what is good. Instead, “love of the Divine Law ... should be a *consequence*

of pure submission to Allah ... and not because it is superior to other systems in such and such details” (Qutb 49, emphasis added). In other words, we should not submit to God because we love his law; rather, we should love God’s law because we submit to him. Pious humility before God therefore *precedes* any attachment to divine law.

But if it is not the superiority of *shari‘a* to all other systems of law (a superiority that Qutb asserts (49)) that leads us to submit to God, what does? Qutb does not offer any explicit answer to this question, but he does make clear in this context that *before* religious legislation can be implemented, “belief ought to be imprinted on hearts and rule over consciences” (47). Through some means that remain unspecified, the heart and conscience of a human being are infused with religious faith, even before he has seen anything of divine law. Our conscience, our sense of right and wrong, does not lead us to religious faith, but submits to and is ruled by it.

As a practical result of our limited human knowledge, the letter of the divinely revealed law must be followed with absolute strictness. This is so both in matters of criminal punishment—an adulterer must be given “one hundred lashes in the presence of the people, in the exact manner that has been specified”—as well as administration—a ruler “does not have the right to levy even a *shahi*’ in excess of what the law provides” (Khomeini 79).<sup>48</sup> When such prescriptions are followed, “law is actually the ruler” of an Islamic society, and the people have no reason to fear arbitrary punishments from the state (Khomeini 46). Those matters that have been decided by God are not within the

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<sup>48</sup> Khomeini refers to the smallest unit of currency formerly used in Iran.

authority of reason to alter, for “individual opinion, even if it be that of the Prophet himself, cannot intervene in matters of government or divine law” (Khomeini 57). The role of Muhammad was therefore strictly one of communication; the prophet is a vessel through which the word of God is conveyed to mankind, and at no point do his merely human opinions have any effect on the content of what is thereby conveyed. The ideal ruler is one who best upholds the divine law *as given*; the only knowledge required of him is “knowledge of the provisions and ordinances of Islam” (Khomeini 60).

### Permanent Validity of Divine Law

It is a straightforward corollary of the claim that divine law is unalterable that it retains its binding authority in all times and places. Thus, “the ordinances of Islam are not limited with respect to time or place; they are permanent and must be enacted until the end of time” (Khomeini 41); God has “ordained [Islam] as the religion for the whole of mankind, given it the status of the last Divine Message for humanity, and made it to be a guide for all the inhabitants of this planet in all their affairs until the end of time” (Qutb 29). The political guidance contained in the Qur'an therefore applies far beyond the immediate historical context of its revelation. Islam “is not related to any ... special conditions and environment peculiar to the first Muslim community” (Qutb 53). To claim that the laws of Islam “are restricted to a particular time or place is contrary to the essential credal bases of Islam” (Khomeini 42). As the product of divine wisdom, *shari‘a* avoids the problem of obsolescence that characterizes all merely human attempts to legislate, for indeed it is an essential feature of “man-made theories and religions” that

they “become outmoded and distorted” (96). By submitting to God, the believing Muslim therefore follows a way of life that will guide him throughout his lifetime and will continue to guide the pious among his progeny until the end of the human race.

Nevertheless, *shari‘a* is not *wholly* static; rather, it consists of two parts, “the part ... which has a permanent and unalterable character and is, as such, extremely beneficial for mankind, and that part which is flexible and has thus the potentialities of meeting the ever-increasing requirements of every time and age” (Maududi 59). The unalterable part of Islamic law derives from the Qur'an and Hadith. It consists of explicit laws (such as prohibitions, punishments, and inheritance rules), directive principles (general rules derived from explicit laws, such as a prohibition on all intoxicants rather than just alcohol), and limitations on human activity (such as limiting the number of wives to four) (Maududi 59). It is essential that Islam possess an unalterable core, for “if there are no permanent elements in a culture and every part of it is subject to change, amendment and modification, it is not an independent culture at all. It is just like a fluid, which can take any and every shape and can always suffer transfiguration and metamorphosis” (Maududi 59-60). Furthermore, it is precisely with respect to those subjects addressed explicitly by *shari‘a* that “the human mind is likely to commit errors and go astray” (Maududi 60). The fixed aspects of divine law are therefore akin to barricades on a high mountain path; they do not deprive us of our liberty, but rather save us from the destruction that would result from following our inclinations (Maududi 144).

The dynamic aspect of Islamic law in turn comprises four parts: interpretation (*Ta'weel*), analogical deduction (*Qiyas*), juristic judgment (*Ijtihad*), and juristic

preference (*Istihsan*). Interpretation refers to the sometimes diverse opinions of religious scholars over the meaning of a given Qur'anic or Prophetic injunction. Analogical deduction involves applying guidance from a similar case to one for which there is no direct guidance. Juristic judgment arises in cases for which there are not even relevant precedents; jurists must instead obey the general principles of Islamic law. Finally, juristic preference consists of making rules regarding matters not explicitly prohibited by the Qur'an or Hadith (Maududi 60-61). These legal powers, taken together, allow Islam to adapt to new situations as they arise.

Islamic law therefore allows some room for flexibility, as any system of law must. Since legal prescriptions often require interpretation and cannot speak to all possible circumstances that may arise, human discretion plays an unavoidable role. Yet precisely because it is through such discretion that dynamism (and therefore the potential for dangerous innovation) enters Islamic law, its exercise must be restricted to those who possess “profound legal knowledge and a trained mind” (Maududi 61). Nor are these intellectual criteria sufficient; above all else, a jurist must display “unstinted devotion and loyalty to Islam and a deep sense of accountability before God” (Maududi 62). Individual judgment, whatever form it may take, must operate “according to well defined principles which are consistent with Allah's religion and not merely following opinions or desires” (Qutb 96). The proper exercise of discretion involves “a sincere attempt ... to find out the will of Allah Almighty through reference to His Book and the teachings of His Messenger” (Qutb 97).

One aspect of legal discretion involves “determining the extent of [*shari'a*’s]

applicability or non-applicability in case of exceptional circumstances” (Maududi 75). Thus, there may be certain cases in which the particular injunctions of *shari‘a* must not be applied. Indeed, “Every law in the world makes provision for exceptions from the general rules in abnormal and extraordinary situations,” and the law of Islam is no different in this regard (Maududi 83). It is not immediately clear how this claim can be reconciled with the earlier assertion that the explicit injunctions of divine law are unalterable and that, as a result, the law is permanently valid. However, when properly understood, this dispensation from strict adherence to a legal injunction in no way undermines the earlier claim. Exceptional circumstances that may arise at any time, in every age, and which require a prudent setting aside of normal legal procedures, are quite a different matter from broad historical shifts that render certain positive injunctions of Islamic law obsolete. Recognizing the occasional need to depart from a strict implementation of law is therefore emphatically distinct from asserting that the world has so fundamentally changed that even *normal* circumstances require setting aside the law. This latter claim is nowhere made by the Islamists, but is in fact strongly denied.

In short, divine law is sufficient for the guidance of human beings and does not stand in need of being updated or revised by reason. Nor should believers expect God to update his revealed law, since after the completion of Muhammad's prophetic mission, “no further revealed guidance is to come to which it may become necessary for mankind to turn” (Maududi 73). God's revelation to Muhammad is the final, comprehensive guidance for man, and it will continue to meet the needs of Muslim societies for as long as the world exists.

## The Importance of Worldly Happiness

Although divine law ultimately directs man towards eternal happiness in the afterlife, it produces worldly benefits as well. The pious Muslim is not forced to choose between a happy mortal existence and entrance into paradise, for the laws of Islam “provide for his well-being in this world and the hereafter” (Khomeini 36). Following the guidance of God, the believer “will succeed in this world and in the next—in this world he will have a life of peace and contentment and in the hereafter he will qualify himself for the heaven of eternal bliss” (Maududi 155). Islam is therefore not exclusively an other-worldly religion.<sup>49</sup> Rather, it seeks to establish the “Kingdom of God” on earth (Maududi 154), through the instrument of law. Indeed, it is only through the effective establishment of divine law that human beings are brought into harmony with the rest of God's creation, and “when harmony between human life and the universe ensues, its results are not postponed for the next world but are operative even in this world” (Qutb 104).

Islamic law is therefore necessarily more comprehensive and far-reaching than law in the context of a liberal regime; beyond merely protecting the members of society from aggressive violence at the hands of outsiders and each other, divine law seeks “to produce integrated and virtuous human beings who are walking embodiments of [it]” (Khomeini 20).<sup>50</sup> Virtue, in turn, is necessary for human happiness, and in fact, “The

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<sup>49</sup> Consider, in this context, the assessment of Islam given by Weber (Chapter 16) and Nietzsche (712).

<sup>50</sup> In this way, Islamic law displays a similarity to the classical understanding of law. Compare, in this context,



Glorious Qur'an and the Sunnah contain *all* the laws and ordinances man needs in order to attain happiness and the perfection of his state” (Khomeini 20, emphasis added).

Similarly, the suffering of those who reject the laws of God is not postponed until the afterlife. Rather, one who chooses the path of evil faces “corruption, disruption and frustration in this world,” in addition to “colossal misfortune in the life to come—that abode of pain and misery which is called Hell” (Maududi 155).<sup>51</sup>

As a predictable result of this emphasis on worldly happiness, sacrifice does not appear as a prominent theme in the works under consideration. But are there not cases in which is it precisely by foregoing a pleasant worldly existence that a Muslim qualifies himself for perfect and eternal happiness in the afterlife? The Qur'an itself seems to indicate that this is the case, stating, “Do not think of those who are killed in the way of God as dead; rather, they are alive, given provision in the presence of their Lord” (3:169). Even in less severe cases, where believers are not required to lay down their lives, giving priority to the needs of others is presented as morally praiseworthy; thus, in speaking of the Muslims of Medina who provided generous hospitality to the newly arriving emigrants from Mecca, the Qur'an says, “They love those who emigrated to them ... and prefer them over themselves, even though they are in poverty” (59:9). Thus, it would seem that an excessively narrow focus on securing worldly well-being goes against the spirit of Islam and therefore places one's piety into question.

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Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* 1179b31-32 with Locke's *Second Treatise* I.3.

<sup>51</sup> Consider, as a point of contrast, *Sahih Muslim* 2956, in which Muhammad is recorded as saying: “This world is the prison of the believer and the paradise of the infidel.”

However, it would be a mistake to read the Islamist emphasis on the importance of worldly happiness as an outright rejection of sacrifice or a refusal to recognize the moral excellence of those who place the needs of others ahead of their own. Rather, this theme serves merely to clarify the objective sought by sacrifice. At no point in the Qur'an are believers asked to sacrifice themselves so that the Muslim community will suffer, but rather so that the community will benefit. Similarly, Islamic law is by no means designed to produce suffering, but rather prosperity. What the Islamists therefore wish to assert in the strongest possible terms is the guaranteed flourishing of any *political community* that implements divine law out of an appropriate spirit of submission to God. It is not necessarily the case that every individual Muslim will have a pleasant worldly existence, as is demonstrated with dramatic clarity by those martyrs who gladly forsake their own worldly happiness for the sake of both eternal reward for themselves and temporal happiness for the Muslim community.

Therefore, it is no distortion of Qur'anic teaching to assert that Islam does not require the pious community at large to make itself miserable in this world in order to earn reward in the next. Rather, obedience to divine law brings tangible, worldly benefits to the Muslim community. Of course, the ultimate goal of every believer is to achieve a more lasting happiness; whatever goods piety may bring about in this life, the rewards of following divine law only “reach their perfection in the Hereafter” (Qutb 104).

## Synopsis

There is, with respect to these central themes, broad agreement among the most

influential Islamists. Khomeini, Maududi, and Qutb collectively offer an interpretation of Islam according to which the faith is fundamentally incompatible with liberal democracy, due primarily to their attribution of legislative sovereignty to God alone. The capacity of human beings to guide their own affairs in the absence of divine assistance is explicitly denied, and while prudence is granted a subservient role, *shari'a* is the ultimate authority in all affairs addressed directly by it. Historical development does not render any aspect of divine law obsolete, and thus the original injunctions of Islam are no less binding upon Muslims today than they were upon the community that witnessed their revelation. Imposing the divine law upon society through the coercive capacities of the state is the only path to the worldly happiness of political societies, nor can any individual achieve abiding happiness in the afterlife except through submission to God alone.

## Chapter 2: Liberal Reform Efforts in Islam

The religious interpretation offered by Islamists is hardly representative of the breadth of political thought in Islam. Beginning especially in the nineteenth century, several liberal-minded Muslim reformists have argued for a dramatic reconsideration of those elements of their religion that appear most inimical to modernity. For these scholars, such elements do not constitute the core of Islam, but are rather the product of a tradition of religious interpretation that had unfortunately and unjustifiably stagnated in the middle ages.<sup>52</sup> The reformist view of Islam, inasmuch as it recognizes a critically important or authoritative role for reason in religious matters, represents a direct challenge to Islamism.<sup>53</sup> Moreover, this insistence on rationalism has direct political implications; liberal Muslims reject the view that Islam consists of a rigid set of laws to be imposed on a community via the coercive powers of the state.<sup>54</sup> While it is outside the scope of the present study to offer a comprehensive survey of such efforts, I have chosen in this chapter to focus on six prominent thinkers, each of whom share the basic goal of bringing about a more rational politics in the Muslim world: ‘Ali ‘Abd ar-Raziq, Muhammad Sa‘id al-‘Ashmawi, Muhammad ‘Abduh, Muhammad Iqbal, Ziauddin Sardar, and Abdolkarim Soroush.

‘Abd ar-Raziq was an Egyptian religious judge (*qadi*) and later a government

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<sup>52</sup> On the modernist Muslim criticism of *taqlid* (conformity to legal precedent), see Euben and Zaman 7; Kurzman 8.

<sup>53</sup> On the importance of reason from the very outset of the liberal Muslim tradition, see Kurzman 7-8.

<sup>54</sup> ‘Abd ar-Raziq 101-102; Soroush 128-129; Iqbal 118; Ashmawi 36-37; Sardar 15.

minister. His 1925 work, *Islam and the Foundations of Political Power (Al-Islam Wa Usul Al-Hukm)*, sparked intense controversy due to its claim that Muhammad exercised only spiritual, and not political, power over his followers. ‘Ashmawi was an Egyptian scholar who, among other political achievements, served as Chief Justice of the High Court. His work, *Political Islam (al-Islam al-siyasi)*, first published in 1987, argues directly against the political and religious claims of Khomeini, Maududi, and Qutb.<sup>55</sup> ‘Abduh, who lived and wrote in the nineteenth century, is the earliest scholar featured in this chapter, and a formative influence upon subsequent Muslim reformists. Born and educated in Egypt, ‘Abduh was appointed Grand Mufti in 1899, six years before his death. *The Theology of Unity (Risalat al-Tauhid)*, among his most popular works, was first published in 1897 and contains ‘Abduh’s argument in favor of Islamic rationalism. Iqbal is widely regarded as the intellectual founder of Pakistan, due to his prominent support for the formation of an independent Muslim state in South Asia. *The Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam*, first published in 1930, offers his clearest statement on the relationship between Islam and modernity. Ziauddin Sardar is a British-Pakistani Muslim reformist and futurist. These two aspects of his scholarly career are brought together in *The Future of Muslim Civilization*, published in 1987, in which Sardar offers the Muslim world guidance in the pursuit of a more peaceful and prosperous future. Finally, Abdolkarim Soroush is an Iranian reformist and scholar. Although appointed by Khomeini to the Cultural Revolution Committee shortly after the

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<sup>55</sup> ‘Ashmawi refers explicitly to the works of Maududi and Qutb on p. 24. Although Khomeini is never mentioned by name, the Iranian regime that he founded is criticized on pp. 61–62 and 90–92.

Islamic Revolution of 1979, Soroush resigned from this position after four years, and has had no further involvement with the regime. *Reason, Freedom, and Democracy in Islam*, published in 2000, offers a synoptic view of the development of Soroush's political theory over the course of his career.

While ‘Ashmawi, Sardar, and Soroush are writing after the intellectual development of Islamism in the mid-twentieth century and are therefore able to respond directly to it, the works of ‘Abduh, ‘Abd ar-Raziq, and Iqbal predate this development by several decades. Nevertheless, these earlier works offer an understanding of Islam that is deeply influential upon and, in most fundamental respects, in agreement with more recent liberal reform efforts. For this reason, the six works examined in this chapter, although representing a span of over 100 years, are presented side-by-side as collectively opposing the Islamist view of the proper relationship between religion and politics. While the authors featured in this chapter do not agree on all particulars, they are united in their efforts to demonstrate the compatibility of reason and revelation.

### Apolitical Islam

By arguing that the relationship of Islam to politics has been fundamentally misunderstood by traditional scholars, ‘Abd ar-Raziq and ‘Ashmawi are leading representatives of the political strand of religious reform in Islam. They have therefore been chosen to represent the broader trend within liberal Muslim theory of denying (or at least fundamentally reframing in a liberal fashion) the political character of Islam, and

therefore contradicting the first Islamist theme explored in Chapter 1.<sup>56</sup>

### **‘Ali ‘Abd ar-Raziq**

‘Ali ‘Abd ar-Raziq views Islam as emphatically apolitical, stating that politics “is a matter which religion has left to humankind, for people to organize in accordance with the principles of reason” (117). The independence of politics from Islam depends, in his account, on the claim that Muhammad’s authority over his followers was strictly spiritual and in no way inheritable. It is on this basis that ‘Abd ar-Raziq justifies his dramatic statement, “there could be no religious authority after the Prophet” (107); indeed, even the first four caliphs were purely secular rulers. The path by which ‘Abd ar-Raziq arrives at this controversial position is best understood by beginning with his distinction between prophecy and kingship. As he makes clear, “the mission of a prophet is very different from the position of a king, and there is no necessary link between these two” (68). ‘Abd ar-Raziq points to the example of Jesus, whose divine message “did not prevent him from advocating obedience to Caesar and endorsing his authority” (68). But while there is no necessary connection between prophethood and kingship—between spiritual and worldly rank—the two are not mutually exclusive; ‘Abd ar-Raziq must admit that there are those “very few figures in the history of the prophets with the combined attributes, decreed by God, of a prophet and a king” (68). The critical question, therefore, is whether Muhammad was such a prophet-king, or instead strictly a religious messenger in the manner of Jesus.

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<sup>56</sup> For examples of this theme in the works of other Muslim thinkers, see Khalaf-Allah 38-39; Hussein 74.

Recognizing that “the prevailing view among Muslims” is to view the Prophet as the founder of a political state over which he himself ruled (69), ‘Abd ar-Raziq nevertheless asserts that “Muhammad was strictly a Messenger, entrusted with a purely religious mission, uncompromised by any desire for kingship or temporal power” (81). The prophetic career of Muhammad, properly understood, is therefore not fundamentally different from that of Jesus. ‘Abd ar-Raziq, of course, cannot deny the obvious historical fact that Muhammad exercised some degree of authority over his people, but as he immediately goes on to clarify, “this is not the same as the power or authority that a temporal ruler wields over his subjects” (82). The soundness of ‘Abd ar-Raziq's central hypothesis therefore depends on his ability to distinguish plausibly the authority that Muhammad undeniably wielded over his followers from political authority as such.

To this end, ‘Abd ar-Raziq claims that although Muhammad established a “religious union”—of which “he was the head, the unparalleled Imam”—this union did not constitute a political entity, despite the fact that Muhammad “secured [it] by means of the word and by means of the sword” (86, emphasis added). But in what way is a union held together by a combination of persuasion and coercion not a political entity? ‘Abd ar-Raziq attempts to meet this objection with syllogistic reasoning. First, “A person who shuns *any* form of control or dominion over men can scarcely be regarded as a head in the temporal sense. For domination, power or authority—*of unlimited scope*—is definitive of a temporal position of power” (88, emphasis added). Second, Muhammad was not permitted by God to force anyone to accept Islam. Since Muhammad’s dominion was limited, inasmuch as he refrained from imposing faith by force, he cannot be said to



have wielded political authority.

‘Abd ar-Raziq wishes to stress that membership in the religious union led by Muhammad was strictly voluntary. Although he sometimes employed coercive means “to *reaffirm* his teachings and *reinforce* the new faith” (95, emphasis added), thus securing the union partly by the sword, no one was coerced into accepting Islam. But while the minor premise of ‘Abd ar-Raziq’s syllogism is accurate (and indeed, he is able to adduce a slew of Qur’anic verses supporting the claim that faith in Islam cannot be coerced), it is unclear why he believes that Muhammad’s refusal to force Islam upon anyone precluded his exercise of political authority in other ways. The claim that temporal or political authority as such is absolute, contained in ‘Abd ar-Raziq’s major premise, is therefore in need of elaboration.

Taken in isolation, the assertion that political authority is necessarily absolute could be interpreted to mean that political authority subsumes all other forms of authority, as suggested, for example, by Aristotle.<sup>57</sup> However, given the context in which the claim is made by ‘Abd ar-Raziq, this interpretation does not lend cogency to his argument. For as we have seen, he asserts that Muhammad’s refusal to coerce religious faith is evidence that he did not exercise political authority. But the decision to allow religious freedom may itself be understood as a political act and by no means necessarily implies the subordination of political authority to any other. ‘Abd ar-Raziq would therefore have failed to prove that Muhammad’s authority was not absolute in this

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<sup>57</sup> *Nicomachean Ethics* 1094a23–28.

particular sense.

An alternative understanding is that political authority necessarily imposes itself upon everyone within its jurisdiction. Thus, the argument could be made, by allowing entrance into Islam to remain a matter of free choice, Muhammad abjured political power, strictly speaking. However, this would only hold if, in addition to allowing non-Muslims religious freedom, Muhammad sought to coerce them in no other respect. A political ruler may very well grant religious liberty to his subjects without renouncing *all* political authority over them. It may therefore be the case that with respect to certain matters other than private faith, Muhammad did impose his rule over *everyone* in the lands under Muslim control. And indeed, we find in Qur'an 9:29 a command to levy a tax (referred to as *jizyah*) upon the non-Muslim communities living under Islamic rule. At no point does 'Abd ar-Raziq address this verse.

Finally, 'Abd ar-Raziq could be suggesting that political authority is absolute in the sense of being totalitarian. Although such a position would be surprising, there is some evidence that this is his intended meaning. For immediately before asserting that Muhammad cannot rightfully be regarded as a temporal ruler, 'Abd ar-Raziq states that the former was not "a tyrant given to coercion" (88), as if this observation proves the purely spiritual character of his authority. If this is indeed what 'Abd ar-Raziq means, he would be committing the error of conflating political authority with tyranny. But as soon as the possibility of limited political power is recognized<sup>58</sup>—as soon as tyranny is

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<sup>58</sup> The decision to limit political power may be a reflexive political act, as noted above. But precisely as a result of such an act, political power would not be tyrannical.

understood to be a subset, and not the entirety, of temporal power—the argument fails.

In short, whichever way ‘Abd ar-Raziq’s claim is best to be understood, the fact that Muhammad did not seek to force religious faith on anyone is in no way a demonstration that his authority was apolitical. It is not surprising that ‘Abd ar-Raziq must resort to such arguments in order to defend his thesis, for arrayed against him is an overwhelming abundance of historical evidence that Muhammad was not merely a religious messenger in the manner of Jesus, but a legislator as well.<sup>59</sup> It is therefore apparent that ‘Abd ar-Raziq fails to appreciate—or at least fails to bring attention to—Muhammad’s role as lawgiver or lawbringer. And indeed, it is this aspect of the latter’s prophetic career that most jarringly opposes ‘Abd ar-Raziq’s central claim: “How far they are from each other! What a distance lies between them—between religion, on the one hand, and politics, on the other!” (85). Muhammad was certainly not a tyrant, but to deny his role as the transmitter and enforcer of divine law—a law that did not coerce faith but did regulate behavior—is to deny the most conspicuous aspect of his prophetic career.

Even leaving aside its historical inaccuracy, ‘Abd ar-Raziq’s thesis suffers from another flaw. For his claim that those of Muhammad’s actions that “appear to be political” were in fact “nothing of the sort” (94-95), if accepted, leaves us deprived of any human standard by which to judge those actions. While political action can be evaluated on the basis of its ability to achieve political goals, such as the well-being of a community or the defeat of its enemies, no such evaluation is possible when the actions

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<sup>59</sup> Binder: ‘Abd ar-Raziq’s “insistence that the Prophet was not a political leader is, of course, hardly acceptable from the historical as well as the traditional point of view” (131-132).

in question are in no way directed toward measurable, worldly goals.<sup>60</sup> Nevertheless, ‘Abd ar-Raziq makes the astonishing claim that prophets are wholly unconcerned with the question of “whether [religious legislation] is effective in the sphere of worldly life” (102). This view of divine law as being entirely otherworldly opens the door to irrational religious fundamentalism. For in criticizing a law as obsolete, regressive, or wicked, we refer primarily to its worldly effects; once these are declared irrelevant, what remaining basis does such criticism have?<sup>61</sup> Far from vindicating the role of prudence in Islam, ‘Abd ar-Raziq, by attempting to depoliticize a political religion, has thereby removed the most promising ground for its exercise.

### **Muhammad Sa‘id al-‘Ashmawi**

‘Ashmawi, for his part, is equally insistent that religion and politics are properly separated. Only in this way can the purity of Islam be maintained, since “to carry on politics in the name of religion is to transform the latter into conflicting groups and

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<sup>60</sup> There are non-political actions that nevertheless aim at measurable goals and are therefore subject to rational evaluation; the worth of a doctor, for example, may be judged on the basis of his ability to heal. However, ‘Abd ar-Raziq is specifically concerned with dispelling the popular misconception (in his view) that Muhammad was a political ruler, and as I go on to show, this leads him to assert that Muhammad was unconcerned with the worldly effects of his apparently political edicts.

<sup>61</sup> Portions of revelation that display outright logical incoherence or factual inaccuracy (such as 1 Kings 7:23, which suggests an impossible ratio between the diameter and circumference of Solomon’s “Bronze Sea”), would still reasonably be subject to criticism. However, the liberal thinkers reviewed in this chapter, ‘Abd ar-Raziq included, are concerned with practical prescriptions whose worldly effects no longer match the original intention of revelation.

interminable struggles ... [and] to reduce its goals to a search for prestige, positions of power, and financial gain” (11). The unfortunately common view that Islam is an inherently political faith results from an inability to distinguish “between Islam and its political manifestations,” an attitude that has “extended for 14 centuries,” despite being “based upon an error” (14). In truth, “political action is the work of simple mortals who are neither sacred nor infallible; governments are elected by people, not by God” (18).

According to ‘Ashmawi, the basic principles of political Islam—“Sovereignty belongs only to God, the sole judge and legislator; ... Government must be according to divine Law solely and entirely; none of its provisions can be amended, suspended or considered relative or obsolete” (25-26)—are never demonstrated by their advocates, but merely assumed. He therefore claims that political Islam “provides premises on which all is founded a priori” (24). Against these assumptions, ‘Ashmawi asserts that God “expressly left to the Islamic community the work of legislating on the basis of reason in function of the needs of place and time” (37). The alteration or suspension of particular legal injunctions brought by Muhammad is therefore justified, provided that such decisions are made on the basis of reason. The Muslim community is under no obligation to obey legislation that has been rendered obsolete by the passage of time. Without denying that God retains ultimate sovereignty, ‘Ashmawi asserts that “in this world, [sovereignty] belongs to man” (27).

In order for this claim to be persuasive, ‘Ashmawi must show that the specific legal decisions of Muhammad do not retain binding authority over the Muslim community today, in which case the role of reason would be restricted to determining

how the precedent set by the prophet is best acted upon. To this end, ‘Ashmawi distinguishes between the Qur’anic usage of *hukuma*, which “designates exclusively the administration of justice,” and *amr*, “which signifies command and authority” (55). A large portion of modern Muslims’ misunderstanding of the relationship between Islam and politics stems from the fact that *hukuma* is today used to mean “the exercise of political power over the members of a given collectivity in the context of a state,” thus blurring its distinction from *amr* (55). Against those who are tempted to consider Muhammad the head of a state, ‘Ashmawi asserts that the authority wielded by the Prophet was, even after the emigration of the Muslim community from Mecca to Medina, limited to “the administration of justice” (64). Strictly speaking, Muhammad therefore did not exercise *political* power, even in the later stages of his prophetic career.

The persuasiveness of ‘Ashmawi’s account depends on the coherence of distinguishing between the administration of justice on one hand and the exercise of political power on the other. It is not immediately apparent what is meant by this distinction, but we receive some clarification when ‘Ashmawi states, “The term *hukm*<sup>62</sup> in the context of the Koran does not mean political authority as it would in modern languages, but the judiciary in the sense of deciding instances of litigation” (32). He therefore does not deny that Muhammad possessed judicial authority.<sup>63</sup> This raises an immediate question: if Muhammad’s authority was indeed restricted to “deciding

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<sup>62</sup> *Hukm* is a cognate of *hukuma*.

<sup>63</sup> ‘Ashmawi cites in this context *Qur’an* 4:65 and 4:105.

instances of litigation,” what are we to make of the “legal prescriptions” found in the Qur’an, whose existence ‘Ashmawi has already noted (30)? The power to enact law is necessarily prior to the power of determining its proper application in particular instances. To be fair, in the passage discussing these legal prescriptions, ‘Ashmawi makes the argument that such verses constitute a very small portion of the Qur’an as a whole. Considered collectively, these verses are so uncomprehensive and imprecise that the legislative aspect of Islam cannot be considered “more important than the ethical aspect” (31). Nevertheless, it is unclear how the promulgation of laws, however few and imprecise, is a manifestation of *hukm*, as it has been described above.

‘Ashmawi’s conception of Muhammad’s authority receives some support from the recognition that the laws contained in the Qur’an are not the prophet’s own creation. For as ‘Ashmawi reminds us, “every new rule of law was dictated to [Muhammad] by Revelation” (64). Since Muhammad was not himself the author, but merely the communicator, of these prescriptions, he may still be described as exercising only the power of *hukm*. Muhammad would differ from all subsequent possessors of this power because only in his case was the law revealed to him directly; all other judges receive the law through the mediation of the prophet. Legislative power, strictly speaking, should therefore not be attributed to Muhammad, who merely conveyed the message bestowed upon him, with no input of his own (Qur’an 53:3–4).

Above all, ‘Ashmawi wishes to deny that Muhammad wielded executive power; it is for this reason that he stresses the *modern* definition of *hukuma* as involving “the administration of public affairs, *especially by the executive branch*” (55, emphasis

added). But once it is conceded that Muhammad's role as prophet required judicial power, it becomes difficult to insist that he did not possess in addition executive power with which to enforce his decisions, for where else could such power reside if not with the prophet himself? According to 'Ashmawi, the government in place during the latter stages of Muhammad's prophetic career was, in fact, "a government of God;" Muhammad was merely an "intermediary" (64). Nor is 'Ashmawi speaking here of the prophet's role as legislative intermediary, but rather as executive intermediary, as the context makes clear.<sup>64</sup> 'Ashmawi therefore denies Muhammad's possession of executive power for precisely the same reason he denies Muhammad's possession of legislative power: these are properly attributed to God, who directed Muhammad in all essential respects. The only authority that Muhammad possessed himself was that of administering justice. It is for this reason that 'Ashmawi recognizes the possibility of Muhammad erring in this regard only: "the judgment of Muhammad, despite his dignity as a prophet, remains that of a man and not of God" (34).

After indicating that Muhammad did not himself possess executive power in any true sense, 'Ashmawi immediately proceeds to claim that Abu Bakr, the first caliph, could not be considered a legitimate successor to Muhammad (64). To draw out the connection between these two claims, the fact that God was the true executive of the

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<sup>64</sup> "During the Prophet's regime every new rule of law was dictated to him by Revelation, which also controlled its application. *Further*, the government of that period was a government of God, by the intermediary of the Prophet whom God had chosen" (64). Governance is being attributed to God *in addition to* his role as legislator.



regime established by Muhammad precludes the possibility that any human being could inherit executive power from the prophet. As ‘Ashmawi elsewhere states, “*only* during the reign of the Prophet was government that of the sovereign God, for according to Islamic dogma Muhammad acted under the control and direction of divine Revelation” (29, emphasis added).

Here, the most important consequence of ‘Ashmawi’s peculiar conception of Muhammad’s leadership becomes clear. For by claiming that the prophet possessed neither executive nor legislative power himself, ‘Ashmawi is able to deny that any such power is inheritable from him. As such, after Muhammad “there remained only men, all equal, none of whom was, like him, inspired directly by Revelation” (29). To this we may add that none of us are, like him, authorized to channel God’s legislative or executive power. ‘Ashmawi wishes to justify, on this basis, the freedom of human beings to “[regulate] the details” of Qur’anic laws “with a view to possibly substituting others in function of the needs of each country and epoch” (99). Since no one has inherited the power of prophecy, reason must determine what is best with respect to every particular time and place.

However, by asserting the political equality of all Muslims after Muhammad, ‘Ashmawi lends as much support to the Islamist argument as he does to his own. For in the minds of Islamists, it is precisely the lack of continued divine guidance that necessitates absolute adherence to divine law in its original, literal sense; since none of us have inherited the power of prophecy, we must humbly submit to the injunctions communicated to us by the last man who did possess such power.

‘Ashmawi wishes to argue that the only political arrangement that gives proper respect to the unique station of the prophet is one that grants reason supervisory authority over the particular divine commands communicated by him. But does not the Islamist alternative, according to which those very same commands are equally binding upon all Muslims, have at least as plausible a claim to respect the singular authority of Muhammad? Indeed, ‘Ashmawi has gone to such lengths to argue that various key aspects of Muhammad’s authority were due solely to his unique relationship with God that it is difficult to see why Muslims today should not, in deference to that singular moment in mankind’s spiritual history, simply adhere to his legacy rather than attempt to update it. We are in need of further arguments if we are to prefer ‘Ashmawi’s interpretation of equality to the Islamist interpretation.

This difficulty is highlighted by ‘Ashmawi’s attempt to explain a particularly problematic verse of the Qur’an: “They will not believe till they make you (Muhammad) judge concerning that over which they dispute. Then they will not find in themselves the possibility of escaping what you have decided and will surrender totally” (4:65).

‘Ashmawi argues that this verse only applies to “the society of the first believers” (33), but he fails to explain why it is not equally a characteristic of successive generations of believers that they, too, “surrender totally” to the decisions of Muhammad. He further explains that simply because the earliest believers submitted in this way to Muhammad’s judgment, “one cannot say on that account . . . that one loses the character of being a believer if he does not hand over voluntarily to *another man*, no matter how wise and highly placed, the settling of his affairs” (33, emphasis added). But this is not a fair

understanding of the Islamist argument; ‘Ashmawi leaves unaddressed the stronger claim that believers should not defer to anyone’s judgment other than Muhammad’s (as recorded in the Hadith), nor respect any law except the one brought by him (as recorded in the Qur’an). By suggesting that non-prophetic human beings be allowed to alter divine law, ‘Ashmawi opens himself to the criticism that it is he, more than any Islamist, who asks Muslims to hand over their affairs to someone other than Muhammad.<sup>65</sup>

### Law Above Reason

Neither ‘Abduh nor Iqbal deny the legal or political character of Islam. Instead, both thinkers couple a recognition of Islam's political character with an insistence that the religion is dynamic and fully capable of providing much-needed guidance in the modern world. Unfortunately, their progressive understanding of Islam is undermined by their relatively low appraisal of reason, which prevents them from consistently opposing the second Islamist theme discussed in Chapter 1, namely that reason is properly subordinated to the express dictates of revelation. ‘Abduh and Iqbal have therefore been chosen to represent the difficulty of combining a progressive view of Islam with the assertion that divine law is ultimately beyond the ability of the human mind to comprehend.

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<sup>65</sup> Nor can ‘Ashmawi reasonably be understood to mean that every Muslim should be able to determine the applicability of divine law for himself. At no point does he suggest such a radical decentralization of political authority.

## Muhammad ‘Abduh

‘Abduh strongly condemns those “falsifiers” who “promulgated the principle that reason and religion [have] nothing in common” (133). Such may have been true in the time preceding Muhammad (‘Abduh notes that with the arrival of the Qur'an, “*for the first time* in a revealed Scripture, reason finds its brotherly place” (31, emphasis added)), but it is emphatically not the case with Islam, inasmuch as the faith is “built squarely on reason” (39). The Qur'an points believers toward “the study of created things,” since such study necessarily leads to “belief in God, as Qur'anically depicted” (32). Indeed, beyond merely displaying “an esteem for . . . rational judgment” (31), the Qur'an “[espouses] the high role of reason and [confirms] its competence as the ultimate means to happiness and the criterion between truth and falsehood, worth and loss” (37).<sup>66</sup> In making such claims, ‘Abduh strongly suggests that reason and revelation are harmonious; the latter confirms what the former discovers about the path to happiness and the existence of God.

As becomes clear from further reading, however, revelation does not merely confirm certain important discoveries of reason. In addition, it grants insights that are not achievable by the unassisted human mind. Nevertheless, although revelation thus contains elements that must be accepted on faith (since the mind cannot independently verify their truth), it will never teach that which is simply inadmissible on rational grounds. In other words, “though there may be in religion that which transcends the understanding, there is nothing which reason finds impossible” (31). Such is the case, for

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<sup>66</sup> As will become clear shortly, this statement is heavily qualified by ‘Abduh’s subsequent account.

example, with respect to certain divine attributes described by the divine law; while reason is “able to hold them compatible with the necessary Being, [it] cannot of itself guide us to their recognition” (53). Thus, it is only due to revelation that we know that God possesses the attributes of speaking, seeing, and hearing (53). Unassisted human reason is also incapable of attaining a full self-understanding; as a result, “the essence of man ... [is] unknown to him and will remain inaccessible to knowledge” (54). Certain intransigent theoretical problems, such as “the reconciliation between ... Divine prescience ... and the evident power of human choice,” are similarly beyond the scope of reason (63), as are the particular benefits of ritualistic or ceremonial aspects of religion (74).

Based on these examples of knowledge that we cannot attain without revelation, ‘Abduh seems to be staking out a position according to which reason is particularly in need of divine assistance in matters of *theology*, rather than politics or worldly action more broadly. Incapable as the human mind may be of grasping fully the nature of God or the soul, our worldly affairs would seem, in contrast, to fall well within our comprehension; indeed, as ‘Abduh goes on to say, “sense and reason are well able to distinguish” between good and bad voluntary actions (70). The separation of purely spiritual or religious matters from moral or temporal matters, suggested by ‘Abduh’s differing treatments of these two spheres of knowledge, points toward a significant, albeit limited, role for reason. Revelation remains *the* authoritative source of knowledge about God, his attributes, and the rituals by which he is properly praised, while reason determines the appropriate guidelines for practical action; passages of the Qur'an that

consist of specific political or legal provisions may reasonably be subjected to occasional revision, while those verses that speak of divine matters retain enduring relevance for the Muslim community.

If, on the other hand, we are dependent upon revelation for knowledge about *both* worldly and other-worldly matters, reason cannot claim authority even in the realm of law. For it has already been established by ‘Abduh that revelation may teach “that which transcends the understanding.” Provided that the legal commands contained within revelation do not involve us in logical impossibilities—for example by commanding mutually exclusive actions—they have a claim to be obeyed. The ultimate status of reason in the thought of ‘Abduh therefore depends on his willingness to maintain the distinction between spiritual and temporal knowledge as he turns to elaborate upon the character of the prophetic mission.<sup>67</sup>

‘Abduh’s account of prophecy begins in unsurprising fashion. Prophets, as the means through which God communicates his revelation, not only teach their followers about God and his attributes, but also “the limits we are obliged to observe in the pursuit of such knowledge” (101). Thus, we are reminded by revelation of the necessary limits of any merely human pursuit of knowledge about the divine. Nevertheless, since nothing taught by a true prophet requires assent to “rational impossibilities” (108), man’s

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<sup>67</sup> Revelation does not threaten to supplant all forms of temporal knowledge equally, of course. The Qur’an does not presume to communicate medical or musical knowledge to man, for example. It is specifically our merely human understanding of morality and politics that is called into question by a religious teaching that concerns itself with such matters.

awareness of these limits does not “shake [his] confidence or deprive him of his assurance about reason as a God-given power” (101). We are made aware of the limited capacity of reason to bring us knowledge about the highest things without being compelled to abandon reason altogether.

As direct recipients of revealed wisdom, prophets possess a level of knowledge “not accorded to rational minds and human abilities” (78). The insight granted by God's favor is “such as others could reach neither by reason nor sense, even with the aid of proof and demonstration” (96). These clear declarations of the superiority of prophetic knowledge to even the most secure forms of ordinary human knowledge bring us back to the critical question: does this divine favor provide supernatural insight into matters of law as well as theology? If so, the legal prescriptions contained within revelation ought to be obeyed even if reason is unable to perceive their purpose, for they would be the product of knowledge that is impossible to attain without divine assistance.

This question is not explicitly raised by ‘Abduh, and therefore does not receive a direct answer in his account. However, in the context of his discussion on prophecy, ‘Abduh makes clear that reason’s subordination to revelation does not pertain solely to matters of theology. For as he states, “reason is obliged to acknowledge *all* that [a prophet] brings, even though unable to attain the essential meaning within it or penetrate its full truth” (107, emphasis added).<sup>68</sup> The distinction between worldly and other-

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<sup>68</sup> ‘Abduh does state that this total submission to revealed teaching is only obligatory when reason has already “recognized the mission of a prophet” as genuine (107). But as becomes clear from ‘Abduh’s more detailed investigation into “the proof of the prophetic veracity” (78), belief in the genuineness of a prophet is

worldly knowledge collapses with this critical statement. We are in no position to set aside *any* prophetic statements, however mysterious they may appear from a rational perspective.

In fact, despite the high praise given to reason in the earlier portion of the work, ‘Abduh ultimately speaks of the relationship between reason and revelation in a manner not clearly distinguishable from the Islamists discussed in Chapter 1. According to ‘Abduh, the proper course for man to adopt is to “submit with reverence and humility” (63) to God. Revelation is a gift that “requires humility and submission” (92). The divine command is so overpowering that the mind, like a citadel surrounded, “finds no option but to surrender” (92). For believing Muslims, “Mind submits to the doctrines *and rules of conduct* that religion discloses” (107, emphasis added); again, we are obligated to submit to divine teachings about voluntary actions as well as matters of belief. In short, Islam restores reason to its “proper dignity, to do its proper work ... in humble submission to God alone and in conformity to His sacred law” (127). Reason's dignity is therefore found in its subservience to revelation.

We are in a better position to understand ‘Abduh’s insistence on reason’s subordination to revelation when we consider his statements on the afterlife. The continued existence of the soul after death means that we must be concerned with our ultimate fate, which will be characterized either by “blessings to enjoy” or “painful punishments to suffer,” depending “on deeds done in this fleeting life on earth” (81). But

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ultimately a matter of faith; see pp. 77–78.



regarding the relationship between our actions in this world and our lot in the next, ‘Abduh claims that “Generally speaking, the human mind is not competent ... to comprehend the requital which every sort of action will receive in [the life to come]” (74).<sup>69</sup> Reason simply cannot penetrate to the life beyond; “the link between” this life and the next “can hardly be determined by rational study or the reach of intuition” (83). Since we are therefore dependent on revelation to know how our actions in this life will be recompensed in the next, our only option is to do exactly as ‘Abduh suggests: submit to *all* the teachings of a prophet without exception. Attempting to carve out a limited sphere in which reason may reign supreme is a perilous task as long as the afterlife remains inscrutable, as it must according to ‘Abduh.

It is perhaps with these considerations in mind that ‘Abduh calls into question the ability of the unassisted human mind to offer guidance even in worldly affairs, despite his earlier suggestions to the contrary. For as he now makes clear, “There may well be actions whose good quality cannot be recognized, and forbidden things where the evil is not definable by us. In those cases, the goodness and badness consist simply in the fact of the command and the evil lies in the fact of the prohibition. For God knows all” (77). From the perspective of limited human understanding, an action must be considered good if it is commanded by God or evil if it is prohibited. Our independent assessment of the virtue or vice of particular voluntary actions must ultimately give way to divine mandate. Thus, “mind alone does not suffice to attain the condition in which the well-being of

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<sup>69</sup> The only exception made is for those few “to whom God has given a perfect reason” (74). But as ‘Abduh makes clear, such souls of “intellectual excellence” remain “On a lower level” than the prophets (97).

humankind resides. It needs a divine guide” (107). It is “*only* by dint of the revealed law” that “we have knowledge of obligation and of the good in that quality of certainty which brings peace to the soul” (76, emphasis added). Unassisted reason may form conjectures about what brings benefit and what obliges us, but insofar as revelation speaks of such matters, we must adopt it as our authoritative guide.

### **Muhammad Iqbal**

Iqbal asserts that the Qur'an “embodies an essentially dynamic outlook on life” (118). Those few legal principles contained within it have great potential for “expansion and development by interpretation” (123). This dynamic character, in order to be fully realized, requires that we “rebuild the laws of Shari‘ah in the light of modern thought and experience” (124). The emphasis thus given to “thought and experience” reveals the central importance of reason to Iqbal's political teaching;<sup>70</sup> it is on the basis of a rational and empirical understanding of our modern world that we take upon ourselves the task of reconstructing *shari‘a*.

It is of the utmost urgency that this reconstructive task is undertaken, for “religion stands in greater need of a rational foundation of its ultimate principles than even the dogmas of science” (2). Science has proven to be useful to mankind despite the hypothetical character of its first principles. Indeed, whether scientific assumptions about causality are true,<sup>71</sup> it remains the case that many medical conditions that were fatal in the

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<sup>70</sup> Iqbal elsewhere speaks of the Qur'an's attempt to “awaken the empirical spirit” in man (11).

<sup>71</sup> See “On Causality and Miracles,” Chapter 17 of *Incoherence of the Philosophers*, for Al-Ghazali's historically influential argument that these assumptions are, in fact, false. Although Ghazali predated the development

past are but minor inconveniences today. It is entirely possible for human beings to benefit from the practical results of scientific investigation even while the foundational theoretical assumptions underlying that investigation remain tentative.<sup>72</sup> For this reason, “science may ignore a rational metaphysics,” and indeed, “has ignored it so far” (2). Religion, however, seeks nothing less than “the transformation and guidance of man’s inner and outer life” (1). As a result, “the general truths which it embodies must not remain unsettled” (1–2). Insofar as religion demands dramatic changes in the way of life of its adherents, the truth of its teachings must be confirmed. As Iqbal states, “No one would hazard action on the basis of a doubtful principle of conduct” (2).<sup>73</sup> We cannot afford to remain agnostic about the truth or falsity of religious teachings to which we adhere.

But the search for rational foundations for religious teachings does not imply “the superiority of philosophy over religion” (2). For religion holds out the possibility of “nothing less than a direct vision of Reality” (1), which philosophy may have to concede

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of *modern* science, his investigations into the nature of causality are highly relevant to the topic at hand.

<sup>72</sup> To refer again to Ghazali’s argument, if God is the efficient cause of every occurrence, scientific assumptions about causality and nature are incorrect; nevertheless, God may *choose* to act according to patterns, in which case the scientific method, by discovering these patterns, would bring practical benefits to mankind despite misunderstanding the root of causality.

<sup>73</sup> This statement, taken literally, appears very doubtful, but perhaps Iqbal is correct at least insofar as no one would wish to be deceived about the basis of their conduct, especially in matters of religion. It is also worth noting that Iqbal would apparently resist the argument that religion need not be true in order to benefit human beings.

is beyond the purview of “pure reason” (1). Thus, Iqbal makes clear that reason is not our only path to knowledge. In addition, there is the avenue of mystical insight,<sup>74</sup> which differs from rational consciousness insofar as the former “brings us into contact with the total passage of Reality in which all the diverse stimuli merge into one another and form a single unanalyzable unity in which the ordinary distinction of subject and object does not exist” (15). This is in stark contrast to philosophy, which “grasps Reality piecemeal” and focuses exclusively on its “temporal aspect” (2). Although the mystical experience is by nature incommunicable (16),<sup>75</sup> it is nevertheless “highly objective and cannot be regarded as a mere retirement into the mists of pure subjectivity” (15). The insight yielded through the mystical experience is therefore true insight into the nature of the world and the human condition.

But mystical consciousness does not merely sit alongside rational consciousness as a coequal partner, as becomes clear from Iqbal's description of the three stages of religious development.<sup>76</sup> The first stage is characterized by unconditional obedience to

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<sup>74</sup> Iqbal refers to this capacity in various places as “intuition” (4), “inner intuition or insight” (13), or “inner feeling” (17). The experience to which this capacity leads is alternatively called “mystic experience” (4), “religious experience” (7), “psychic, mystical, or supernatural” experience (13), “mystic consciousness” (14), the “mystic state” (15), “religious consciousness” (16), and “inner experience” (17). In each case, Iqbal seems to indicate an experience in which the normal distinctions on which rational consciousness relies (such as between subject and object) are broken down.

<sup>75</sup> “The interpretation which the mystic or the prophet puts on the content of his religious consciousness can be conveyed to others in the form of propositions, but the content itself cannot be so transmitted” (16).

<sup>76</sup> Whether these stages are meant to describe the historical evolution of humanity's religious experience or

religious commands. Eventually, the believer develops a rational understanding of the purpose of divine commands, thus entering the middle stage. Finally, “the individual achieves a free personality ... by discovering the ultimate source of the law within the depths of his own consciousness” (143). Mysticism therefore represents the final state of spiritual evolution to which our rational consciousness can only aspire. Nor can this higher level of insight be comprehended by the lower; according to Iqbal, science can do no more than “[discover] the characteristic features of the mystic levels of consciousness” (77). In fact, the mystical experience has such a capacity to alter our ordinary thinking that it “makes us suspicious of the purely rational process” (146). Having experienced the mystical state, we realize that “truth revealed through pure reason is incapable of bringing that fire of living conviction which personal revelation *alone* can bring” (142, emphasis added). The core of the mystical experience must remain, from a strictly rational point of view, mysterious.

The possibility of such experience is not, in itself, deeply problematic from the perspective of a rational political science. For even if we concede that mystical insight subordinates our rational understanding in matters of, say, metaphysics, we may still assert the authority of reason with respect to politics. Such assertion remains tenable as long as the trans-rational insights of the mystic remain essentially private or apolitical. And indeed, Iqbal claims that “the mystic does not wish to return from the repose of ‘unitary experience’; and even when he does return, as he must, his return does not mean

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the changing nature of an individual believer's piety over the course of his life is unclear. In either case, Iqbal's preference for mysticism over rationalism is clearly revealed, as I go on to argue.

much for mankind at large” (99). Thus, while mystical insight may far outstrip the ability of reason to provide an understanding of the nature of the divine or our place in the wider cosmos, it may nevertheless allow political matters to be prudentially determined on the basis of the fluctuating circumstances of time and place.<sup>77</sup>

But although mystical experience as such is not inherently threatening to rational political science, the same cannot be said for *prophetic* experience, which is a subset of mystical experience. The distinguishing characteristic of prophetic experience is that it “tends to overflow its boundaries and seeks opportunities of redirecting or refashioning the forces of collective life” (100). The prophet, in stark contrast to the mere mystic, seeks “to completely transform the human world” (99). It is for this reason that the prophet legislates, and in doing so, denies politics the independence afforded to it by the mystic. As Iqbal states, “the Qur'an considers it necessary to unite religion and state ... in a single revelation” (132).

To summarize the difficulty that we now see emerging from Iqbal’s presentation: since *shari‘a* is a product of the prophetic consciousness, which is itself merely a specific type of mystical consciousness, and since mystical consciousness is by its very nature beyond our rational understanding, how can we entrust our rational faculty with the task of reconstructing *shari‘a*? Does not such reconstruction presuppose a rational faculty that

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<sup>77</sup> This distinction between political and metaphysical matters resembles the distinction, discussed in the section concerning ‘Abduh, between worldly and otherworldly matters. In both cases, reason relinquishes authority over a particular sphere of knowledge while asserting itself with respect to politics or other worldly affairs.

is capable of understanding, if not the inner character, then at least the products of the prophetic experience?

Perhaps, in Iqbal's defense, the prophetic experience is not so simply mysterious as *non-prophetic* mystical experience. After all, the prophet, in contrast to the mere mystic, removes himself from the "unitary experience" in order to return to "the sweep of time with a view to control the forces of history" (99). By thus returning to the world of time, history, and human concern, does not the prophet simultaneously return to the world of rational intelligibility? Iqbal has already distinguished between the core of the prophetic experience, which is inaccessible to non-prophets, and the *products* of such an experience, which are not (16). Perhaps the rational faculty is capable of understanding, and when necessary, altering at least the legal or political products of the prophetic experience.

In other words, even if we concede that prophetic insight both subordinates our rational understanding and is emphatically political, it may still be the case that the political insights of prophets are rationally intelligible, despite their mystical origin. At least with respect to politics, revelation may merely confirm what reason teaches. And if the purpose of divine law is indeed rationally comprehensible, it becomes possible for reason to judge that some particular law has been rendered obsolete by the passage of time. If, on the other hand, even the legal prescriptions of revelation are trans-rational, divine laws would rightfully demand our obedience regardless of their apparent reasonableness; without understanding the purpose of a law, we lack the ability to judge its continued relevance.

Consider, as an example, the Qur’anic law concerning polygamy. If it is the case that this institution was meant to promote the welfare of women in a historical context where widows had extremely poor economic prospects, then the abolition of polygamy is justified if circumstances change such that widows are no longer in danger of privation. But if there are other reasons for the Qur’anic sanction of polygamy, reasons that transcend rational understanding,<sup>78</sup> then we have no right to overturn the institution without comprehending those reasons. Thus, the crucial question that must be answered in order to assess the cogency of Iqbal’s political project is whether reason, without the aid of any mystical insight, is capable of discerning the purpose of divine law.

Unfortunately, Iqbal never provides any arguments that this is the case, instead issuing a statement that strongly suggests it is not. For immediately after describing the three stages of religious development, he approvingly cites the following words of an unnamed Sufi:<sup>79</sup> “*no understanding of the Holy Book is possible until it is actually revealed to the believer just as it was revealed to the Prophet*” (143, emphasis added). The possibility of a rational understanding of the Qur’an, and therefore of *shari’a*, is denied. In order to have any hope of understanding God’s revelation, one must first experience the mystical state.

To be fair, Iqbal gives us no reason to believe that such a state is beyond the

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<sup>78</sup> I do not mean to suggest that the reason I have provided is the only possible rational explanation for the Qur’anic attitude toward polygamy, but merely to offer an example of a law that some will argue is obsolete for the reason given.

<sup>79</sup> The editor helpfully notes that this is, in fact, a reference to Iqbal's own father.



capacity of an ordinary believer. It is therefore possible that those who have achieved mystical insight into the purpose of divine law could return to the world of human concern and confirm for the Muslim community at large that we are indeed entitled to undertake the project envisioned by Iqbal, namely the reconstruction of *shari'a* to better suit modern circumstances. But at no point in the text are we given any indication that this is the expected outcome of mystical insight. In the likely case that self-professed mystics do not unanimously endorse Iqbal's project, how are we to adjudicate between their competing claims, unless we, too, transcend our merely rational consciousness?

While the claim that divine law in its particularity is not meant to apply unchanged to every place and time is not itself unreasonable, Iqbal has made clear that reason is not the ultimate authority in interpreting revelation. Reason stands in need of endorsement by man's higher faculties if we are to have any confidence that prudential revision of divine law is justified. Iqbal's account is therefore illustrative of the difficulties one encounters when attempting to justify a rationalist political project by appealing to an experience that is trans-rational.<sup>80</sup>

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<sup>80</sup> Iqbal's project would be uncontroversial if the Qur'an itself clearly endorsed the use of reason to revise its own practical prescriptions, in which case reason would still be, in the eyes of Muslims, receiving support from something higher than itself. But in the absence of such explicit endorsement, reason cannot depend upon unambiguous support from mystics who have, by definition, become "suspicious of the purely rational process."

## Epistemological Relativism

Although ‘Abduh and Iqbal deny the capacity of reason to fully comprehend divine law, they do not seek to relativize the former. Reason, in both thinkers’ presentations, is able to achieve objective albeit limited insight. Sardar and Soroush, in contrast, take the more radical step of denying rational objectivity altogether. For in the works of both, we find explicit claims that the human mind cannot escape the limitations imposed on it by cultural context. Unfortunately, this has the unintended effect of lending support to the second Islamist contention explored in Chapter 1, that reason ought to be subordinated to revelation, as discussed below.

### **Ziauddin Sardar**

Sardar recognizes Islam as “the primordial religion of man,” which “has performed an eternal validity” (13). Furthermore, it is comprehensive; “as a way of life, it applies to all aspects of man’s existence and performance” (13). But these two features do not render the faith any less dynamic. Islam’s capacity for progressive change can be traced to the comparative level of detail with which the Qur’an treats individual matters on one hand and collective matters on the other. For although the Qur’an provides fairly extensive guidance with respect to “the spiritual, the moral, the intellectual, the aesthetic and the physical dimension of the human personality ... the principles of collective behavior are provided only in outline form” (15). Thus, while the “cardinal framework” of Islam—the “articles of faith, basic injunctions, patterns of norms and values” (37)—is equally valid in all times and places, the practical application of these principles must take into account the idiosyncratic circumstances of a particular “space/time setting” (48).

Unfortunately, today's Muslims fail to understand Islam "with reference to the contemporary world" (35). This inability or unwillingness to take into account "new conditions of life" leads inevitably to "progressive decline" (36). Nor can the danger of this consequence be overstated, for although God promises in the Qur'an the "eternal survival of Islam," he makes no such promise for Muslim civilization; as the primordial faith of man, Islam will continue to exist even if the Muslim community is destroyed. Sardar therefore urges that the "truths revealed in the Qur'an" be restated "in terms more familiar to modern intellect and more fully comprehensible to contemporary man" (38). Such an approach is endorsed by the Qur'an itself, which "repeatedly asks the Muslim community to use reason, to reflect, to speculate" (52–53). Insofar as Muslims possess a static view of Islam, they fail to fulfill this expectation, for "we understand Islam *only* if we can operationalize its dynamic and vibrant concepts in contemporary society" (72, emphasis added).

Sardar's call to make Qur'anic teachings more accessible to modern Muslims can only be fully understood in connection with his fundamental epistemological thesis. As is made clear in several passages, Sardar flatly denies the ability of the human mind to arrive upon or to perceive objective truth: "there are *no* objective truths that can be discovered by reason alone" (24); "*Nothing* in perception is ... objective or strictly factual; it is *all* full of subconscious or indeed preconscious interpretations in the light of previous experience" (230, emphasis added). Furthermore, these subconscious or preconscious interpretations are not consistent across cultures, in which case one could at least speak of a shared *human* perception of reality, however short it may fall of perfect

rationality. Rather, “observation ... cannot be made in a cultural vacuum, but [has] meaning and significance *solely* in the framework of a theory itself set in the conceptual picture of a world-view” (230, emphasis added).

Islamic culture provides no exception to this general principle. The Qur'an and Sunnah, taken together, constitute the “Absolute Reference Frame of Muslim civilization” (14), by which Sardar seems to mean the defining parameters of Islamic cultural perspective. It is pointless to attempt to transcend the epistemological limitations of one’s cultural surroundings, since “all theories of knowledge that are devoid of an Absolute Reference Frame can lead only to conflict and confusion” (24). A Muslim therefore has no choice but to judge the truth of every claim with which he is faced on the basis of its relationship to the reference frame provided by Islam; “anything in contradiction to the Absolute Reference Frame is error,” while anything derived from a source other than the Islamic frame, however compelling it may appear to our rational comprehension, is merely “probable opinion” (25). In short, “the absolute judge of validity is ... the Qur'an and the Sunnah,” rather than the human mind (25).

Sardar’s account runs into two major difficulties. First, Sardar of course believes that the contents of the Qur'an and Sunnah are true and that therefore Muslims are not misguided by their complete epistemological reliance upon these sources. But given his denial that trans-cultural perception is possible, what is the grounds of this belief? To be clear, Sardar does not deny that trans-cultural *knowledge* is available, only that reason or observation is capable of achieving such knowledge. Thus, he does leave open at least one path toward the knowledge that one religion among many is true; namely, some kind

of religious experience that grants the one who undergoes it personal assurance of the validity of their faith. It is therefore not necessarily the case that Sardar's preference for Islam is simply arbitrary, although on the basis of his own epistemological thesis, this preference cannot be rational.

Second, the claim that all perception and observation is distorted by cultural bias, if it is to have any theoretical value, must itself be free of cultural bias. In order to avoid outright incoherence, Sardar would need to assert that the perception leading him to this claim is of a more objective character than the perceptions of which it speaks. Somehow, we must be able to escape the cultural boundaries of our minds in order to recognize that our minds are culturally bound; or, to use Sardar's terminology, we must step outside of our own reference frame in order to recognize its existence as a reference frame. But how is such an escape possible if subjectivity is indeed as ubiquitous as Sardar claims?

Perhaps, through no control of our own, the human race finds itself living in a privileged moment, during which the essentially conditioned nature of all (previous) human thought has become apparent. And indeed, Sardar does claim that "the passage of time *per se* increases the knowledge of mankind" (35-36). Thus (to elaborate upon a possibility that Sardar at most points to), at some unspecified point in history, mankind has perhaps become aware of the fundamentally relative character of all human perception, with the exception of this very observation, which stands alone in its objectivity.<sup>81</sup>

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<sup>81</sup> Strangely, Sardar calls the development of historicism a "metaphysical catastrophe," due to which "man, having sacrificed everything to 'history,' found himself more alienated than ever" (102). But the claim that

Sardar by no means demonstrates the impossibility of rational, trans-cultural insight, nor is the claim self-evidently true. But even assuming that he is correct, the consequences of this thesis render much of his teaching about reinterpreting Islam for the modern age deeply problematic. For if no objective understanding is available to the unassisted human mind (apart from the knowledge of epistemological relativism), how can we have any confidence that we are acting correctly when we “operationalize the injunctions of Islam with reference to contemporary reality” (40)? Would not such an act amount simply to imposing our culturally determined norms upon the word of God? In order for Sardar’s envisioned project to be justified, we would seemingly require knowledge—not merely culturally bound perception—of Islam’s original and enduring purpose as well as knowledge of how this purpose is to be best achieved in the modern world. But Sardar has gone to such lengths to discount the abilities of the human mind that such knowledge must be regarded, on his own account, as unavailable to our rational faculty.

Trans-cultural knowledge could be attained through non-rational means, as suggested above; this possibility, at least, is never denied by Sardar. But this does not appear to be the direction in which Sardar wishes to proceed. His hopes lie rather with *ijtihad* (independent reasoning by a jurist), which he calls “*the principle that provides the Muslim system with its power of regeneration*” (164, emphasis added). But as Sardar immediately goes on to make clear, “*ijtihad* involves all-round use of reason to arrive at

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all knowledge is culturally bound renders human beings no less “the plaything of blind fate” (102), which is precisely what Sardar wishes to avoid.

individual judgment” (165).<sup>82</sup> *Ijtihad* therefore suffers from the same defects of any rational attempt to arrive upon the truth; reason has no grounding beyond a particular culture’s reference frame. The one who undertakes *ijtihad* could, of course, pray to God for guidance, but the moment he does so, he concedes that reason cannot stand on its own but is rather in need of support from a higher authority. And as we have already seen in our discussion of Iqbal, relying on trans-rational religious experience to endorse the worldly authority of reason cannot be expected to produce consistent support for a rationalist political project.

In light of what Sardar teaches about the necessarily tentative character of merely human claims to knowledge, subjecting revelation to prudential considerations seems dangerously hubristic. Should we not instead cling all the more resolutely to what Sardar himself characterizes as “*the* absolute source of knowledge and *the* absolute judge of validity ... the Qur'an and the Sunnah,” as the Islamists suggest (25, emphasis added)? After all, “It is not possible for a finite being to comprehend or imagine the Infinite [God]” (28); how, then, can we claim authority to alter the commands of that God? Thus, while Sardar's general practical recommendation—that Islam be understood in its applicability to the modern world—is eminently reasonable, it is severely undercut by his commitment to epistemological relativism.

### **Abdolkarim Soroush**

Soroush views the fundamental political question presented by Islam in terms of

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<sup>82</sup> As Sardar soon clarifies, all-round use of reason refers to using “all available tools of logic” (165).

the relationship between reason and revelation, stating, “The arguments concerning the primacy of religious law ... presuppose the dependency of human rationality on prophetic instruction” (150). Soroush, for his part, rejects the view that Islam requires the subordination of reason to revealed truth. Rather, “disregard of rational criteria and of the necessity for the harmony of religious understanding and rational findings is a breach of religious responsibility” (127). Far from demanding the suppression of the rational faculty, Islam instead celebrates reason's essential role in confirming religious truth.

But as becomes clear in Soroush's account, this asserted concordance between reason and revelation results in the practical subordination of the latter to the former: our understanding of religion must be adapted to “the sciences and needs of each age” (32); it is only “vulgar demagoguery” that criticizes the attempt “to bend religion to meet the requirements of the age” (33); “What transpires among us humans, whether in the name of God or otherwise ... should ... be open to rational supervision and scrutiny” (61). But how can this view be justified over and against the claim that revelation rightly circumscribes reason without merely assuming the primacy of reason and therefore begging the fundamental question? For Soroush, the answer lies in “the distinction between religion and religious knowledge” (30). Understanding this epistemological thesis is therefore a prerequisite for evaluating Soroush's political teaching as a whole.

The critical error made by past reformers is that “They failed to recognize religious knowledge as a variety of human knowledge” (30). Although scripture and religion are themselves sacred, flawless, and constant, they are necessarily refracted through an all-too-human interpretive lens as soon as we attempt to understand them.



Indeed, we should never view ourselves as acting in obedience to religion, but rather in conformity with our particular interpretation of it. And critically, our interpretation of religion—our religious knowledge—is “incomplete, impure, insufficient, and culture-bound” (32); it is nothing short of “delusion and hubris” to identify our understanding of religion with religion itself (34). Once we have recognized the necessarily tentative character of our religious understanding, reason assumes its proper role as the governor of our worldly affairs. For it is reason “that undertakes the task of understanding the teachings of religion,” and it does this by “[harmonizing] its comprehension of religion with its other precepts” (127). In short, the distinction between religion and religious knowledge leads us to view our interpretation of religious texts as inherently subject to error; we therefore resort to reason as our best (and only) guide to a proper grasp of what God requires of us, with the understanding that any interpretation at which we arrive may be subject to future revision as our scientific knowledge of nature and society develops over time.

Thus, whereas the Islamists advocate strict obedience to the legal prescriptions of Islam, Soroush is led to recommend the continual revision of our understanding of these prescriptions on the basis of reason, such that religion is ever adapted to the “requirements of the age.” Against the charge that such a view assumes the primacy of reason, Soroush would respond that we have no choice—any interpretation of revelation is refracted through a human mind with all its attendant limitations.

But this response sits uneasily alongside Soroush's recognition that the Qur'an and

religious tradition are emphatically not “receptive to just any interpretation” (36).<sup>83</sup> Our interpretation of religious texts is not infinitely flexible but must take place within the limits allowed by the texts themselves. While we may be entitled to understand the practical prescriptions of the Qur'an in the most reasonable way possible, there is no basis in revelation itself for rejecting them outright, even if a purely rational political science would demand their rejection due to dramatic historical changes since their initial implementation.

For example, it may be argued that criminal punishments should be made less harsh as the apprehension rate of criminals increases due to the development of forensic science and related technologies. More specifically, if thieves are caught with far greater success today than they were in seventh-century Arabia, amputation may be unnecessary as a deterrent.<sup>84</sup> While such an argument is reasonable, it does ask that we disregard the obvious meaning of Qur'an 5:38, which commands Muslims to cut off the hands of thieves.<sup>85</sup> We therefore *do* have a choice in such matters; we can grant reason the authority to alter the practical prescriptions of divine law, or we can obey these

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<sup>83</sup> Rahman, for his part, criticizes “the neorevivalist” whose “consolation and pride both are to chant ceaselessly the song that Islam is 'very simple' and 'straightforward'” (137). But he must also concede that “In most cases ... it is not difficult to see the real point of a verse or the basic import of a given injunction” (18).

<sup>84</sup> This argument assumes that deterrence is the sole purpose of criminal punishment. Whether or not such a view is sanctioned by the Qur'an, I am here merely elaborating a rational perspective on punishment.

<sup>85</sup> The following verse leaves open the possibility of forgiveness if the thief repents, but this does not change the punishment that is otherwise prescribed.

prescriptions in their original form.

Indeed, the existence of verses with apparently unambiguous practical import makes clear the difficulty raised by Soroush's presentation. For why should a pious believer not humbly accept such verses in their most straightforward sense, even when they appear unreasonable?<sup>86</sup> Moreover, such humble acceptance only becomes more attractive upon recognizing the limitations of mind to which Soroush himself repeatedly points; against the dark backdrop of our inherently defective religious knowledge, divine revelation shines all the brighter. In this context, Qutb's key statement acquires a keen edge: "Allah knows, and you do not know." The inherently flawed character of our religious understanding, once recognized, encourages us to cling to the literal meaning of revelation at least as much as it encourages us to turn to reason.<sup>87</sup> Thus, the very cornerstone of Soroush's thesis is a weapon that fits as comfortably the hands of the Islamists as it does those of the liberals. And as the Qur'an itself warns, God's revelation contains "clear (*muhkam*) verses—they are the foundation of the Book. Others are ambiguous (*mutashabih*). But those in whose hearts is perversity follow the part that is

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<sup>86</sup> Of course, even when reason submits itself to an authority, it remains in some sense the final arbiter, since it has decided that doing so is best—this is inescapable. However, there is still a meaningful, and in fact critical, difference between granting reason the ultimate authority on every question and restricting its authority solely to the decision to submit.

<sup>87</sup> Euben and Zaman: "given the limits of human understanding relative to God's knowledge, Islamists ... depict ... fidelity to the *unadulterated* word of Allah as the ultimate expression of deference to divine omniscience" (27, emphasis added).

ambiguous, seeking discord and *searching for its hidden meanings*” (3:7).

Soroush's position could be salvaged if human beings possessed knowledge of justice. For as he makes clear, “In the opinion of believers, justice is at once a prerequisite for and a requirement of religious rules. A rule that is not just is not religious” (132).<sup>88</sup> This confidence that God's rulership must be just, coupled with knowledge of justice, would provide a standard by which to measure divine commandments. If any particular commandment is found wanting, this would not be because God is unjust, but rather because circumstances have changed such that the original intention of the law has been frustrated. In such a case, adapting divine law to the needs of the time would seem to be justified; our knowledge of religion, which is “neither complete nor flawless” (37), would rightfully give way to a knowledge of justice that is both.

However, Soroush denies that such knowledge has been discovered, or at least that it has been published: “no one has proposed a clear definition of justice and injustice” (105, emphasis added). Although we know by definition that “Justice is that which is good” (112),<sup>89</sup> ubiquitous controversy over which actions are properly considered just allows people “to proudly engage in any deed in the name and under the facade of justice” (114). We therefore cannot depend upon our understanding of justice to

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<sup>88</sup> Soroush takes for granted that the believer as such makes the same choice as Euthyphro in the Platonic dialogue named after him.

<sup>89</sup> Soroush seems to mean by this that justice is, by definition, morally good. Whether it is also good in the sense of being beneficial for the just man is unclear from his account.

serve as a standard by which to judge the meaning of divine commands.

Even more fundamentally problematic, Soroush seems at times ambivalent about the independent status of reason as such. For it is positivism that denies “the historicity of science and reason,” and as Soroush makes clear, “Positivism should be defeated” (50). He immediately adds that such a defeat should not come “at the expense of overthrowing science and reason” (50). But once we accept the claim that science and reason are historically determined, that “each group looks at an event from its own viewpoint—which immanently defines the limits of what it knows” (187), and that “people always accept the cast of their culture” (189), in what sense have science and reason not been overthrown?

Soroush’s statements about the central role that reason must play in interpreting revelation and determining the manner of its application are difficult to reconcile with these claims of cultural and historical relativism. Furthermore, Soroush does not hesitate to point out the incoherence of certain extreme forms of relativism, stating that “Postmodernism, which has issued the verdict of the relativity of truth (which is tantamount to denying it) is now, according to its own verdict, either devoid of the truth or else invites the charge of self-contradiction” (49). But without going so far as to claim that the truth *itself* is relative, Soroush may nevertheless assert that human beings, due to their inescapable cultural or historical paradigms, cannot attain objectivity. And indeed, Soroush presents the belief in objective science or observation as a leading example of the “extravagant and arrogant claims” of positivism (50). To the extent that we rely upon reason to determine the proper application of revelation in the modern world, we must

recognize that reason does not stand above, but is limited by, our particular cultural context.

This brings us back to the fundamental difficulty: how can we assert with any confidence that liberal religious understanding is superior to Islamist religious understanding, for are we not simply products of a liberal culture, intellectually restricted and determined by it? And finally, does this not again bring us face-to-face with the attractiveness of the Islamist position, of submitting ourselves wholly to revelation as our only salvation, insofar as it, at least, “originates in a realm beyond time and space” (32)? By thus undermining our confidence in the human capacity to know justice objectively, Soroush simultaneously undermines his thesis. Indeed, we are faced with mutually exclusive options: either human knowledge of justice is historically contingent, inconclusive, and conjectural, or we are justified in subjecting revelation to prudential considerations of the age; both cannot be true.

### Synopsis

The three approaches to Islamic reform reviewed in this section each suffer from errors that undermine their shared purpose of encouraging an Islamic reform that gives reason supervisory powers over the legal injunctions contained within revelation. ‘Abd ar-Raziq and ‘Ashmawi deny, in different ways, the political character of Muhammad's career and therefore either prevent the application of worldly, political standards to divine commands (in the case of ‘Abd ar-Raziq) or make us all the more reliant upon Muhammad's unmatched prophetic insight (in the case of ‘Ashmawi). ‘Abduh and Iqbal

assert that reason cannot grasp the highest truths, thus undermining our confidence that the products of prophetic experience are rightly subjected to prudential revision. Finally, Sardar and Soroush relativize knowledge according to cultural context, such that any trans-cultural and strictly rational alteration of divine law is rendered an impossibility. We must therefore conclude that the Islamist challenge elaborated in the previous chapter remains unmet by these efforts—an alternative is needed. In Alfarabi, we meet a thinker who affirms the political character of religion, the epistemological power of reason, and the possibility of science, even or especially political science.<sup>90</sup> It is in the hope that he will provide a more adequate response to Islamism that we turn to a consideration of his *Book of Religion* in the following chapter.

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<sup>90</sup> ‘Abd ar-Raziq complains that, alone among the various branches of human knowledge, “political science was notably neglected” in the Muslim world (44), perhaps a sign of his lack of familiarity with the medieval Islamic philosophic tradition as a whole. But as Binder (138) points out, this is especially odd given ‘Abd ar-Raziq's frequent references to Ibn Khaldun.

### Chapter 3: Alfarabi's *Book of Religion*

Throughout the medieval era, the Muslim world grappled profoundly with the question of reason's proper role in religious and political matters. The *falasifa*, deeply influenced by Plato and Aristotle, accorded reason an authoritative role in guiding human affairs.<sup>91</sup> Although their historical influence was destined to be eclipsed by the more mystically inclined Al-Ghazali, who subjected the doctrines of the *falasifa* to severe criticism,<sup>92</sup> their teachings retain an urgent importance for us today. For inasmuch as the Muslim world, and indeed the modern world at large, continues to confront the perennially troublesome relationship between religion and politics, the arguments made by medieval Muslim rationalists in favor of political prudence deserve to be revisited and given the most serious consideration. This dissertation intends to contribute to this objective in part through a close study of Alfarabi's *Book of Religion*, which is provided in this chapter.

Alfarabi was the first political philosopher in the Muslim world, a thinker whose formative influence on the subsequent tradition of Muslim philosophy is evident in the works of Ibn Sina, Ibn Rushd, and others.<sup>93</sup> In the *Book of Religion*, Alfarabi addresses

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<sup>91</sup> Consider, for example, Avicenna's account of the objectives of the legislator (2005, pp. 370–378), as well as Averroes' defense of philosophic reasoning as an activity obligated by divine law (1–3).

<sup>92</sup> For Al-Ghazali on the limits of reason, see secs. 61, 141.

<sup>93</sup> For examples of explicit reference to Alfarabi in the works of later Muslim philosophers (some critical), see Ibn Sina (Avicenna, 1974, p. 35), Ibn Bajja (269), Ibn Tufayl (100), Ibn Rushd (Averroes, 12), and al-Ghazali (4). Alfarabi was also held in the highest esteem by the medieval Jewish philosopher Maimonides



more directly than in any of his other works the relationship between human and divine wisdom.<sup>94</sup> In the course of doing so, he offers an account of religion that is thoroughly rational<sup>95</sup>: God rules over a perfectly intelligible, hierarchical cosmos (61–63);<sup>96</sup> the virtuous political order is a microcosm of this cosmic order, with the rule of the religious founder corresponding to the deity's rule over the world (63); and revelation, the link between the human and cosmic realms, consists of opinions and actions derived from—or at least corroborated by<sup>97</sup>—theoretical and practical philosophy, respectively (47). In

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(226–227).

<sup>94</sup> Burns compares passages from the *Book of Religion* with parallel passages from Alfarabi's *Enumeration of the Sciences*, with very insightful results. This chapter proceeds on the belief that the *Book of Religion* warrants a comprehensive interpretation of its own, without denying that the comparison undertaken by Burns is highly constructive. For the argument that Alfarabi's political works may be helpfully considered as self-contained wholes, see Parens 25–27.

<sup>95</sup> By this, I mean to indicate that, in Alfarabi's presentation, religion may be comprehensively understood through human reason alone, as distinguished from human reason supplemented or replaced by divine guidance. Even revelation (Section 1) and God's governance of the cosmos (Section 27) are said to be explained by “theoretical science” and “theoretical philosophy,” respectively. The key exception to this general tendency—the assertion in Sections 11 and 14 of an afterlife—is discussed in the relevant portions of this chapter and the next.

<sup>96</sup> All parenthetical citations of the *Book of Religion* refer to page (and, in the case of direct quotations, line) numbers from Mahdi's critical Arabic edition. Direct quotations are from Butterworth's translation; an asterisk indicates that I have modified the translation.

<sup>97</sup> According to Alfarabi, revelation consists either of divinely determined actions and opinions or of a faculty that allows the virtuous first ruler to determine actions and opinions himself; in either case, religion is in agreement with the discoveries of philosophy.

sum, “the two parts of which religion consists are subordinate to philosophy” (47:7). The practical consequence of this explicit subordination is that divine law be subject to occasional revision by human prudence, in order to prevent the former's lapse into obsolescence (48–49). Without so much as a word indicating the existence of an opposing view, Alfarabi thus implicitly rejects the claim that divine commandments must be obeyed in all times and places without being subject to the supervision of merely human wisdom.

By remaining silent about this view—one that is in certain key respects fundamentally opposed to the rationalist position he asserts—Alfarabi apparently fails to establish a solid basis for his claim that the injunctions of divine law ought to be subject to human revision. For as long as certain theological claims remain potentially true—specifically, as long as the existence of a providential God who punishes severely those who reject or seek to innovate on his commands remains an unrefuted hypothesis—it cannot be established with certainty that the subordination of divine law to reason is itself reasonable. Indeed, the existence of such a deity or deities gives rise to the possibility that the only reasonable course of action is to submit our merely human wisdom to divine wisdom, as communicated to us via revelation.<sup>98</sup>

It is therefore the case that Alfarabi appears, in the *Book of Religion*, to neglect not merely one particular Muslim view of the divine, but *the* theological perspective as such, insofar as that perspective asserts the ultimate dependence of reason on divine

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<sup>98</sup> Alfarabi raises this possibility explicitly in *Enumeration of the Sciences* 81–82, where it is said to be the opinion of a particular group of dialectical theologians.

guidance. In this chapter, I intend to show that, despite his apparent silence regarding this theological alternative to his rationalist account, Alfarabi is, in fact, confronting that very alternative in the *Book of Religion*. Moreover, I seek to establish that such a confrontation constitutes the heart of the work and is therefore the key to understanding the text as a whole.

### Previous Scholarship

Although scholarly interest in Alfarabi has increased since the work of Leo Strauss in the 1950s, the philosopher remains critically understudied relative to his importance as the founder of political philosophy in the Islamic world. The *Book of Religion* in particular has received relatively little attention, having only appeared in English translation as recently as 2001. Nevertheless, the work has not gone entirely without notice. This section will review, in chronological order, three scholarly attempts to offer relatively in-depth interpretations of this text. I intend to show that previous work on the subject has not focused on Alfarabi's confrontation with the theological view and has therefore left unexplained Alfarabi's attempt to establish a solid basis for his rationalist political teaching.

While Strauss' writings on Alfarabi focused primarily on his works of Platonic interpretation, Muhsin Mahdi devotes the fifth chapter of *Alfarabi and the Foundation of Islamic Political Philosophy* to a discussion of the *Book of Religion*. Mahdi rightly observes that, according to Alfarabi, "the theoretical views in religion contain nothing inherently supernatural or suprarational in the strict sense" (112). Furthermore, he notes

the existence of the opposite view, unmentioned by Alfarabi, according to which “religion communicates truths inherently and eternally hidden from, and beyond the reach of, human beings: they are mysteries a human being can only accept and perhaps seek to understand but can never hope to know” (112). Mahdi goes on to say that this view “is the mystical view, where *ergon* (work, activity) rather than *logos* (reason, logic) is the way to the mysterious One-Beyond-Being-and-Nonbeing,” a view he attributes to Plotinus and al-Ghazali (112). According to Mahdi, Alfarabi took this alternative view seriously, “[seeing] in religion *the* alternative to science or philosophy, an alternative whose claim to be the true way had to be given the most serious consideration” (113). But having thus laid out the crucial issue, Mahdi does not explain how Alfarabi justifies his silent dismissal of this alternative, nor the practical suggestion based on this dismissal that the successor to the religious founder must sometimes alter his predecessor’s legal injunctions. This explicit subjection of religious law to human revision is the most radical practical consequence of Alfarabi’s consistent habit, already noted by Mahdi, of offering a rational account of religion in place of a mystical account. Were God’s mysteriousness upheld, pious obedience to divine law would stand as a reasonable alternative to the prudential revision of divine law; God may simply desire, for reasons unknown or perhaps unknowable to us, that his laws be followed, regardless of their apparent suitability or unsuitability to particular circumstances. Mahdi therefore does not explain how Alfarabi confronts what is, in Mahdi’s own words, “*the* alternative to ... philosophy” (116). On this account, it would appear that Alfarabi fails, in the *Book of Religion*, to establish any basis for preferring rationalism to humble submission to

suprarational demands.

Christopher Colmo offers an analysis of the *Book of Religion* in the sixth chapter of *Breaking With Athens: Alfarabi as Founder*. He begins this chapter by noting that Plato, as presented by Alfarabi, has “no theoretical basis for his practical action.” In drawing attention to this fact, Alfarabi thus “points ... to the need to unite theory and practice at the level of philosophy itself” (89). However, Colmo delays his treatment of this topic until well after his discussion of the *Book of Religion*, thereby suggesting that such a unification does not occur in that work. The *Book of Religion* instead treats a question “easier of access,” namely whether Alfarabi “[endorses] the union of theory and practice at the level of *politics*” (89, emphasis added).<sup>99</sup> Accordingly, Colmo's highly insightful subsequent treatment of the work does not mention the extent to which the *Book of Religion* itself contains an attempt by Alfarabi to vindicate normative rationalism in the face of its most serious rival. Colmo recognizes the singular problem posed by revealed religion—especially monotheistic revealed religion—stating, “Because of its comprehensive claim to certain knowledge based on revelation, Islam confronts philosophy with a kind of challenge that Plato never faced. No Greek claimed for Homer the kind of authority that every Muslim claims for the Qur'an” (91). But in Colmo's presentation, rather than attempt to meet this challenge, the *Book of Religion* appears simply to assert the subordination of revealed religion to philosophy, not as “Alfarabi's esoteric teaching,” but as “his publicly stated doctrine”; how Alfarabi justifies this

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<sup>99</sup> This question receives a negative answer by Colmo (89, 102).

admittedly “shocking” teaching is left unsaid (95). This question receives a greater urgency in light of Colmo’s interpretation of Alfarabi’s assertion that the theoretical opinions found in religion have their proofs in theoretical philosophy. According to Colmo, “For Alfarabi, there is *nothing* in theoretical philosophy that religion might usefully imitate.” On this basis, Colmo suggests that “the theoretical things that the first ruler imitates are, in fact, his own free creations” (99, emphasis added). If such a radical notion is indeed what Alfarabi has in mind, the *Book of Religion* is only made more mysterious: on what basis does Alfarabi feel justified in claiming that the theoretical opinions in religion are the prudential fabrications of a charlatan prophet rather than the direct and literal word of God? Must we turn to other of Alfarabi’s works, or are at least the beginnings of an answer contained within the *Book of Religion* itself?

In “The *Book of Religion*’s Political and Pedagogical Objectives,” Waseem El-Rayes argues that Alfarabi wishes to teach those who are drawn towards philosophy “to take seriously the spiritual and moral claims religion ... makes” (177). However, as El-Rayes rightly notes, by asserting that the opinions and actions of virtuous religion are corroborated by theoretical and practical philosophy, Alfarabi “seems to preclude the possibility that religious beliefs are superrational” (176n2). Thus, in implying that “religious belief and practice needs to be subject to rational examination” (179), the *Book of Religion* depends on an audience already convinced of the primacy of reason. Such a starting point is understandable if the text is primarily meant to cater to those who are already inclined towards philosophy, as El-Rayes suggests. But if Alfarabi does in fact wish to convince would-be philosophers to take the claims of religion more seriously,

why does he not address the far more fundamental question of whether reason ought to be privileged over faith in the first place? El-Rayes offers at least some indication that this issue is not left entirely unaddressed by Alfarabi. When El-Rayes states that “for a man of faith, personal salvation in the world to come requires ... concern with the well-being of the community (the problem of the common good), which means concern with politics” (180), he points to the fact that politics is *the* common ground between the rationalist and the pious believer. Furthermore, he recognizes that, just as philosophy “seems to promise the attainment of happiness to those who follow its way,” religion, too, makes a similar promise (182). It is therefore by investigating the political pursuit of happiness that the otherwise intransigent conflict between rationalism and piety may at least begin to be resolved. Indeed, toward the end of his essay, El-Rayes states that, according to Alfarabi, it is at least the partial task of political science to investigate religious opinions about “how ... happiness is, or can be, attained” (196). El-Rayes rightly sets the stage for such an investigation but does not himself reveal how the *Book of Religion* itself undertakes this very task. This chapter intends to do just that.

In general, while each of the scholars reviewed in this section believes that Alfarabi had reasons for rejecting the theological view and its implications for divine law, they either do not think that such reasons may be found in the *Book of Religion*, or they simply choose not to focus on this particular theme in their analysis of it. As I argue below, it is in fact the primary purpose of the *Book of Religion* to confront this political aspect of piety, and therefore any comprehensive interpretation of the work must give a central place to this theme.

## Alfarabi's Manner of Writing

Alfarabi's writing style in the *Book of Religion*, as well as in his other political works, is startling in its self-assurance. The philosopher's presentation noticeably lacks the dialectical character of Aristotle's treatises; rather than offering a survey of conflicting opinions on the matters under discussion, Alfarabi merely puts forward a single, didactic account, never once suggesting that his assertions are tentative, nor drawing attention to their often unorthodox character.<sup>100</sup> Furthermore, he makes no reference whatsoever to his own time and place. Alfarabi's works seem to be written with an eye to universal human problems that transcend the particularities of context. Lacking knowledge about the historical circumstances surrounding its creation, one could read the *Book of Religion* and reach the false conclusion that its author had no knowledge of Islam. The most important consequence of this stylistic choice is that the orthodox Islamic alternative to Alfarabi's rational account of religion is given no voice within the pages of the work. And while it may be the case that the particular theology of any single religion is bound to a specific time frame, the insistence on the subordination of human reason to divine authority stands as a perennial alternative to rationalism's privileging of the human mind. It is therefore to be expected that Alfarabi, as a philosopher, will not neglect to consider this alternative altogether. Furthermore, as will become clear in the following interpretation, the prominence of certain themes in the *Book of Religion*—the comparison of the political art and the medical art, as well as the assertion that the

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<sup>100</sup> Butterworth makes precisely this point in his introduction to the *Political Regime* (11).



virtuous political ruler is the earthly counterpart of the divine ruler—leaves little doubt that Alfarabi intends to provoke his more thoughtful readers into considering the limitations of the rule of law as such and wondering at its apparent adoption by God.

But if this interpretive proposal is correct, it is worth asking why Alfarabi does not simply make all of this explicit. Why allow the confrontation with the theological alternative to rationalism to take place in the background of the text? This is especially puzzling if, as I have suggested, confronting the theological challenge to philosophy is indeed Alfarabi's most fundamental purpose in the work. In order to address this question, it is necessary to consider Alfarabi's attitude toward philosophic writing, as described by him in various works.<sup>101</sup>

In his *Summary of Plato's "Laws,"* Alfarabi offers the following account of Plato's manner of writing:

the wise Plato did not feel free to reveal and uncover every kind of knowledge for all people. Therefore he followed the practice of using symbols, riddles, obscurity, and difficulty, so that knowledge would not fall into the hands of those who do not deserve it and be deformed, or fall into the hands of someone who

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<sup>101</sup> Alfarabi's employment of esoteric writing is supported by Strauss (1945, pp. 357–393; 1988, Introduction, esp. pp. 17–18); Madhi (1961, p. 10); Butterworth and Pangle (2001, pp. vii–xx); Colmo (2005, pp. 9–16); Parens (1995, pp. xxvi, 24–27; 2006, pp. 5–7). For the claim that Alfarabi, even when speaking in perfectly general terms, has Islam in mind, see Orwin (2017, p. 87). A very helpful summary of various hermeneutical approaches to Alfarabi can be found in Galston (1990, Chapter 1).

does not know its worth or who uses it improperly. In this he was right (130).

Although the passage cited falls short of an explicit confession that Alfarabi himself practices esoteric writing, his concluding remark that Plato was correct to engage in such practices leaves little doubt that Alfarabi followed in the footsteps of his predecessor in this regard.

Nor did Alfarabi consider Plato to be alone in adopting this peculiar method of presentation. In *The Harmonization of the Two Opinions of the Two Sages: Plato the Divine and Aristotle*, Alfarabi attempts to show that, despite the apparent differences between the two Greek philosophers with respect to matters of doctrine as well as presentation, they were in fact in agreement regarding all of the most fundamental questions. Thus, it is only apparently the case that, in contrast to Plato, “Aristotle’s procedure is to clarify, elucidate, put in writing, order, communicate, uncover, and explain, making full use of any of these he finds an approach to” (131). In fact, Aristotle’s writing is characterized by a level of “abstruseness, obscurity, and complexity” (133) sufficient to belie the assumption that he seeks merely to clarify complex issues for all readers.

As evidence for the claim that Aristotle’s writings are deceptive in this way, Alfarabi cites a letter purportedly written by Aristotle to Plato. The latter had apparently reproached his pupil for “putting books in writing, ordering the sciences, and bringing this out in complete and exhaustive compositions” (133). In response, Aristotle writes, “Although I have put these sciences and their well-guarded and sparingly-revealed maxims in writing, I have nevertheless ordered them in such a manner that only those

suiting for them will get them, and I expressed them in an idiom that only those adept in them will comprehend” (133). Aristotle, as presented by Alfarabi, is in complete agreement with Plato regarding the need to insulate scientific knowledge from the many.<sup>102</sup> In short, the two thinkers whom Alfarabi held in the highest regard both appeared to him to engage in esoteric writing, designed to guard the secrets of science from those unworthy or incapable of their possession.

Furthermore, the *Book of Religion* itself offers evidence that Alfarabi agreed with Plato and Aristotle regarding the varying intellectual capacity of potential readers. In Section 6, in the context of discussing the importance of dialectic and rhetoric for establishing and defending religious opinions, Alfarabi states, “virtuous religion is not only for philosophers or only for someone of such a station as to understand what is spoken about only in a philosophic manner. Rather, most people who are taught the opinions of religion and instructed in them and brought to accept its actions are not of such a station” (47). Thus, we are led to understand that Alfarabi does not view public enlightenment as a possible or desirable goal, at least not in his time.<sup>103</sup> To speak “in a philosophic manner” is to be misunderstood by “most people.” And when the topic under discussion is divine law and its proper relationship with human prudence, such misunderstandings may radically subvert popular opinion in a way that Alfarabi wishes to

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<sup>102</sup> Whether the letter actually exists is irrelevant for the purposes of determining Alfarabi’s attitude toward esoteric writing.

<sup>103</sup> See pp. 198–199 for a further discussion of Alfarabi’s attitude towards a potential public enlightenment in the future.

avoid.<sup>104</sup> After all, the desire to withhold scientific knowledge from the many may stem, in part, from a philanthropic motive. Beyond a desire to prevent knowledge from falling into the hands of those who would deform or misuse it (the motivation for esoteric writing suggested by Alfarabi's account of Plato), it is reasonable to suppose that Alfarabi sought also to protect certain popular religious opinions, even if they are "not such as to be proven by demonstration or looked into by dialectic" (47).

There is at least one other reason why Alfarabi may not write in a perfectly straightforward manner.<sup>105</sup> Concern for the protection of himself as well as his work would provide strong motivation for Alfarabi to cloak his confrontation with certain authoritative religious opinions. For example, Alfarabi could have offered in the *Book of Religion* a succinct outline of the orthodox account of revelation: that a willing, providential God chose a prophet to receive His literal message; that this prophet, as transmitter, had no role in determining the content of that message; and that the prescriptions of divine law are equally valid for all times and places. Furthermore, he could have cited Qur'anic verses and relevant Hadith that corroborate this view.<sup>106</sup>

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<sup>104</sup> One could object that the danger Alfarabi faces is not that he will be misunderstood, but that he will, in fact, be understood; in other words, that his confrontation with the theological alternative will be discerned even by non-philosophic readers. However, merely recognizing that the *Book of Religion* contains an implicit criticism of orthodox theology is not yet to understand Alfarabi's teaching. What would be perceived by the many as an outright attack on piety may in fact be its refinement, such as is necessary for coherent belief. Consider, in this context, Maimonides' *Guide for the Perplexed*, Part 1 Chapter 50.

<sup>105</sup> See Melzer, Chapters 5–8 for an account of the diverse motivations for esoteric writing by philosophers.

<sup>106</sup> Qur'an 6:115, 10:15, and 18:27 stress the unalterable character of God's words. Qur'an 2:106 and 16:101

However, as my interpretation will show, these ideas are called into question by Alfarabi's account. And to display one's familiarity with the orthodox position in this way, only to oppose it at every point, is necessarily to antagonize the pious community at large and thereby jeopardize the message itself.<sup>107</sup> Rather than adopting this approach, Alfarabi presents himself in the *Book of Religion* as a naive rationalist who overestimates the ability of the human mind to offer comprehensive political guidance and, as a result, too easily assumes that reason can account for all particular injunctions of divine law. By thus avoiding an open attack upon mainstream piety, Alfarabi allows his heterodoxy to be explained as the product of excessive faith in human wisdom rather than a lack of faith in divine wisdom.

In short, with respect to the need for esoteric writing, Alfarabi believed his environment to be essentially the same as that of his ancient Greek predecessors. We must therefore remain open to the possibility that, as he understood Plato and Aristotle to do, Alfarabi will employ "symbols, riddles, obscurity, and difficulty," and that his text

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indicate that God retains the power of abrogation, but at no point is Muhammad said to have such a right.

That innovation was seen as a sin of the highest order by Alfarabi's time is borne out by *Sahih Muslim* 3601.

Muhammad offers an account of the revelatory experience in *Sahih Bukhari* 1.2.

<sup>107</sup> It is perhaps no coincidence that Alfarabi's commentary on Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* has not come down to us, given Ibn Tufayl's report in his introduction to *Hayy ibn Yaqzan*: "in [Alfarabi's] commentary on Aristotle's *Ethics*, discussing human happiness, he says that it exists only in this life, and on the heels of that has words to the effect that all other claims are senseless ravings and old wives' tales" (100). While this report may be exaggerated, it is not implausible that Alfarabi allowed himself to speak with greater candor in this work than in others.

will be characterized, at least to some degree, by “abstruseness, obscurity, and complexity,” even in those places where it seems straightforward.

### Title, Structure, and Interpretive Approach

We find in the *Book of Religion* Alfarabi’s most direct statements regarding the competing claims of reason and revelation on human life. But the title is in a way misleading, since in this work Alfarabi treats the themes of philosophy and political science with as much care as he does religion. Indeed, the inclusion of such themes in a book primarily about religion leaves the reader with the distinct impression that, for Alfarabi, each of these aspects of human life is inextricably tied to the others.

The *Book of Religion* is divided into 27 subsections, the 14<sup>th</sup> of which is further divided into five subsections. Although Alfarabi does not group these divisions into larger sections, certain broad movements of the text are easily noticeable. Sections 1 through 6 are an attempt to define religion, and here Alfarabi begins to describe its relationship with philosophy. Sections 7 through 10 address the more political matters of jurisprudence and succession of rule. Sections 11 through 14d<sup>108</sup> offer Alfarabi’s exposition of political science, while Sections 15 through 27 treat an explicitly philosophic political science, in contrast to political science simply. The final nine sections of the work, part of the treatment of philosophic political science, are undoubtedly the most striking feature of the *Book of Religion*. Here, Alfarabi launches into a sweeping account of the entire cosmos, describing its several parts and their

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<sup>108</sup> The subdivisions of Sections 14 are designated as 14, 14a, 14b, 14c, and 14d.

hierarchical organization, as well as the relationship between human and divine governance. The tone of these sections stands in marked contrast to the reserved language that precedes them. Indeed, the cosmological account begins so suddenly and dramatically that ascertaining the precise relationship of these reflections to the rest of the text is one of the major obstacles to any thoughtful interpretation of the work. In the analysis that follows, I intend to show that the various sections of the *Book of Religion* do indeed form a coherent whole, through which Alfarabi addresses some of the most fundamental questions facing man as a political and spiritual animal.

In an effort to approach the text with the appropriate care, given not only Alfarabi's likely employment of esoteric writing but also his stature as a philosopher of the highest order, the method employed in the following interpretation is one that pays the closest attention to the twists and turns of his presentation. Topics whose relation to our primary theme—the respective roles of reason and revelation in political matters—is not immediately clear will nevertheless be treated in some detail, in order to present a comprehensive interpretation of the work and thereby facilitate an understanding of Alfarabi's political teaching in all its fullness and complexity. The analysis will proceed section by section through the entire work, so that the argument of the text may be allowed to unfold as Alfarabi intended. I therefore refrain from interpreting passages in light of statements that are only encountered later in the work (although earlier passages are sometimes revisited), thus reconstructing the experience of a careful reader approaching the text for the first time.

## The Text

### Religion and Philosophy (Sections 1-6)

In this opening portion of the work, Alfarabi introduces many concepts that will play an important role throughout the whole. In the course of six sections, he offers a definition of religion, a typology of rulers, provocative remarks about revelation, and discussions of the theoretical and practical aspects of religion, the relationship between religion and philosophy, and the political utility of dialectic and rhetoric. As we will see in our analysis of subsequent sections, Alfarabi's initial treatment of each of these topics, aside from being highly thought-provoking, provides the necessary groundwork for what follows.

The *Book of Religion (Kitāb al-Milla)* opens with a definition of its titular subject. Alfarabi asserts that "Religion is opinions and actions, determined and qualified by stipulations and prescribed for the community by their first ruler (*raīsahum al-awwal*),<sup>109</sup> who seeks to achieve through their practicing it a specific objective for the sake of them or by means of them" (43:3–4\*). Several features of this definition are worth noting in greater detail. Religion first comes to sight as political; it is the comprehensive collection of beliefs and behaviors bestowed upon a community by its first ruler. The size of the community is not specified; it "may be a tribe, a city or district, a great nation, or many nations" (43:5–6). Traditional mythologies that develop over time and are passed down

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<sup>109</sup> The first ruler is not necessarily the first chronological ruler of a community but is in all cases first in importance due to his role as religious founder.



through generations are excluded by this definition; the religion spoken of by Alfarabi is emphatically the product of a single mind that seeks a specific purpose. Religion necessarily involves both opinions and actions; thus, legislation concerning actions that does not prescribe particular beliefs cannot be religious, nor can prescribed beliefs that are not accompanied by rules of action. Alfarabi's definition furthermore contains an ambiguity: by legislating a religion for his community, the first ruler seeks a purpose "for the sake of them or by means of them." The act of religious founding is therefore undertaken either for the sake of the ruler, in which case the community exists merely to be exploited for his interest, or for the sake of the ruled. No mention is made of what good, if any, would accrue to the ruler in this latter case.

Alfarabi distinguishes four types of rulers, distinguished by what kind of good they seek. The virtuous first ruler (*ar-raīs al-awwal al-fāḍil*) "seeks only to obtain, for himself and for everyone under his rulership, the ultimate happiness (*as-sa'ādāt al-quṣwā*) that is truly happiness; and that religion will be virtuous religion (*milla fāḍila*)" (43:7–9).<sup>110</sup> Although Alfarabi is completely silent for now about what constitutes ultimate happiness, he immediately goes on, in discussing the next type of ruler, to offer a list of goods that fall short.

The second type of ruler identified by Alfarabi is the one whose rulership is ignorant (*jāhiliyya*),<sup>111</sup> who "seeks only to obtain, for himself by means of [the ruled],

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<sup>110</sup> As opposed to "errant religion," which is discussed in Section 4.

<sup>111</sup> *Al-jāhiliyya* is the term used in the Qur'an to describe the time of paganism before the advent of Islam; see, for example, 3:154 and 33:33.

one of the ignorant goods (*al-khayrāt al-jāhiliyya*)—either necessary good, that is, health and bodily well-being; or wealth; or pleasure; or honor and glory; or conquest” (43:9–12). However, the ignorant ruler is not necessarily so selfish; “the most virtuous of the ignorant rulers” (43:15) seeks one of the ignorant goods exclusively for the ruled or for both himself and the ruled in common. By calling these ignorant rulers “most virtuous,” Alfarabi indicates that both the pursuit of common goods as well as altruistic rule are more virtuous than seeking one’s own good at the expense of others. Though he makes no explicit comment about the relative ranking of political altruism on the one hand and pursuit of the common good on the other, it must be remembered that the virtuous ruler exhibits the latter behavior. Whatever the relationship of the ignorant ruler to his subjects, he is so called because the goods he seeks are not conducive to ultimate happiness. But after excluding the ignorant goods, what is left for the city to pursue? Perhaps ultimate happiness must regard the well-being of the soul, a subject about which Alfarabi will say very little throughout the work.

Third, he whose rulership is errant (*ḍalāla*) “presumes himself to have virtue and wisdom (*hikma*) and those under his rulership presume and believe that of him, without him being like that” (43:16–17). Furthermore, such a ruler “seeks that he and those under his rulership obtain something presumed to be ultimate happiness without it being truly so” (43:17–44:2). Like the virtuous ruler, the errant ruler necessarily seeks his own good in common with the good of the ruled. However, the errant ruler is distinguished from the virtuous ruler in that the former is merely believed to possess that virtue which the latter possesses in fact. But while the errant ruler is explicitly said to lack wisdom, Alfarabi

does not say that the virtuous ruler is wise.

Finally, he whose rulership is deceptive (*tamwīh*) is thought by the ruled to pursue ultimate happiness for both himself and the ruled, when in fact he seeks to “obtain one of the ignorant goods by means of them” (44:5–6). Thus, Alfarabi's classificatory scheme seems, at first glance, to identify four distinct types of rulers. However, upon closer inspection, it becomes increasingly difficult to see exactly how the ignorant ruler constitutes a separate and distinct class. It is not possible for the ignorant ruler to believe that he is attaining true happiness, for then the ignorant ruler who seeks the good of himself and of the ruled would be indistinguishable from the errant ruler. Nor can the ignorant ruler lead a deceived populace, for then he would be indistinguishable from the deceptive ruler. In order to constitute a separate category, the ignorant ruler must knowingly seek ignorant goods without deceiving the population into thinking he is doing anything else. But how would such an arrangement come to be? Will subjects tolerate such a ruler if they are not deceived about his aims? Is it psychologically possible for a ruler to pursue, above all else, a good he knows to be deficient? The last of these questions applies no less to the deceptive ruler, since he, too, pursues one of the ignorant goods.

It must be the case that ignorant and deceptive rulers share the mistaken opinion that there are no truer goods than health, wealth, pleasure, honor, and conquest, and no ultimate happiness beyond the happiness offered by these. But if this is so, how is the ignorant ruler different from the errant ruler, since both are mistaken about the nature of ultimate happiness? Since Alfarabi presents the errant ruler as a separate category, the

error of such a ruler must not be that he believes one of the ignorant goods to constitute true happiness; this is the error of the other two non-virtuous rulers. Rather, the errant ruler believes in some good beyond these earthly goods, but he is distinguished from the virtuous ruler in that the good he seeks is not truly happiness. Could Alfarabi mean to indicate by such a category deluded claimants to prophetic revelation? Such men truly believe that they have access to some ultimate good that transcends mere worldly pleasures; they presume themselves to have virtue and wisdom, and they are believed by their followers to possess these qualities. If this is indeed what Alfarabi means to indicate, then by presenting a typology of rulers that is more complex than it first appears, he would quietly be pointing to the problem of distinguishing between true and false claims to divine inspiration.

This impression is confirmed by the fact that Alfarabi immediately turns to discuss revelation as that which accompanies the kingly art and thus distinguishes the virtuous ruler from all others: “the craft of the virtuous first ruler is kingly and joined with revelation (*wahy*)<sup>112</sup> from God (*Allāh*)”<sup>113</sup> (44:6–7). Earlier, Alfarabi had explicitly stated that the errant ruler believed himself to possess wisdom, but surprisingly, the virtuous ruler was not said to possess wisdom explicitly. Thus, revelation first comes to light as a substitute for wisdom as the distinguishing feature of the virtuous ruler.

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<sup>112</sup> “*Wahy*” is the Qur'anic word for the divine revelation received by Muhammad; see, for example, 53:2–4.

<sup>113</sup> “God” always translates *Allāh*. Alfarabi's use of *Allāh* in this context should be contrasted with his use of *ilāh* (always translated as “deity”) in Sections 23 and 27; the latter is a more generic term, as captured in Qur'an 37:35: “there is no *deity* except *Allāh*.”

Furthermore, it is clear that the specific knowledge that distinguishes virtuous rule is knowledge of true happiness—this is precisely the way in which all other types of rulers fall short. For the moment, the relationship among revelation, wisdom, and knowledge of true happiness in Alfarabi's scheme is not perfectly clear.

For now, Alfarabi elaborates on the first of these subjects, asserting that the virtuous first ruler determines the actions and opinions of religion by means of revelation. But this may occur in one of two strikingly different ways: either revelation bestows determined, particular commands directly upon the ruler, or “he determines them by means of the faculty (*quwwa*)<sup>114</sup> he acquires from revelation and from the Revealer, may He be exalted, so that the stipulations with which he determines the virtuous opinions and actions are disclosed to him by means of it” (44:9–11). In the first case, the ruler appears to exert no influence over the content of religious law; he is merely the vessel through which God communicates his will to the community. In the second case, however, Alfarabi emphasizes the agency of the ruler; God reveals to him a special faculty, through which he determines opinions and actions himself.<sup>115</sup> It is also possible that “some [virtuous opinions and actions] come about in the first way and some in the second way” (44:11–12). Alfarabi therefore leaves open the radical possibility that revelation consists

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<sup>114</sup> “Faculty” always translates “*quwwa*,” while “ability” translates “*qudra*.” In his “Commentary (*Sharh*) on Aristotle's *De Interpretatione*,” Alfarabi states that “‘Possibility’ (*imkan*), ‘power,’ ‘ability,’ and ‘capability’ (*istiḍāʿ*) are nouns which we must now understand to be synonymous, although many of the arts employ these terms for different significations” (182:16; citation found in Alon 346, 382; translation my own).

<sup>115</sup> Orwin, 98.

*entirely* of a divinely bestowed faculty through which a virtuous first ruler is able to determine the proper actions and opinions to legislate for his community.<sup>116</sup> Such a faculty could perhaps also be described as a kind of practical, political wisdom. The first section concludes with the remark that theoretical science (*al- 'ilm an-nazariyya*) has already explained how divine revelation comes about “and how the *faculty* acquired from revelation and from the Revealer occurs in a human being” (44:13, emphasis added). Theoretical science therefore confirms that revelation operates, at least in part, in the second way mentioned by Alfarabi. The alternative extreme possibility, that revelation consists entirely of particulars that have been determined for the ruler by God, is quietly dismissed.<sup>117</sup>

In Section 2, Alfarabi begins to offer a more precise account of the content of virtuous religion. Religion consists of actions and opinions, and the latter may in turn be divided into opinions about theoretical matters and opinions about voluntary matters. Alfarabi offers a lengthy list of subjects described by theoretical opinions<sup>118</sup> of religion. Some of the items on the list are not surprising; Islam, the religion that permeated Alfarabi's historical context, certainly provides opinions on God, the spiritual beings, the coming into being of the world, divine justice, the soul, prophecy, and the afterlife. But

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<sup>116</sup> Although traditional understandings of Muhammad's abilities as prophet do not deny his possession of such a faculty, the notion that revelation may consist of nothing more than this faculty is by no means orthodox.

<sup>117</sup> Such as the view of revelation suggested by Qur'an 53:3–4.

<sup>118</sup> The use of this phrase always refers to opinions about theoretical matters, as opposed to practical matters.

Alfarabi also includes subjects that are not so commonly included in traditional religious teaching; thus, he claims that virtuous religion includes opinions about “how the primary bodies were generated and that some of the primary bodies are the sources of all the other bodies that are gradually generated and pass away” (44:17–45:2), as well as opinions about “the intellect, its rank in the world, and its station in relation to God and the spiritual beings (*rūḥāniyyūn*)” (45:6). While topics roughly corresponding to these could certainly be located in the Qur'an, certain of Alfarabi's own works—specifically the *Virtuous City* and the *Political Regime*—address these issues more directly than most religious texts. Furthermore, the *Book of Religion* itself culminates in a sweeping picture of the cosmos, in which Alfarabi will offer theoretical opinions regarding, for example, “how the things the world encompasses are linked together and organized” (45:3–4).<sup>119</sup> In other words, Alfarabi's enumeration of the theoretical opinions offered by virtuous religion appears to describe, above all else, portions of his own writing. While it would certainly be inaccurate to claim that in such passages Alfarabi means to legislate his own religion, he clearly indicates in this section that certain of his own writings contain a religious element and are therefore not strictly philosophic.

Opinions about voluntary matters concern examples from the past and present of virtuous and vicious men. Regarding men from the past, Alfarabi speaks of “the prophets

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<sup>119</sup> Compared to the highly parallel metaphysical sections in the *Virtuous City* and the *Political Regime*, which focus on the coming into being of the world and the cosmic status of human intellect, the concluding sections of the *Book of Religion* emphasize to a much greater extent the strict hierarchical order of the universe.

(*anbiyā'*), the most virtuous kings, the righteous rulers, and the leaders of the right way and of truth" (45:9–10). As vicious counterparts of these, he mentions "the most depraved kings, the profligate rulers exercising authority over the inhabitants of ignorant communities, and the leaders of the errant way" (45). This section features the only use of the word "prophet" in the entire text (though it appears in the plural) and comparing the two lists makes it clear that there is no vicious counterpart of the prophet. This is unsurprising, since presumably it is revelation that distinguishes prophets from the other virtuous types mentioned. However, this would seem to imply that not all virtuous kings experience revelation, apparently undermining the claim in Section 1 that the virtuous first ruler is necessarily accompanied by revelation. Alfarabi therefore draws the reader's attention to the distinction between first rulership as religious founding on the one hand and kingly rule on the other; there is no necessity that the latter involve revelation.

Although Alfarabi has made clear that religious opinions have their source in revelation, they may be revealed in one of two different ways, as noted previously. The theoretical and voluntary opinions described here could be revealed directly by God; this would explain how the first ruler has such astounding knowledge of the cosmos and of historical figures that preceded his own lifetime. But what if, as the alternative account states, revelation is a faculty by which the first ruler determines these opinions himself? By what possible faculty would the first ruler be able to determine the structure of the cosmos? Is such knowledge accessible to man as man, or is divine revelation, understood conventionally, necessary if the community is to have any confidence in the truth of its opinions about divine matters? Strikingly, Alfarabi has not explicitly said that the



opinions in virtuous religion need to be true, only that the virtuous ruler must seek that which is truly happiness for himself and for the ruled. He furthermore concludes Section 2 by departing from the purely descriptive tone employed so far and offering the following prescription for religion: “The descriptions of the things comprised by the opinions of religion ought to be such as to bring the citizens (*madaniyyūn*) to *imagine* (*takhyīl*) everything in the city ... so that what is described will be likenesses the citizens will follow in their ranks and actions” (45:20–24, emphasis added). Whether the city is in fact such as it is described by religious opinions is less important than the effects those opinions have on the citizenry. The guiding principle for the theoretical and voluntary opinions of religion is therefore political expedience.

Having already discussed the nature of religious opinions, Alfarabi turns in Section 3 to offer an account of the *actions* of virtuous religion. Just as religious opinions may be either theoretical or voluntary, so too can actions be divided into two categories. First, Alfarabi speaks of “actions and speeches” (46:1) by which God, the spiritual beings, prophets, kings, rulers, and leaders are praised and by which vicious rulers are blamed. Second, “after all this” (46:6–7), there are those actions by which the members of cities deal with one another and with themselves. Alfarabi’s transition from the first type of action to the second makes it clear that speeches of praise and blame are in some sense prior to or more fundamental than the actions by which citizens deal with one another. He thereby emphasizes the extent to which a ruler cannot expect to regulate human action except in the context of opinions about the highest things. This being the case, a strict separation of theoretical and voluntary matters would seem to be impossible,

since the former influence the latter. Indeed, Alfarabi stresses this fact through his unnecessarily complex presentation of religious opinions and actions. Some religious opinions describe those who should be praised or blamed, while some religious actions prescribe speeches by which they are praised or blamed. These largely overlapping divisions emphasize the difficulty of envisioning a purely theoretical science that would have no substantial influence on the daily political life of citizens.<sup>120</sup>

The overlapping character of theoretical and practical matters is further conveyed by Section 4, where Alfarabi turns to consider a set of related terms. “Religion (*millā*)” and “creed (*dīn*)” are near synonyms, as are “law (*sharīʿa*)” and “tradition (*sunna*)” (46:11). According to Alfarabi, the former pair seems to represent the aspect of religion that deals with opinions, while the latter pair regards actions. However, “law” may also refer to the determined opinions, such that law, religion, and creed would all be synonymous. Again, no clean division between the actions and beliefs inculcated by religion is possible.

In the latter half of Section 4, Alfarabi gives the first account in the text of the relationship between truth and the theoretical opinions contained within religion. Virtuous religion contains determined opinions that “are either the truth or a likeness of the truth (*mithāl al-ḥaqq*)” (46:17–18). The truth is that which can be ascertained either

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<sup>120</sup> Both here and in the previous section, Alfarabi has given a special emphasis to the ruled as members of cities. Although the virtuous religions community may expand over many nations, the opinions and actions of religion are primarily directed at regulating the daily life of citizens (*al-madaniyyūn*), which takes place in cities.

through “primary knowledge, or by demonstration” (46:18–19). Thus, it seems that any theoretical opinion contained in virtuous religion that is not a first principle or demonstrable on the basis of first principles must be a likeness of the truth, rather than the truth itself. However, while the account so far has made it seem as though virtuous religion contains only opinions that are either strictly true or likenesses of the truth, Alfarabi immediately goes on to say, “any religion in which the first type of opinions<sup>121</sup> does not comprise (*yashmal*) what a human being can ascertain either from himself or by demonstration *and* in which there is no likeness of anything he can ascertain in one of these two ways is an errant religion (*milla ḍalāla*)” (46:21, emphasis added).

This construction is more radical than it first appears, for Alfarabi posits two conditions that must *both* be met if a religion is to be considered errant.<sup>122</sup> Thus, a religion that includes only true theoretical opinions (thus failing the first condition) will be virtuous even if it contains false likenesses (thus meeting the second condition). Alternatively, a religion that includes false theoretical opinions (thus meeting the first condition) might still be virtuous, provided it contains, in addition, likenesses of demonstrable truths (thus failing to meet the second condition). Alfarabi avoids making the stronger statement that a religion containing even a single untrue theoretical opinion

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<sup>121</sup> That is, theoretical opinions, rather than those that describe virtuous and vicious leaders.

<sup>122</sup> Although this construction makes it easier for a religion to be considered virtuous, it is radical in the sense that it leaves open the possibility that virtuous religion may contain untrue theoretical opinions, as I go on to show. A more orthodox position would presumably assert that we can depend upon the truth of all opinions in virtuous religion.

or false likeness is an errant religion.

Alfarabi's use of the word "errant" to describe religions that have no basis in truth whatsoever recalls the errant ruler of Section 1. It seemed then that, as a ruler who believes himself to be wise and to possess knowledge of true happiness beyond worldly happiness, the errant ruler was primarily a deluded claimant to divine inspiration. By using the same word to denote religions that have no basis in truth, Alfarabi confirms this suspicion.

While it may appear as though the difference between virtuous and errant religion is merely one of degree, given that even the former may include some untrue theoretical opinions, there is in fact a difference of kind. The founder of virtuous religion apprehends the truth, though he may choose to temper it through likenesses or adulterate it with a degree of untruth. The errant ruler, in contrast, is simply ignorant of the truth. Alfarabi gives no explanation for why the founder of virtuous religion would not legislate simply true theoretical opinions to the exclusion of all else. An explicit answer to this puzzle is never offered in the *Book of Religion*, but it helpful to recall the end of Section 2. There, Alfarabi indicated that the aim of religious opinions is to provide models that citizens will follow in their actions, presumably for the sake of political health.

But if this were the sole desideratum of religious teachings, then why must virtuous religion have any basis in truth at all? Should not the most virtuous religion simply be that which fosters the healthiest political society, regardless of whether its theoretical opinions have a basis in truth? Clearly, truth and political expedience are not simply opposed; a public teaching that is manifestly false can in no way be efficacious.

On the other hand, the theoretical opinions legislated by a religious founder regard topics that do not admit of easy proof or refutation. As long as the opinions are sufficiently plausible—that is, as long as a sufficient number of people can be persuaded of their truth—they may have a salutary political effect regardless of their ultimate truth. Thus, a community that believes in the eternal reward and punishment of individual souls after death on the basis of divine justice could conceivably experience political benefits from such an opinion regardless of its truth. But as long as we remain uncertain that such hopes for divine justice have a foundation in fact, we cannot be sure that the truth about theoretical matters will always be conducive to political harmony.

Given this uncertainty, should the virtuous religious founder care for the truth of public teachings at all, beyond what is required for political purposes? There are at least two reasons not to dismiss this possibility entirely. First, Alfarabi stated in Section 1 that the good sought by the virtuous first ruler—for himself and for the political community—is not bodily health, wealth, pleasure, honor, or conquest. But it is precisely these goods that would seem to be gained by legislating with an eye toward social harmony above all else. Might some spiritual health be gained when citizens are permitted to partake in the truth to the extent they are capable? Even if such spiritual health comes at the expense of ignorant goods, would not the virtuous first ruler be willing to make such a trade?

Second, despite the disguised radicalism of Section 4, the distinction Alfarabi makes between virtuous and errant religion is significant; the theoretical opinions of the virtuous religion must include either the truth or likenesses of the truth, even if untrue opinions are present in addition. For now, the principle according to which the virtuous first ruler

determines how much truth to reveal through public teaching remains mysterious. All that can be said with certainty is that Alfarabi does not allow political expedience to eclipse the demands of truth entirely.

Having suggested that virtuous religion cannot dispense entirely with truth, Alfarabi turns in Section 5 to treat the relationship between religion and philosophy. Just as philosophy contains theoretical and practical aspects, so too does religion; in both cases, “the theoretical-contemplative [part] is that which, when a human being knows it, he is not able to do, and the practical [part] is that which, when a human being knows it, he is able to do” (46:23–47:1\*).

Purely theoretical knowledge, therefore, is that which cannot be acted upon. But is there such a type of knowledge that cannot be acted upon, or does all knowledge necessarily have some impact on the manner in which one lives? Certainly, some fields of human inquiry seem to have no direct impact on our perception of the proper way to live but are rather oriented toward discovering the nature of things—mathematics and astronomy, for example. But to the extent that a science like astronomy uncovers certain mechanisms underlying perceptible phenomena, does it not thereby alter our understanding of humanity's place in the cosmos? A comprehensive science of planetary motion could perhaps lead one to wonder whether the universe as a whole operates on the basis of some mechanistic necessity. Progress in theoretical philosophy would therefore necessarily seem to exert its influence on practical matters. Indeed, the theoretical opinions explicitly mentioned by Alfarabi in Section 2—regarding God, divine justice, and the afterlife, among other things—undoubtedly have an extraordinary effect on the

actions of one who subscribes to them. Thus, the manner in which Alfarabi defines theoretical and practical philosophy emphasizes the absurdity of attempting a strict classification of knowledge into one or the other category.

Why, then, does Alfarabi distinguish between theoretical and practical knowledge at all? Although knowledge about the nature of things might often or always influence practical matters, there would still seem to be a meaningful distinction to be made between knowledge that is directly addressed to questions of action and knowledge that exerts an indirect influence on how one lives. Thus, while the virtuous first ruler's apprehension of truth is a matter of theoretical knowledge, his decision about when to include likenesses and untrue opinions in his public teaching is a question of practical reason, though perhaps shaped by his theoretical insights. This distinction must be kept in mind when Alfarabi turns to offer his own theoretical account of the cosmos in the concluding sections of the work; by choosing to commit to writing—and thus make available to all literate people—a particular view of the universe, a philosopher is necessarily subject to the demands of practical reason.

Alfarabi goes on to state that both the practical and theoretical aspects of religion are subordinate to the corresponding aspects of philosophy, but in different ways. The practical injunctions of religion are in fact the universals of practical philosophy, “made determinate by stipulations restricting them” (47:3). For this reason, “all virtuous laws (*sharā'i*)<sup>123</sup> are subordinate to the universals of practical philosophy” (47:5–6).

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<sup>123</sup> Alfarabi here uses the plural of *shar'a*, which, in Section 4, is said to be synonymous (in certain usages) with “religion” (46:13–14). The cognate *shir'ah* is used in Qur'an 5:48 to describe the particular system of law

Apparently, the universals of practical philosophy, if they are to be useful, require translation into more specific injunctions fit for a particular time and place. As Alfarabi will go on to discuss explicitly in a few sections, laws are therefore in need of updating as social circumstances change. Theoretical religious opinions, on the other hand, “have their demonstrative proofs in theoretical philosophy (*al-falsafa an-naẓariyya*) and are taken in religion without demonstrative proofs” (47:6–7). Alfarabi makes no mention of theoretical opinions needing to be made more particular or to be adapted to historical circumstance. Perhaps this aspect of religious legislation is inherently more enduring than practical legislation; while unforeseeable historical change will render many traditional laws obsolete and require new laws where there previously were none, opinions about the highest things may continue to guide a community indefinitely.

But if it is indeed the case that some theoretical opinions in religion are capable of demonstrative proof, as Alfarabi claims, what reason could the virtuous first ruler possibly have to keep such proofs to himself? Perhaps, in demonstrating the truth of some theoretical opinions, the virtuous ruler would be unable to avoid drawing attention to those opinions which do not permit demonstrative proof, but which are nevertheless necessary for the subjects to believe.

In the latter half of Section 5, Alfarabi appears to merely recapitulate the foregoing discussion. But this time, in addition to claiming that practical philosophy

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given by God to each people; thus, Alfarabi's reference to several virtuous laws is not inherently heterodox.

The more generic term for law, *namus* (pl. *nawamus*), does not appear in the *Book of Religion*, but is used by Alfarabi in the *Attainment of Happiness* and *Book of Letters* (Orwin, 99).



comprises the universals that inform the particulars of religious law, he asserts that practical philosophy “gives the demonstrative proof for the determined actions that are in virtuous religion” (47:13–14). But while proof of a theoretical opinion is easy to conceive, what could it mean for actions to have demonstrative proofs? Perhaps a demonstrative proof of an action would prove that the action is indeed good. Alfarabi would, in this case, be pointing to the need for a comprehensive account of the human good, such as is not provided within religious legislation itself. Such an account would be necessary if some goods are to be ranked above others, as Alfarabi does when he criticizes the ignorant goods in Section 1. But if Alfarabi possesses knowledge of what the greatest good for man is, he does not mention it explicitly at any point in the work.

Section 5 concludes with the remark that the kingly craft, as that which is “responsible for what the virtuous religion consists of” (47:16–17) is entirely subordinate to philosophy. Thus, revelation, which in Section 1 was said to accompany the kingly craft of the virtuous first ruler, is dropped from the account when philosophy explicitly enters the picture. But by claiming that religion in its entirety is subordinate to philosophy, Alfarabi is not simply denigrating the former. Rather, by insisting that virtuous religion has a basis in a philosophic understanding of the truth, he in fact offers a firm, rational basis for religious teachings. But at what cost does establishing religion on such grounds come? Certainly, Alfarabi has greatly restricted the autonomy of religious legislation; according to the account he offers, theology is necessarily the handmaid of philosophy. In asserting this, is he not committing a most grave oversight? What about the possibility that revelation in fact exists in the first sense mentioned in Section 1; that

is, as a collection of determined actions and opinions given to man by God? As long as revelation of this type remains a possibility, Alfarabi cannot reject outright the need to follow those actions and opinions that do not permit philosophic explanation. As the product of divine wisdom, such laws would have a claim to be obeyed, regardless of their apparent rationality or irrationality. For the moment, Alfarabi seems to ignore this challenge, rather than confront it directly. And while direct confrontation with such claims never occurs in the *Book of Religion*, we can only expect that Alfarabi will not leave the challenge unmet.

In Section 6, Alfarabi considers two arts that lend support to the ruler as he attempts to establish religious opinions in the souls of his subjects: dialectic (*jadāl*) and rhetoric (*khiṭāba*).<sup>124</sup> Beginning with the former, Alfarabi claims that “Dialectic yields strong presumption (*az-ẓann al-qawīyy*) about all or most of what demonstrative proofs yield certainty (*yaqīn*) about” (47:18–19). On the basis of this statement, it is not immediately clear why dialectic is not rendered utterly superfluous by demonstration; not only does dialectic only offer “strong presumption” in place of “certainty,” but it may not even be able to do this with regard to every subject admitting of demonstration. But as Alfarabi goes on to state, “virtuous religion is not only for philosophers or only for someone of such a station as to understand what is spoken about only in a philosophic manner” (47:20–21). Not everyone is capable of working through demonstrative proofs

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<sup>124</sup> Alfarabi therefore avoids explicit reference to the art of *kalām*, or dialectical theology, which had already become highly controversial in his day. *Kalām* is discussed by Alfarabi in *Enumeration of the Sciences*, Chapter 5, Section 5.

about religious matters, “either due to nature (*tab’*) or because they are occupied with other things” (48:1). Dialectic would therefore seem to serve the purpose of persuading those who are prevented, either due to intellectual limitations or lack of leisure, from struggling with a rigorous philosophic education that would presumably culminate in demonstrations about religious matters.<sup>125</sup> Rhetoric, on the other hand, “persuades about most of what is not such as to be proven by demonstration or looked into by dialectic” (47:19–20). This second art is therefore unnecessary for those religious teachings that are capable of demonstrative proof, as well as for those teachings that may be arrived at through dialectic. As opposed to dialectic, which only aids in the establishment of demonstrably true opinions, rhetoric is only needed to the extent that virtuous religion teaches that which is not demonstrably true. When he asserts that “both dialectic and rhetoric are of major value for verifying the opinions of religion for the citizens and for defending, supporting, and establishing those opinions in their souls (*nufūsum*)” (48:2–4), Alfarabi obscures the critically different ways in which these two arts buttress religion, thus disguising the fact that not all opinions legislated by a virtuous religious founder will be equally true.

Virtuous religion appears to be, above all else, a presentation of philosophy that is acceptable to subjects who are for various reasons incapable of grasping the

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<sup>125</sup> Alfarabi’s account therefore implies that dialectic, by which students investigate the truth of opinions in a conversational or dialogical process, is of easier access than philosophic demonstration, which presumably presupposes rigorous training in grammar, logic, physics, and metaphysics, of the kind laid out in the *Enumeration of the Sciences*,

unaltered truth. But in claiming that “virtuous religion is not *only* for philosophers,” Alfarabi makes it clear that philosophers, too, derive some benefit from its implementation. Thus, the reader is reminded of the opening section of the *Book of Religion*, in which Alfarabi asserted that the virtuous first ruler seeks ultimate happiness both for himself and for the ruled. In the intervening sections, Alfarabi has shown how subjects of virtuous religion would benefit; the selective inculcation of truth by a virtuous first ruler has the potential to foster social harmony as well as guide non-philosophers some distance along the path to truth. Which awards await the first ruler himself have yet to be presented.

Furthermore, in this section Alfarabi has given us some reason to doubt the existence of a simple common good between ruler and ruled. In discussing the need for religious, rather than philosophic, instruction of the public, Alfarabi had asserted that the many are prevented from reaching the station of philosophy by one of two factors: natural limitations or lack of leisure. Thus, it is possible that philosophically capable individuals are held back by nothing more than their occupation with other tasks. By strongly emphasizing the importance of leisure for philosophic reflection, Alfarabi provokes the reader to consider what sort of occupations would most seriously inhibit philosophy, and why, if philosophers are by nature rare, those who are capable should not be encouraged to pursue it. Beyond these mere indications, Alfarabi is silent, and he does not draw further attention to the looming problem that is only now becoming apparent: the philosopher is the only man capable of legislating a virtuous religion, and yet political rule, perhaps more than any other task, would allow insufficient time for leisurely

reflection. It is conceivable that a philosopher could begin ruling only after reaching a sufficient level of insight, but the daily activity of ruling would undoubtedly come at the cost of further reflection. If ultimate happiness consists in partaking of the joys of contemplation to the extent one is capable, the one qualified for virtuous rule would seemingly be better off avoiding rulership altogether. However, as was glimpsed in Section 2 by Alfarabi's separation of prophets and kings, there is a meaningful distinction to be made between the founder of a virtuous religion and the king who actively rules in accordance with its principles. While it is difficult to conceive of a philosopher undertaking the latter task uncompelled, perhaps the act of founding a religion is less antithetical to the demands of philosophy. While we cannot yet be sure this is the case, the distinction between founder and successive ruler will be a central theme in the following sections.

The possibility of virtuous religion as defined by Alfarabi in Section 1 cannot be determined without first addressing the possibility of a common good between ruler and ruled. Alfarabi has made clear that the virtuous religious founder necessarily seeks both his own good and the good of his subjects. If no such common good is possible—if, for example, the act of ruling precludes the acquisition of the greatest goods—then the institution of virtuous religion cannot be an object of rational pursuit.

### **Succession and Jurisprudence (Sections 7-10)**

In the next series of sections, we come across Alfarabi's crucial statement that the laws of the religious founder be subject to prudential revision. In preparation for this pivotal moment in the work, he must first show why the legislative legacy of the founder

is necessarily uncomprehensive and therefore in need of supplementation. In this portion of the work, Alfarabi also discusses the role of a more conservative jurisprudence that attempts to understand, but not alter, the laws of the founder.

Having raised the reader's expectations for the possibility of a religious rule based on philosophic truth, Alfarabi turns in Section 7 to consider practical limitations that constrain the first ruler's political project. For several reasons, it is unlikely that the first ruler will be able to offer a comprehensive set of practical stipulations. Death may cut his career short, or political demands such as war will prevent him from devoting his full attention to legislation. Furthermore, if the ruler restricts himself to offering guidance only on those topics which present themselves in his time and place, much will be left undetermined, "since not all accidental occurrences happen in his time nor in the country in which he is" (48:13–14\*). While practical legislation is therefore necessarily contingent upon the particular historical circumstances in which a first ruler finds himself, this is apparently not the case for theoretical religious opinions—at no point in this section does Alfarabi speak of theoretical opinions being left undetermined. This offers further support for a hypothesis first hinted at in Section 5. There, Alfarabi had stated that practical stipulations of religion are subordinate to practical philosophy because the latter contains the universals that inform the former. Theoretical religious opinions, on the other hand, were said to be subordinate to theoretical philosophy only in the sense that the latter contains demonstrative proofs for the former. Taken together, these two sections suggest that the same opinions about the highest things can guide men across time and location, despite historical changes that may necessitate an extrapolation

or alteration of the first ruler's practical legislation.

Section 7 concludes with the remark that if the first ruler begins by legislating those actions that are of greatest benefit to the city, it is possible that “someone else can extrapolate them, either in [the first ruler's] time or after him, if he imitates him” (49:7–8\*, emphasis added) Thus, the one responsible for extrapolating from the first ruler's basic principles may begin to do so even while the first ruler is still alive! It would therefore be possible to have a regime in which a philosophic founder operates alongside a more active, but subordinate, executive officer who applies the law to particular circumstances as they arise. In such an arrangement, the first ruler would presumably focus his attention on providing a healthy theoretical framework that will guide his community far into the future. To the extent that the first ruler makes practical determinations, he does so with full knowledge that they are contingent on current circumstances and may be subject to change at a later date or in another place. Alfarabi therefore emphasizes the distinction between the first ruler as a founder and successive rulers who actively apply the former's legislative principles to particular cases.

Even if a sufficiently skilled contemporary exists, it will necessarily be the case that not all possible determinations are made in the lifetime of the first ruler. Thus, the first possible cause of an incomplete legacy of practical determinations mentioned by Alfarabi is the death of the ruler. Death first comes to sight in the *Book of Religion* as that which terminates a founder's career prematurely. But in pointing to this possibility, Alfarabi seems to be overlooking the fundamental alternative to his view of religious founding. According to the ordinary, pious view, the virtuous first ruler is not merely a

philosopher with special access to theoretical knowledge, but a prophet chosen by God to convey the latter's message to humanity.<sup>126</sup> If God wills that his teaching be conveyed in its entirety, then what reason do we have to fear that our only line of communication to the divine be cut off prematurely? Alfarabi has been frustratingly silent so far about the theological alternative to the rationalist account that he favors. Once again, we can only expect that a response awaits us in the rest of the work.

In Section 8, Alfarabi considers the possibility that the virtuous first ruler is succeeded after his death by someone “who is like him in all respects” (49:9). In this case, the responsibility for filling in lacunae from the first ruler's legislative determinations will fall to such a man. But the task of the virtuous successor is not limited to making determinations in cases where the first ruler was silent; in addition, “it is also up to him to alter much of what the first [ruler] legislated and to determine it in another way, when he knows that this is the most suitable (*al-aṣḥ*) for his time” (49:11–12\*). Such an alteration would in fact be undertaken by the first ruler himself, if only he were alive to see how circumstances had changed.<sup>127</sup> Alfarabi thus makes it clear that, in the absence of a succession of rulers whose virtue matches that of the founder, the

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<sup>126</sup> Muhammad's lack of learning is attested to by Qur'an 7:158, although some have challenged the orthodox interpretation of *al-umiyi*; see, for example, Yuksel (23–28). The traditional belief in Muhammad's illiteracy receives support from Qur'an 29:48 and *Sahih Bukhari* 1.3.

<sup>127</sup> As expected, Alfarabi does not claim that the successor should alter the theoretical opinions legislated by the first ruler.



particular actions legislated in religion will necessarily become outdated. The mortality of the virtuous founder is deeply problematic for political society because, in the absence of living wisdom, laws cannot be properly updated to maintain their original intention.

Even if a community is fortunate enough to experience a succession of virtuous rulers, we cannot expect the ruled to accurately determine the virtue of any particular successor; such a judgment can only be made by someone sufficiently wise. By remaining silent about the actual process by which a successor ascends to power, Alfarabi hides the enormous difficulty involved in ensuring that the best men rule. If, by some further fortune, the wisest man is chosen to rule, will the ruled stand by passively as he overturns the now obsolete determinations of his predecessor? For practical reasons, a wise successor likely has no choice but to present himself as a restorer and updater of the founder's will, but it is not at all clear that he will be permitted by his subjects to do anything more than slavishly follow the letter of the established law.

Despite these severe practical limitations, Alfarabi seems to be achieving an important goal in this section of the text: by making the theoretical point that law will necessarily deteriorate with time, he attempts to temper the often violent attachment that the many have to ancestral religious determinations. Writing in a context of religious devotion, Alfarabi wishes to illustrate the utopian circumstances that are needed if such deterioration is to be avoided.

In making his point, Alfarabi seems to ignore the possibility that the law of the founder is meant to apply, unchanged, to all times and places. If the law of the founder is nothing other than the commands of God, what possible grounds does Alfarabi have to

suggest that these commands be altered when their goodness is no longer apparent? His assertion that religious law be altered in the face of changing historical circumstance forcefully opposes the view that man must submit himself unquestioningly to the orders of his creator.<sup>128</sup> Section 8 therefore offers a glimpse of Alfarabi's ultimate strategy for dealing with the theological alternative to his rationalist account. By showing that no law can possibly continue to apply perfectly through changing circumstances, Alfarabi forces his reader to consider if God would require adherence to unchanging commandments. This is, of course, in no way a decisive refutation of the opposing position; the response to the challenge of conventional piety clearly remains incomplete at this point in the text.

While pointing to the problem of obsolescence necessarily lowers the status of divine law, Alfarabi nevertheless avoids fully undermining the high esteem in which the founder is held. Thus, Section 9 considers the likely scenario in which there is no successor who matches the founder with respect to virtue. In such a case, it is necessary “for the successor to follow in the footsteps of the predecessor with respect to what he determines” (50:6–7). In the case that extrapolations are required, they must be made on the basis of “the things the first [ruler] determined by declaring them” (50:9). Alfarabi thus articulates a conservative defense of traditional law by taking advantage of his immediate historical context. Alfarabi's environment is one in which no man thought himself capable of matching the virtue of Muhammad, or at least would not publicly admit to such pretensions. Despite the immediately preceding claim that law will

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<sup>128</sup> Qur'an 6:115, 10:15, and 18:27 stress the unalterable character of God's words. Qur'an 2:106 and 16:101 indicate that God retains the power of abrogation, but at no point is Muhammad said to have such a right.

deteriorate over time, Alfarabi is careful not to encourage reckless innovation.

As pointed to in the previous section, any successive ruler of sufficient virtue who does believe that an alteration to the original law must be made will be greatly constrained by public resistance to his project of reform. Alfarabi gives an indication of how moderate reform might be feasible in the face of such resistance when he turns to the art of jurisprudence, which “enables a human being to make a sound determination of each thing the lawgiver (*wāḍī‘ ash-sharī‘a*) did not declare specifically by extrapolating it or inferring it from the things he determined” (50:10–12). Alfarabi claims that the jurist’s task is only possible if “his belief in the opinions of that religion is correct (*ṣaḥīḥ*) and he possesses the virtues that are virtues in that religion” (50:14–15). Since it is not necessarily the case that all of the opinions legislated by the virtuous first ruler are true, what does it mean for a jurist to have a correct belief in those opinions?<sup>129</sup> Since jurists are defined by their lack of virtue relative to the founder, it seems unlikely that they possess the capacity to distinguish between the founder’s true and untrue theoretical statements. Thus, Alfarabi points to the necessary result of jurisprudence undertaken by men who lack the virtue of the founder; unable to distinguish between true and untrue opinions, they will simply accept the teachings of the founder on trust and work to extrapolate what they can from his recorded commands.

Our suspicion that the jurist does not recognize the possibility of the founder’s untruth is strengthened when we examine Alfarabi’s second criteria for a jurist, that “he

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<sup>129</sup> The Arabic word “*ṣaḥīḥ*,” in addition to meaning “true,” can mean “healthy” or “lawful.” Alfarabi therefore retains some ambiguity regarding the truth of the jurist’s beliefs.

possesses the virtues that are virtues in that religion.” Nowhere previously in the *Book of Religion* has virtue been qualified in this way. By provoking the reader to contrast religious virtues with virtue simply, Alfarabi points to the existence of trans-religious virtue, possessed by the founder but perhaps not by most of his followers.

But given the slim possibility that a man with virtue to rival the founder does appear, and given the certain resistance such a man would face in attempting to reform the determinations of his predecessor, is the situation for religious reform at the hands of a wise successor simply hopeless? Or can such a successor, who is either unwilling or incapable of presenting himself as a new prophet, disguise himself as a mere jurist, thus exerting a subtler but still meaningful influence on religion? In Section 10, Alfarabi offers reasons to believe the latter possibility. In addition to possessing thorough knowledge of the actions and statements of the lawgiver and knowledge of the lawgiver's language, “the jurist must be quite clever at recognizing the meaning intended by an equivocal name in the context in which it is used, as well as at recognizing equivocality in speech” (51:10–12). It may therefore be the case that the literal and intended meanings of the lawgiver's statements diverge. But a jurist who is able to distinguish between literal and intended meaning might also be able to distinguish between demonstrably true and metaphorically true theoretical opinions. What, then, distinguishes the most capable jurist from the founding lawgiver? Of course, Alfarabi does not go so far as to say that the jurist should be able to recognize when the lawgiver includes untrue opinions. Nevertheless, by bringing the jurist closer in terms of virtue to the founder, Alfarabi intimates to the careful reader the necessity of disguising

religious reform under the acceptable shroud of jurisprudence. In the face of practical limitations, perhaps the best a virtuous successor can do is claim that the founder was being equivocal when making a particularly problematic statement. Furthermore, by sketching an image of the ideal jurist, Alfarabi shows how high a standard would have to be met if religious legislation is to be protected from decay. To the extent that jurists are unable to peer into the mind of the lawgiver, the latter's intention will necessarily be frustrated as his determinations become increasingly obsolete with the passage of time.

Just as there are two parts of philosophy and of religion—opinions and actions—so, too, must there be two parts of jurisprudence. We have seen in a few foregoing passages that the voluntary determinations of a founder are in need of updating as historical circumstances change, while the founder's theoretical determinations are not. This being the case, what possible need could there be for a “jurist concerned with the opinions determined in religion” (52:3)? Alfarabi goes into no detail about the theoretical jurist, simply asserting that he “ought already to know what the jurist concerned with practices knows” (52:3). Perhaps this section represents a recognition by Alfarabi that, although theoretical opinions are less contingent upon time and place than laws concerning voluntary matters, they may nevertheless require updating, as humanity's scientific understanding of the world progresses to such an extent that certain theoretical opinions are rendered unbelievable. For this reason, virtuous religion must allow some space for a jurist who can claim that certain theoretical opinions are merely likenesses of the truth, rather than the truth simply, should the need arise.

Section 10 concludes in a manner reminiscent of the latter half of Section 5,

where Alfarabi spoke of the subordination of religion to philosophy. Here, he asserts that since practical jurisprudence “comprises only things that are particulars of the universals encompassed by political science (*ilm ... al-madaniyy*),” it is subordinate to practical philosophy (52:4–5). This is the first mention in the text of political science, and it marks the transition to the next portion of the work, in which this will be the primary focus. And although religion will not be mentioned again until the text’s final section, political science will turn out to share key similarities with religion as defined by Alfarabi in the opening lines of the work.

### **Political Science (Sections 11-14d)**

We now approach the heart of the *Book of Religion*. In the next series of sections, Alfarabi elaborates on his understanding of political science. In the course of doing so, he addresses for the first time the relationship between worldly goods and the happiness of the afterlife. Alfarabi’s treatment of this issue will be centrally important in determining the character of his political thought in its distinction from Islamism, a topic pursued in Chapter 4. In addition, we find in this portion of the work an elaboration upon the concept of the kingly craft as well as a discussion of the virtuous city. Finally, Alfarabi introduces an analogy of the medical and political arts that constitutes the foundation of his critique of the rule of law.

Alfarabi defines political science by pointing out the various objects of inquiry it pursues, asserting that “Political science investigates happiness first of all” (52:10). According to the typology of rulers offered in Section 1, the virtuous ruler is distinguished from all others in that only he aims at “the ultimate happiness that is truly

happiness” (43:8–9). Thus, the first ruler must either possess political science or, through some other method, come to possess the knowledge about happiness that political science offers. As a result of its investigation of happiness, political science allows its possessor to distinguish between true happiness and that which is merely presumed to be happiness. Alfarabi has hitherto been frustratingly silent about the nature of the former, and while he does not give a definition in this section, he does offer some characteristics. True happiness “is the one sought for its own sake; at no time is it sought in order to obtain something else by it; indeed, all other things are sought in order to obtain this one, and when it is obtained, the search is given up” (52:12–14). The happiness sought by the virtuous first ruler, both for himself and for the ruled, is therefore emphatically not instrumental. Somehow, the art of religious legislation is meant to achieve a state of perfect fulfillment for all, or at least takes its bearings by such a standard.

Unexpectedly, Alfarabi goes on to claim that true happiness “does not come about in this life, but rather in the next life (*al-ḥayāt al-ākhirā*)<sup>130</sup> which is after this one” (52:14–15). The virtuous kingly craft therefore aims at a happiness that can only be attained through death! Conventional piety, of course, can easily make sense of this statement; ultimate happiness may only come about in the afterlife, in which individual souls are judged by God and sentenced to eternal reward or punishment. In light of this fact, anyone who focuses on the attainment of worldly ends, such as “wealth, pleasures, honor and being someone glorified, and the like among that which is sought and acquired

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<sup>130</sup> *Al-ākhirā* is the term used in the Qur'an for the hereafter.

in this life that the multitude (*al-jamhoor*) calls goods,” would be acting foolishly (52:16–18\*). Even the acts of virtue undertaken by the pious man do not constitute ultimate happiness, since they are undertaken for the sake of eternal bliss and are therefore merely instrumental. The virtuous ruler guides himself and his community toward divine favor by ordering the regime in accordance with the commands of God.

With this sudden declaration, Alfarabi aligns himself more closely with orthodoxy than at any other point in the *Book of Religion*. Indeed, appearing as it does immediately after radical claims regarding revelation and divine law, the assertion that true happiness does not come about in this world stands out to the reader so dramatically precisely because of its apparent conformity with received religious opinion.<sup>131</sup> Given Alfarabi's heretofore consistent rationalism, what accounts for the sudden shift? The answer to this question must await a further exploration of Alfarabi's account of political science, which turns out to be the keystone of his teaching in the *Book of Religion*.

We learn in Section 12 that political science not only investigates the nature of true happiness, but also “the voluntary actions, ways of life, moral habits, states of character, and dispositions until it gives an exhaustive account of all of them and covers them in detail” (53:1–2). By allowing its possessor to understand the nature of true happiness and by giving an account of all the various ways of life, political science is the precise science that discovers the happiest way of life. If the political scientist discovers

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<sup>131</sup> Alfarabi's discussion of the afterlife in other works is far from orthodox (1998, Chapter 16; 2001, 52–53).

But in contrast to these other works, the *Book of Religion* remains utterly vague about the nature of the afterlife; Alfarabi thus leaves open, at least in this work, heterodox and orthodox interpretations alike.



that the life of a virtuous first ruler is the happiest, he will presumably undertake such a project, if he is capable. If, on the other hand, he discovers that a certain kind of private life is happier, this would mean that Alfarabi's virtuous founder could not exist, since anyone with the knowledge of true happiness would not seek to rule. Therefore, either the happiest life is that of the virtuous first ruler, or the virtuous ruler as Alfarabi describes him is an impossibility. So far, we have only seen slight indications that rulership may come at the cost of private happiness, while the massive surface impression is that such a life represents the perfection of human virtue. The next few sections are of the utmost importance for determining Alfarabi's ultimate stance toward the choiceworthiness of undertaking a project of religious founding.

In Section 13, Alfarabi claims that, after thoroughly investigating the various ways of life, political science "explains that these cannot all be found in one human being nor be done by one human being, but can be done and actually manifest themselves only by being distributed among an association of people (*jamā'a*)" (53:3–5). Simply for economic reasons, utter self-sufficiency is impossible; no man can accomplish his task without the assistance of others undertaking their own tasks. As an example, Alfarabi points to the farmer, who "cannot complete his task unless a carpenter assists him by preparing wood for the plow, a blacksmith by preparing steel for the plow, and a cowherd by preparing oxen for the yoke" (53:11–13).

Alfarabi does not draw any attention to the fact that, in the example given, some of the arts exists for the sake of other arts; that is, the products of carpentry, blacksmithing, and cowherding are the inputs of farming. Presumably, the output of

farming itself exists for some higher end, as well. This hierarchical structure of subordinate and superior arts would ultimately terminate in the highest purpose of the city, in light of which all other activities are merely instrumental. Alfarabi does not tell us what such an activity would be, only that the various groups within a community must “cooperate, through the actions and dispositions in each, to perfect the purpose of the whole association in the same way that the organs of a human being cooperate, through the capacities in each, to perfect the purpose of the whole body” (53:16–18).

By failing to describe the highest purpose of the city, Alfarabi provokes the reader to consider possible candidates. But in doing so, the thoughtful reader comes across a difficulty regarding the prospect of a common good between ruler and ruled. We know from Section 1 that the virtuous city is oriented toward ultimate happiness. Furthermore, we learned in Section 12 that such happiness is unavailable in this life. But if some regimes are better than others, it must be the case that there exists a certain way of life that either secures ultimate happiness in the next life or approximates it in this life. The virtuous city aiming at ultimate happiness for all must therefore cultivate such a way of life among its citizens. But if the best human life—compared to which all other activities are instrumental—is the life of the ruler, then the ruler attains or approximates true happiness himself while using the ruled as instruments. The typology of rulers in Section 1 did not include a ruler who seeks true happiness in this way; the virtuous ruler necessarily seeks true happiness for the ruled as well as for himself, while the deceptive ruler seeks an ignorant good for himself exclusively. Nevertheless, such an arrangement would seem to be necessary, if the life of rulership is indeed the happiest. If, on the other

hand, there is some private life happier than the life of ruling, then the ruler's task is merely instrumental, providing the order necessary for such a pursuit to take place.

Alfarabi's image of the virtuous city is, however, not simply a logical impossibility. Two criteria must be met if there is to be a common good between ruler and ruled: the life of the ruler must be happiest, and human capacities must vary so widely across individuals that some members of the city find the greatest happiness available to them in the performance of tasks that are instrumentally useful to the ruler's project. Given such a set of circumstances, the ruler would attain his truest happiness while guiding each individual member of the community toward whatever happiness they are capable of attaining.

It is necessary at this point to recall the distinction, hinted at by Alfarabi in several previous passages, between the virtuous first ruler as founder and the more active, but subordinate, executive ruler, who may exist contemporaneously alongside the first ruler or rule after his death. As described in Section 1, the virtuous first ruler "seeks only to obtain, for himself and for everyone under his rulership, the ultimate happiness that is truly happiness" (43:7-9). Might it be the case that all successive kings are "under the rulership," so to speak, of the religious founder and lawgiver? The distinction between these two types of rulers will be made explicit in Section 14, the central section of the text. In addition, Alfarabi will make clear the high standard that must be met by the kingly craft, if it is to provide for the common good.

Section 14 is the only part of the *Book of Religion* that is divided by Alfarabi into subsections. In the first of five such subsections, Alfarabi states that political science

“distinguishes the ways of life, moral habits, and dispositions that, when practiced in cities or nations, make their dwellings prosper and their inhabitants obtain goods in this life here below (*al-ḥayāt ad-dunyā*),<sup>132</sup> and ultimate happiness in the afterlife; and it sets them apart from those not like that” (54:1–3). This statement makes more explicit than ever the fact that the virtuous first ruler must be the political scientist *par excellence*. Furthermore, and most crucially, Alfarabi speaks here as if the same ways of life that are conducive to prosperity in this world also attain ultimate happiness in the next life.

But prosperity presumably involves the acquisition of what Alfarabi has repeatedly called “ignorant goods”; that is, physical health, wealth, pleasure, honor, and conquest.<sup>133</sup> Although Alfarabi has previously asserted that such goods are “presumed to be happiness but [are] not such” (52:15), Section 14 offers a critical clarification. While such objects by no means constitute man’s ultimate good and should not be treated as though they do, they are not simply opposed to ultimate happiness. In order to make sense of Alfarabi’s claim that the same ways of life achieve worldly goods and otherworldly happiness, at least some of the ignorant goods must either be prerequisites along the way to ultimate happiness or byproducts of the pursuit of ultimate happiness. The pursuit of such goods is therefore only ignorant when they are pursued as ends,

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<sup>132</sup> This phrase is used repeatedly in the Qur’an to describe earthly life, in contrast to the hereafter.

<sup>133</sup> The verb in 54:2, translated above as “make ... prosper,” is *‘amarat*, which does call to mind at least physical health and wealth. Furthermore, it must be emphasized that the “goods” of which Alfarabi speaks in the same line cannot be the virtuous ways of life or moral habits themselves, but are rather their worldly product.

rather than means. The quest for true happiness will attain, incidentally, “goods in this life here below.”

In the concluding remark of this subsection, Alfarabi reminds the reader of the singular importance of ultimate happiness, stating, “Those [things] by which ultimate happiness is attained among the voluntary actions, ways of life, moral habits, states of character, and dispositions—they alone are virtuous, they alone are goods, and they are beautiful (*jamīla*)<sup>134</sup> in truth” (54:3–5\*). Virtue, goodness, and beauty can only be defined with respect to ultimate happiness. Furthermore, Alfarabi seems to indicate that these three concepts are identical, at least with respect to their truest meaning, if not in popular opinion. That which is truly beautiful or virtuous is therefore nothing other than that which is good; there is no tension among the three, and each concept describes the way of life conducive to ultimate happiness.

But since ultimate happiness cannot be attained in this world, to what extent can these qualities be realized in the course of a human life? Of course, even if perfect virtue were not attainable for human beings in this world, there could still be a meaningful standard that individuals could more or less successfully approximate. The most virtuous, best, and most beautiful man would, in this case, be the one who most profoundly recognizes the limits imposed by mortality and who adjusts his pursuits accordingly. Indeed, the repeated association of ultimate happiness with reminders of death seems to be Alfarabi's method of intimating to the reader that mortality has the effect of causing

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<sup>134</sup> The Arabic “*jamīl*” roughly corresponds to the Ancient Greek “*καλός*” inasmuch as both words refer primarily to physical beauty but carry an associated meaning of moral virtue.

ignorant goods to lose their appeal for the wise man.<sup>135</sup>

It is not until Section 14a<sup>136</sup> that Alfarabi finally mentions rulership as a subject of political science. This science teaches that rulership is necessary for bringing about “the things such as to be distributed in a city, in cities, in a nation, or in nations so as to be practiced in common” (54:8–9). In addition to the initial establishment of these common practices, rulership also aims at their preservation, “so that they do not disappear or become extinct” (54:10–11). Furthermore, rulership is itself a product of the kingly craft (*al-mihna al-malakīyya*). This craft has as its object the regime (*siyāsa*), and it “consists of cognizance of all the actions with which one goes about establishing, first, and preserving afterwards” (54:16–17). Cognizance of the actions necessary for founding alone does not constitute the kingly craft, unless one also possesses cognizance of the means by which a founding can be preserved. Alfarabi repeatedly insists in the space of a few lines that it is the same craft that allows both the initial establishment and the long-term preservation of the proper actions of a political community.

The relationship between rulership and the kingly craft clearly involves the subordination of the former to the latter, but why does Alfarabi require both concepts? Would it not be enough to say that rulership brings about the proper actions in the community and drop the kingly craft altogether? While such an approach would likely yield a clearer picture, Alfarabi’s inclusion of the kingly craft indicates an important

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<sup>135</sup> Consider, in this context, the end of the First Valli of the Katha Upanishad, in which Nachiketa refuses the worldly pleasures offered to him by Yama.

<sup>136</sup> The five subsections into which Section 14 is divided are labeled by Alfarabi as: 14, 14a, 14b, 14c, and 14d.

point. In claiming that the kingly craft allows rulership to come about, Alfarabi makes it clear that the art that informs rulership is conceptually distinct from rulership itself. It therefore seems entirely possible that the possessor of the kingly craft might not take part in actual rule.

Alfarabi says nothing more about this at the moment, and instead distinguishes between virtuous and vicious rule. Rulership that establishes the ways of life aimed at ultimate happiness is virtuous rulership. This only comes about by means of the virtuous kingly craft, and the product of this craft is the virtuous regime. Whatever political community is subject to this regime, whether city or nation, is virtuous as well, and the human being who lives in this community is the virtuous human being. The vicious counterparts of all of these are those that “aim at attaining one of the goods particularly characteristic of this world here below—that is, the ones the multitude presumed to be goods” (55:7–9). There are several types of vicious regimes, named according to the particular good sought above all others. Alfarabi thus evokes the typology of rulers offered in Section 1.

But in that account, the virtuous first ruler who aims at true happiness was said to be the recipient of divine revelation. Furthermore, it was only by means of revelation that the first ruler was said to determine the actions and opinions of virtuous religion. Revelation is conspicuously absent from Alfarabi’s account when political science makes its entrance. It is important to recall that Alfarabi spoke of revelation in two vastly different ways in Section 1: as the receipt of determined particulars directly from God or as a faculty by means of which the founder determines particulars himself. Since

knowledge of true happiness is apparently available through political science, might not the faculty bestowed by revelation be a kind of political prudence, by means of which the founder organizes the community in such a way that they attain the greatest happiness possible?<sup>137</sup>

Although Alfarabi initially gives the impression that the virtue of an individual is entirely dependent on the virtue of his regime, he goes on to consider the possibility that some human beings may be mismatched with their city; thus, “it is not impossible for a human being who is part of the virtuous city to be living in an ignorant city, voluntarily or involuntarily” (55:17—56:1). But the man in such a situation is a kind of monstrous chimera, resembling “an animal that happens to have the legs of an animal belonging to an inferior species” (56:2–3). The ignorant man who happens to live in a virtuous city is similarly dual-natured; however, rather than possessing the legs of an inferior species, such a man “may be likened to an animal that has the head of an animal belonging to a superior species” (56:4–5). Thus, Alfarabi concedes that even the virtuous city may contain ignorant individuals, who are benefited by their presence in a properly governed regime.

But under what circumstances would the virtuous man find himself in an ignorant city? Alfarabi concludes the subsection by claiming that “the most virtuous persons, forced to dwell in ignorant cities due to the non-existence of the virtuous city, need to

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<sup>137</sup> This would be a far cry from the orthodox account of revelation; see, for example, *Sahih Bukhari* 1.2. But consider the possible range of interpretations of *baṣā'irū* in Qur'an 7:203.



migrate (*hijra*)<sup>138</sup> to the virtuous city, if it happens to come into being at a certain moment” (56:5–7). A virtuous man therefore inhabits an ignorant city when the earth is filled with nothing but ignorant regimes, and no alternative is available. But why “the most virtuous persons” must merely wait for the virtuous city to come into being, rather than bringing it into being themselves is unclear. Is this not precisely the task of the first ruler—to determine opinions and actions such that the virtuous regime is brought into existence? If even the most virtuous men are sometimes unable to bring about the best regime, it must be the case that virtue is a necessary, but not a sufficient, precondition for the creation of such a regime. Alfarabi quietly indicates, for the first time in the *Book of Religion*, the tremendous influence of fortune in allowing or preventing the existence of the best regime.

However, even more perplexing is the claim that virtuous men may live in an ignorant city “voluntarily or involuntarily.” While the latter case clearly refers to the situation just described—in which no virtuous city exists—what could it possibly mean for the virtuous man to voluntarily inhabit an ignorant city? There would seem to be two possible interpretations of this strange statement. Alfarabi could mean that the virtuous man will prefer living in an ignorant city to having no city at all, if for no other reason than the economic interdependence of man spoken of in Section 13. But could Alfarabi also mean that the virtuous man may prefer living in an ignorant city to living in a virtuous city? Since the latter city is, by definition, ruled by a virtuous man, the only

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<sup>138</sup> Cognates of “*hijra*” are used in the Qur’an to describe the emigration of the young Muslim community from Mecca to Medina. See, for example, 16:110, 33:50, 59:9.

possible reason he would prefer an ignorant city is that he would not need to rule.

Alfarabi therefore again raises the question that has been present since the opening section of the text: to what extent is there a common good between ruler and ruled? This is the strongest indication so far that the virtuous man may wish to avoid the life of rulership, even at the cost of his membership in the virtuous city.

After hinting at this massively disappointing teaching, Alfarabi immediately proceeds, in Section 14b, to reaffirm the incredible capacity of the kingly craft to alter the political environment. Political science distinguishes between two types of rulership: first rulership (*ar-ri'āsa al-ūlā*) “establishes the virtuous ways of life and dispositions in the city or nation without their having existed among the people before that, and it converts them from the ignorant ways of life to the virtuous ways of life” (56:9–11). The first ruler therefore has the capacity to change an ignorant city into a virtuous city. Alfarabi implies that ignorance is mankind's original condition, and that it is only through a wise first ruler that virtue comes to exist in cities at all. The other type of rulership discerned by political science is “the rulership dependent on the first,” which “follows in the steps of the first rulership with regard to its actions” (56:12). Here, in the very center of the *Book of Religion*, Alfarabi chooses to emphasize the distinction between the founding king and the subsequent rulers. The first virtuous kingly craft—that is, the craft characteristic of the first ruler and not the successor—“consists of cognizance of all the actions that facilitate establishing the virtuous ways of life and dispositions in cities and nations, preserving them for the people, and guarding and keeping them from the inroad of something from the ignorant ways of life” (56:14–16). Again, the kingly craft is that

which brings about *cognizance* of the actions that would be required of a virtuous ruler; it is entirely conceivable that the possessor of the first kingly craft not actually rule.

Section 14b concludes with the introduction of a medical analogy. To the extent that the first virtuous kingly craft protects the virtuous city from ignorant ways of life, it resembles the medical craft, “for the latter consists of cognizance of all the actions that establish health in a human being, preserve it for him, and guard it from any sickness that might occur” (56:17–19). The comparison of political rule to medicine raises a fundamental question: given that a physician works with individual patients, to what extent must the virtuous king similarly cater his rule to the needs of individual subjects with idiosyncratic needs? This question will be treated explicitly in the following subsection.

Alfarabi begins Section 14c by laying out three medical facts that ought to be known by the physician, each more specific than the last: that opposites combat opposites, that chill combats fever, and that barley-water or tamarind-water combat jaundice. Alfarabi states that when the physician cures, he necessarily does so with respect to single beings. Even the most particular level of knowledge available through the study of the medical art is insufficiently specific to deal with individual cases. Thus, though it may be true that jaundice can be combated by barley-water, in the case of a particular individual, it could be that “barley-water will heal the bodily humor, but not let him perspire” (57:12–13). The very medical treatment that saves one individual may therefore be capable of killing another; thorough knowledge of individual cases is needed if the physician is to avoid visiting tremendous harm upon his patients. Furthermore, the

sort of individualized knowledge needed cannot be acquired from books of medicine, nor from the physician's cognizance of universals of the medical art. Rather, such knowledge is available to the physician only “through another faculty developing from his pursuit of medical practices with respect to the body of one individual after another, from his lengthy observation of the states of sick persons, from the experience acquired by being occupied with curing over a long period of time, and from ministering to each individual” (57:21–58:2). The virtuous physician therefore needs two distinct faculties if he is to successfully practice the art of medicine: “one is the ability for unqualified and exhaustive cognizance of the universals that are parts of his art so that nothing escapes him; then there is the faculty that develops in him through the lengthy practice of his art with regard to each individual” (58:3–6).

The medical craft requires a combination of universal and particular knowledge because individual human beings are variations of a single, species-wide pattern. Particular knowledge is needed because not every human being is identical; universal knowledge is possible because all human beings share certain class characteristics. Thus, the universals of the medical craft apply equally to every human being, including the physician himself. Were the physician exclusively interested in preserving his own health, he would require very little particular knowledge, perhaps only of himself and a small number of comparison cases. While knowledge of universals is therefore required regardless of whether the physician wishes to tend to his own good or the good of others, the thorough knowledge of various particular cases that Alfarabi describes is necessary only to the extent that the physician wishes to heal others.

This must be kept in mind as Alfarabi returns to the political side of the analogy in Section 14d, reiterating that the first kingly craft is like the medical craft. Just as the physician must possess a combination of universal and particular knowledge, “the ruler is not content to have comprehensive cognizance of universal things, or the ability to grasp them, unless he has another faculty as well, one acquired through lengthy experience and observation” (58:8–10). Political rule necessarily deals with particulars, and therefore “the actions of the kingly craft are only concerned with particular cities ... this city and that city, this nation and that nation, or this human being and that human being” (58:13–15). Political science can therefore determine the proper actions and opinions all the way down to the individual level, legislating only that which is most fitting for a given human being.

But such a level of sensitivity to individual needs is, of course, impossible to achieve through lawgiving. The determinations of a founder necessarily order the entire political community and must therefore overlook critical differences among individual human beings. By presenting political rule as if it were simply comparable to the medical craft, Alfarabi leads the reader to discover a massive limitation of the lawgiver's art. Just as barley-water may cause grave injury if prescribed to the wrong patient, so too may an otherwise beneficial law cause tremendous harm to exceptional individuals. Of course, just as a physician may stipulate exceptions to general injunctions regarding health, so too may a ruler decree exemptions from established patterns of policy. But to the extent that the ruler is a lawgiver—and this is primarily true of the founder—he is forced to work with blunt instruments. While law is therefore a practical necessity, it is

emphatically inferior to living wisdom.

Why, then, should a virtuous first ruler resort to law at all? Could he not instead offer general injunctions that are open to flexible interpretation and application based on the particular circumstances of each individual case? In previous sections of the text, Alfarabi has presented us with two reasons to reject this possibility. First, as mentioned in Section 7, the founder is mortal. Given that there can be no guarantee of a succession of virtuous rulers, if the founder cares at all about the welfare of the political community after his death, he will act as a lawgiver, albeit one who fully recognizes the limitations of law as such. Second, Alfarabi has increasingly begun to hint that the life of active rule may not be the happiest. To the extent that engaging in rulership distracts the founder's attention from matters that are of greater interest to him, he will restrict himself to issuing general injunctions which would ideally be implemented by subordinate executive officers; such an arrangement was briefly hinted at in Section 7. Thus, the two fundamental shortcomings of human rulers that necessitate the imperfect instrument of written law are mortality and the inability to perform multiple tasks simultaneously. The perfect political community would therefore require a ruler both immortal and omnipotent. Thus, in the remaining sections of the *Book of Religion*, Alfarabi gives an account of God's rule over the cosmos and its relation to human rulership. In doing so, he will finally defend his attempted rationalization of religious law against those who would claim that divine law must be followed unquestioningly and unceasingly.

### **Philosophy and Theology (Sections 15-27)**

In the final sections of the work, Alfarabi offers further elaboration of political

science, although this time a political science that is grounded in a broader philosophic framework. In this portion of the text, theoretical matters will reassert their importance after having been dropped from consideration for several pages. Alfarabi also revisits the distinction made early in the work between the virtuous and non-virtuous ruler. The book culminates in an account of the entire cosmos that sheds further light on the precise relationship between the religious founder and God.

Beginning in Section 15, Alfarabi turns to consider “political science that is a part of philosophy” (59:3), which remains his theme for the remainder of the text. In doing so, he implies that the immediately foregoing discussion concerned a political science that was somehow non-philosophic. We can therefore expect to understand more clearly what Alfarabi considers to be the distinctive characteristic of philosophy by carefully comparing the previous account of political science with what follows.

Alfarabi's initial remarks about philosophic political science emphasize its generality: this science “is limited—in what it investigates of the voluntary actions, ways of life, and dispositions, and in the rest of what it investigates—to universals and to giving their patterns” (59:3–5). Philosophic political science does not concern itself with specific political arrangements, but instead “brings about cognizance of the patterns for determining particulars” (59:5). The insights of philosophic political science therefore constitute guidelines for political rulers, according to which they can correctly decide about specific matters as they may arise. The determination of particulars itself “belongs to a faculty other than philosophy” (59:7). Though Alfarabi does not presently mention this faculty by name, his definition of prudence (*ta' aqqul*) in the previous section—“the

faculty by means of which a human being is able to infer the stipulations with which to determine actions with respect to what he observes” (58:15–16)—leaves little doubt that this is what is being discussed. Just as jurisprudence was said to be subordinate to practical philosophy, prudence is subordinate to philosophic political science, since the latter contains the universals that inform the former, one of the forms of subordination discussed by Alfarabi in Section 5.

Alfarabi concludes the first part of Section 15 by mentioning that philosophy does not determine particulars “*perhaps* because the circumstances and occurrences with respect to which determination takes place is infinite and without limitation” (59:7–8, emphasis added). The conspicuous qualification of this statement leaves open the possibility that there are only a finite number of circumstances that will ever present themselves to political rulers in the course of human history, or at least a finite number of classes into which these circumstances could be categorized. This potential limitation on the variety of political life implies some fixed boundaries within which human political behavior takes place. In this case, philosophic political science, insofar as it offers a thorough understanding of human nature, would contain the timeless knowledge needed by rulers of any era.

In the remainder of Section 15, Alfarabi begins an account of philosophic political science that runs highly parallel to the previous discussion of political science. He first mentions that philosophic political science examines happiness, distinguishing between true happiness and that which is merely presumed to be happiness. It describes the various voluntary actions that come to exist in cities and nations, distinguishing between



the virtuous and non-virtuous. In addition, it “[brings] about cognizance of the actions by which virtuous actions and dispositions are established and ordered among the inhabitants of the cities, as well as of the actions by which what has been established among them is preserved for them” (59:12–13). This account, though highly condensed, is perfectly in line with what Alfarabi had previously stated about political science.

This parallelism continues in Section 16, where Alfarabi states that philosophic political science enumerates the various forms of non-virtuous kingly craft. The rest of the section is a further recapitulation of points made in the previous account; specifically, that non-virtuous ways of life are sicknesses that befall virtuous cities and that non-virtuous regimes are similarly “the sicknesses of the virtuous kingly craft” (59:18). Alfarabi offers still more similarities between the two versions of political science in Section 17, where he states that philosophic political science enumerates the reasons why virtuous cities are in frequent danger of transformation into non-virtuous cities. This science furthermore teaches actions by which virtuous cities may be prevented from turning into non-virtuous ones, as well as means by which non-virtuous cities may be turned back to health.

The obvious similarity of this account to the foregoing one has the potential effect of lulling the reader into passivity, thereby disguising the divergence that occurs in Section 18. In the previous three sections, Alfarabi has more or less restated, in condensed form, the account of political science from Section 11 through Section 14b. If the pattern were to continue, we would therefore expect a recapitulation of Alfarabi's digression on medicine, which forms the subject of Section 14c, and its comparison to the

kingly craft, found in Section 14d. However, a mere glance at Section 18 reveals that it is not a restatement of Alfarabi's earlier medical analogy. But as noted above, comparing kingly rule to the medical art allowed Alfarabi to implicitly criticize the bluntness of law. It may therefore be the case that Section 18, though lacking any reference to medicine, nevertheless points in its own way to the severe limitations of the rule of law and thus continues Alfarabi's pattern of recapitulation.

Alfarabi begins Section 18 by stating that philosophic political science “explains that the actions of the first virtuous kingly craft cannot come about completely except through cognizance of the universals of this art; that is, by theoretical philosophy being joined to it and prudence being added to it” (60:5–7). While this statement closely resembles one made in Section 14d, it differs in one key respect: throughout the section on political science, Alfarabi had been utterly silent about theoretical philosophy. Alfarabi's previous references to universals of the kingly craft seemed to fall strictly within the realm of practical philosophy, which, as we learned in Section 5, regards “that which, when a human being knows it, he is able to do” (47:1\*). The sudden reminder at this point in the text that the true king requires theoretical philosophy serves to highlight the topic's utter absence from Alfarabi's foregoing account of political science.

Having recognized this absence, we are in a better position to appraise that account. It is not immediately clear that political science as described in Sections 11 through 14d is in any way deficient. It describes the various ways of life, distinguishing the virtuous from the vicious, and discovers the means by which virtuous habits may be instilled in a population. What could a combination of prudence and theoretical

philosophy, the latter of which concerns “that which, when a human being knows it, he is not able to do” (46:23\*), possibly contribute to such an apparently comprehensive science of ruling?

Alfarabi offers a clue to this puzzle in Section 11, when he states that true happiness “does not come about in this life, but rather in the next life which is after this one” (52:14–15). Any science of ruling that does not offer a comprehensive picture of man's place in the cosmos and the ultimate fate of his individual soul is necessarily deficient, since man is a creature whom ultimate happiness eludes during his mortal lifetime. Human beings cannot help but wonder at the fate that awaits them upon death; any attempt to regulate human behavior while remaining silent about this critical issue reflects a lack of sensitivity to the importance of mortality in human psychology.<sup>139</sup> From the standpoint of a political science that seeks to effectively govern its subjects, it is of secondary importance whether or not ultimate happiness indeed awaits the virtuous after death, as Alfarabi suggests it does. As long as any significant number of subjects—and a significant number may be very few—yearn for a more perfect happiness in another world, political science will be ineffectual if it does not offer an account of man's ultimate fate.

Political science that is a part of philosophy, as distinguished from political science simply, must therefore take into account man's spiritual and existential restlessness. While such considerations would seem to fall under the jurisdiction of

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<sup>139</sup> As further evidence that this consideration was lacking in the previous account of political science, consider that Alfarabi's last use of the word “opinion” (appearing in its plural form, *al-āraʾ*) was in Section 10.

political psychology rather than theoretical philosophy, it must be remembered that Alfarabi here states that the kingly craft is in need of supplementation by *both* theoretical philosophy and prudence. In Section 14d, prudence was defined with respect to practical matters only; now that theoretical matters have been reintroduced by Alfarabi, the definition of prudence fittingly expands. For Alfarabi now mentions that prudence allows the proper determination, not only of actions (as stated in Section 14d), but of ways of life and *dispositions* as well. Theoretical philosophy investigates matters that have no direct influence on the way we live but are nevertheless issues that give rise to our anxious curiosity. Prudence, when combined with theoretical philosophy, allows its possessor to determine which theoretical discoveries should be revealed for particular individuals and communities, as well as which are perhaps better commingled with politically salutary opinions.<sup>140</sup> What we therefore find in Section 18 is not so much a critique of the rule of law simply, but rather a critique of the rule of law divorced from a larger theoretical framework. It is precisely such a framework that Alfarabi will sketch beginning in the next section, but not before making a statement on the succession of rulers in a virtuous regime.

What would be best for virtuous cities and nations is to experience a long succession of kings, all of whom “possess the qualifications (*shirāʿit*) of the first ruler” (60:16). Philosophic political science does not leave this critical aspect of the regime to

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<sup>140</sup> Such determination cannot dispense with theoretical philosophy, since the opinions prescribed for a community must guide them indefinitely far into the future; the founder must wish to avoid prescribing opinions that will be rendered incredulous by subsequent scientific developments; see n. 61.

chance, at least not insofar as it can be helped. Rather, it explains “which qualifications are to be sought for in the sons of the city's kings so that if they are found in one of them, it is to be hoped that he will become the same kind of king as the first ruler” (60:17–19). Although there were indications previously in the text that Alfarabi was speaking primarily of a monarchic regime, it is only here that he states the point explicitly. In addition, the kingship described here is apparently hereditary, although not necessarily primogenitural; virtue is sought in all of the king's sons. For the moment, it is entirely unclear how Alfarabi's vision for political society would be best served by a monarchy, much less one in which rulership is based on bloodline.<sup>141</sup>

Religion, as defined by Alfarabi in the opening sentence of the text, is necessarily the product of a single mind. The first ruler, as religious founder and lawgiver, must possess such extraordinary virtue that his position with regard to his followers is one of natural kingship. Furthermore, the first ruler has access to revelation, either in the form of determined opinions and actions disclosed him by God or a divine faculty through which he determines them himself. In either case, it is understandable if prophets do not form democracies, possessing as they do such extraordinary gifts. Alfarabi's continued insistence that the first ruler be a king therefore appears justified. But why, upon the death of the founder, should rule fall to his descendants? Earlier, in Sections 8 and 9,

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<sup>141</sup> The suggestion that proper education would yield a succession of rulers equivalent in virtue to the founder is obviously problematic from the point of view of religious orthodoxy, according to which prophets are chosen by God. In such a view, no human institution can possibly secure a lineage of rulers matching the founder.

Alfarabi had discussed successors to the first ruler, but gave no indication that such men would be sought exclusively or even primarily among the founder's descendants. It would be worthwhile to revisit these passages in light of Alfarabi's most recent remarks on the subject.

In Section 8, Alfarabi discussed the possibility that the first ruler is succeeded after his death by someone equal to him in every respect. In this case, the successor must be free not only to extrapolate upon the rulings of the first, but also to alter them when circumstance demands. If such a man were indeed present upon the founder's death, the desirability of continued kingly rule is clear. But in Section 9, Alfarabi addresses the much more likely case that there is no successor whose virtue matches that of the founder. In this situation, the successor ultimately chosen—by what means, we are not told—must faithfully uphold the precedents established by his predecessor. To this end, he must possess the art of jurisprudence, which allows him to apply the will of the founder to cases upon which the latter did not offer judgment during his lifetime. But Alfarabi immediately goes on to suggest, in Section 10, that the art of jurisprudence will be performed by multiple individuals; this becomes especially clear when he states, “The jurist concerned with the opinions determined in religion ought already to know what the jurist concerned with practices knows” (52:3). It is therefore ambiguous whether the founder who dies without leaving an equally virtuous heir will be succeeded by a single king, a class of jurists, or even a hybrid regime in which a king is constrained by religious scholars. Whatever the case, by making his most explicit statement regarding the form of the regime apparently supportive of unqualified hereditary monarchy, Alfarabi disguises

the textual basis he previously offered for a more balanced regime in which at least some power resides in the hands of jurists.

To return to our current place in the text, Alfarabi states in Section 18 that the king following the precedent of a founder “does not by nature need philosophy” (60:14). Thus, Alfarabi reiterates a point made in Section 5, that the true distinguishing characteristic of the virtuous first ruler is philosophy. Alfarabi presumably does not expect philosophic potential to be hereditary; however, given the rarity of a truly philosophic soul, capable of the tremendous virtue that Alfarabi ascribes to the first ruler, the best practical approximation of philosophic kingly rule may be a royal lineage in which the education of potential heirs is taken with the utmost seriousness. By suggesting that the eldest son should not automatically inherit his father's throne, Alfarabi slightly moderates one particularly undesirable aspect of hereditary monarchy. Though such an arrangement hardly guarantees capable rulership, it might be expected to produce better results on the whole than many practicable alternatives.

“The king of the tradition (*malik as-sunna*<sup>142</sup>)” (56:13), who follows in the footsteps of a virtuous predecessor, is not the only ruler who does not by nature require philosophy; such is also the case for “the kings whose rulerships are ignorant” (60:20–21). It is to these men that Alfarabi turns his attention in the last part of Section 18. The ignorant ruler, in order to pursue one of the ignorant goods enumerated in Section 1—“health and bodily well-being; or wealth; or pleasure; or honor and glory; or conquest”

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<sup>142</sup> *Sunna* is the word used in Islamic tradition to refer to the recorded sayings and actions of Muhammad.

(43:11–12)—requires “a thoroughly deceitful genius (*jūda qarīḥa khabītha*) capable of inferring what he needs for determining the actions he is to perform and for determining the actions in which he will employ the inhabitants of the city” (61:3–5). Thus, the ignorant ruler must possess a kind of deficient counterpart of the virtuous ruler's prudence, similar in its determination of the best means toward a chosen end but divorced from knowledge of man's proper end.

In the typology of rulers offered in Section 1, it had seemed as though Alfarabi was drawing special attention to the problem pointed to by the errant ruler, namely, the difficulty of distinguishing between true and false claims of divine inspiration. This suspicion was bolstered by Alfarabi's description of misguided religions as “errant” in Section 4. Now, Alfarabi chooses to highlight ignorant rulers, or those who focus exclusively on some deficient, worldly good as if it constituted man's ultimate happiness.<sup>143</sup> Alfarabi has therefore shifted over the course of the text, from contrasting the virtuous ruler primarily with the errant ruler in the earlier sections, to now contrasting the virtuous ruler with the ignorant ruler. We can better appreciate the meaning of this shift by recalling the particular deficiency of Alfarabi's first account of political science; namely, that it in no way addressed man's place in the whole of being. An ignorant ruler, possessing the necessary genius to achieve physical well-being, wealth, or pleasure for himself and his subjects,<sup>144</sup> is not so clearly deficient, just as the first account of political

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<sup>143</sup> The ignorant ruler was similarly singled out for reproach in Section 14.

<sup>144</sup> As Alfarabi pointed out in Section 1, ignorant rulers may seek the goods they desire desired for both themselves and the ruled.



science was not clearly deficient at first glance.

In Section 19, Alfarabi begins the cosmic account that most clearly separates political science that is a part of philosophy from political science simply. This account takes up the remaining nine sections of the *Book of Religion*, and in it, Alfarabi will offer an image of a universe in which all things are related to one another and in which there exists a special connection between the human and divine realms. The remaining sections therefore contain sweeping claims about the ultimate nature of all that exists. Before turning to consider the account itself, we must remind ourselves of comments made previously by Alfarabi that will influence our understanding of what follows. In Section 2, Alfarabi had listed the subjects of theoretical religious opinions, which included those describing “the world, its parts, and the ranks of its parts” (44:17), “how the things the world encompasses are linked together and organized” (45:3–4), and “the intellect, its rank in the world, and its station in relation to God” (45:6). Each of these subjects will feature heavily in the closing sections of the *Book of Religion*, indicating that Alfarabi is perhaps offering an account more religious than it is strictly philosophic. Furthermore, in Section 4, Alfarabi had left open the possibility that virtuous religion will include some untrue theoretical opinions. Though we were not told on what basis the virtuous first ruler would decide how strictly to adhere to the truth, presumably such a decision is made on the basis of political prudence. This would make sense of the claim made in Section 18 that “the first virtuous kingly craft cannot come about completely except ... by theoretical philosophy being joined to it and prudence being added to it” (60:5–7). It is precisely the conjunction of theoretical philosophy and prudence that characterizes the

virtuous first ruler—not theoretical philosophy alone. Finally, in Section 5, Alfarabi had defined practical philosophy as that which concerns what “a human being is able to do” when he knows it (47:1). The choice of what theoretical opinions to commit to writing is therefore a matter of practical philosophy.<sup>145</sup> Only by keeping these earlier statements in mind can we hope to understand Alfarabi's purpose in the remaining sections of the text.

Section 19 comprises a breathtaking ascent, beginning from “the parts of the world that are most inferior” (61:11) and terminating only upon reaching that being of whom Alfarabi says, “It is not possible for there to be any deficiency (*naqs*) in him ... nor is it possible for there to be any perfection (*kamāl*) more complete than his perfection, nor any existence more excellent (*afḍal*)<sup>146</sup> than his existence” (62:18–63:2). Alfarabi's language in this section is emphatically political; the inferior parts of the world are such precisely because they “have no rulership over anything at all and ... give rise only to actions used for serving, not to actions used for ruling” (61:12–13). The primary characteristic of the perfect being—at this point unnamed—is that he “rules everything below him” (62:18). The various classes of intermediate beings rule those below them while being ruled in turn by those above. At each stage of ascent, philosophic political science discovers that the higher class of beings comprises fewer members; furthermore, each individual member of a class contains “greater unity in itself and less multiplicity”

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<sup>145</sup> Alfarabi offers a further indication that he means to point to his own activity as a writer when, also in Section 5, he illustrates the concept of particularity by stating, “our saying 'the human being who is writing' is more particular than our saying 'the human being'” (47).

<sup>146</sup> Alfarabi here uses the comparative form of *fāḍil*, which has been translated throughout as “virtuous.”

(62:12–13) than members of the immediately preceding, inferior class. Thus, at the highest level, beyond which there is no possible ascent, there exists a class of only one being, “one in number and one in every aspect of oneness” (62:15–16). At no point in the text does Alfarabi offer arguments on behalf of these assertions, but instead merely declares them to be discoveries of philosophic political science.<sup>147</sup> The *Book of Religion* is clearly not intended to serve as a textbook for students of metaphysics. Rather, Alfarabi aims to illustrate, with characteristic terseness, what the product of an exceptional combination of prudence and theoretical philosophic might look like.

In Section 20, Alfarabi offers a mirror image of the preceding ascent. Philosophic political science descends from the most perfect beings to the more deficient, noting that at each successive level of inferiority, the individual members of the class display more multiplicity and less unity. This descent terminates in “the last beings, namely, the ones that perform servile actions” (63:5). Having discovered the various classes of being and their vast differences with regard to unity and perfection, philosophic political science then “brings about cognizance of their harmony, of how they are linked together, how they are organized, how their actions are organized, and how they mutually support one another so that despite their multiplicity they might be like one thing” (63:10–12). The cooperation of such vastly different beings is made possible through the governance of the perfect, ruling being. His rule over the cosmic order is in no way deficient; each being is governed in a way “commensurate with its rank and in accordance with the amount of

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<sup>147</sup> Nor are such arguments impossible to imagine. Ibn Sina makes a compelling case for increasing unity in each higher class of being in the metaphysical portion of the *Healing*.

natural worth a being at that level of existence must have” (63:12–14).

Sections 21 through 23, comprising a single sentence each, indicate that philosophic political science points to a corresponding order in the human soul, the human body, and the virtuous city.<sup>148</sup> Thus, although the soul, the body, and the city do not possess perfect unity, they may nevertheless be governed in such a way that their constituent parts cooperate and thereby approximate true unity. A soul, body, or city is therefore healthy to the extent that it emulates the cosmic order. When speaking of the virtuous city in Section 23, Alfarabi furthermore states that philosophic political science “[places] the king and the first ruler in the same station as the deity (*al-ilāh*) who is the first governor (*al-mudabbir al-awwal*)<sup>149</sup> of the beings and of the world and the classes [of beings] in it” (63:18–20). The virtuous founder is therefore the earthly counterpart of the cosmic governor, whose rule over the world takes perfect account of the natural worth of every being.

The comparison of the virtuous first ruler to the divine ruler is by this point fully expected, but precisely by preparing the ground for this claim in the previous few sections, Alfarabi allows many readers to overlook its central importance in the teaching of the *Book of Religion*. As Alfarabi had mentioned in Section 14d, the practitioner of the first kingly craft cannot rest satisfied with knowledge of universals; in addition, he must

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<sup>148</sup> In doing so, Alfarabi succinctly states a point made with far greater elaboration in the *Virtuous City, Political Regime*, and *Selected Aphorisms*.

<sup>149</sup> The cognate verb *yudabbiru* is used in the *Qur’an* to describe God’s regulation of his creation; see, for example, 10:3.

possess a prudential faculty that arises through experience with individual cases. Furthermore, as was discussed above in connection with that section, this would seem to mean that the first ruler must view law as a particularly clumsy tool for governance, unable as it is to cater to exceptional individuals. However, due above all else to his mortality as well as his interest in activities other than politics, the first ruler may nevertheless resort to lawgiving as an encapsulation of his political prudence, albeit one that will necessarily deteriorate with the passage of time. But these limitations presumably do not apply to the most perfect being. Alfarabi has already stated in Section 20 that the perfect being is “the sempiternal one (*al-wāhid al-aqdam*), to whom nothing can be prior” (63:7–8). And while he has not explicitly said that this being is omnipotent, he claimed in Section 19 that “it is not possible for there to be any deficiency in him, not in any way at all” (62:18–63:1). It is therefore entirely unclear why the deity, as Alfarabi now calls him in Section 23, would choose to rule human beings through divine law, rather than by catering his rule to the needs of each particular individual. Indeed, the deity's governance of the cosmic, as opposed to the human, realm does not appear to suffer from this shortcoming, since it takes into account the “natural worth” (63:14) of *each* being at every level of existence. Why, then, does the divine will, as it has been communicated to human beings through prophets, take the shape of divine law, thereby displaying such bluntness as law requires?

Clearly, the human world would need to be radically different than it is if the shortcomings inherent in law were to be overcome. The very diversity of human beings and the constant flux of political circumstances prevent a single code of law from

applying to all people at all times, no matter how wise its authorship. But are not such characteristics of the human world well within the power of the deity to alter?

Alternatively, the deity could leave the world as it is and yet do away with the need for law entirely, if only he would minister to each of us individually, making the path to happiness clear for every man. The question of why divine will takes the shape of a static divine law therefore quickly turns into a more basic one: why has man been created in such a way that leaves him isolated in his individuality and unsure of the path to happiness? And although Alfarabi offers no answer here—it is not clear that such a question can be answered—his comparison of human and divine governance has not been without purpose. Rather, by provoking defenders of static divine law to consider why the deity does not act like the perfect physician, he initiates a dialogue between rationalism and piety, one that will perhaps moderate the latter's tendency to adhere unreflectively to religious tradition. This theme forms the subject of the next chapter, in which I construct just such a dialogue. But a small portion of the *Book of Religion* yet remains to be considered before turning to these considerations.

In Section 24, the pattern of ascent and descent begun in Section 19 continues. After indicating the correspondence of the first ruler with the deity, philosophic political science moves down through the ranks of the city, ultimately arriving at those “whose actions are such that it is not possible for them to rule by means of them, but only to serve” (63:22). Just as the intermediate beings in the cosmos rule those below them while being ruled in turn by those above, so too do the intermediate ranks in the city rule and serve appropriately. The kingly craft occupies the upper extreme of this chain, since “it is

a craft and a disposition only for ruling” (64:5). Section 25 makes the account of the cosmos and the city symmetrical, ascending from the most servile ranks in the city until reaching the level of the king, “who rules and does not serve” (64:8–9).

In Section 26, Alfarabi goes beyond merely indicating the correspondence between the human and divine realms, introducing a being who acts as a bridge between the two worlds. Philosophic political science teaches the existence of “the spiritual being governing the king who is the first ruler of the virtuous city, namely, the one set down as the trustworthy spirit (*ar-rūḥ al-amīn*)” (64:10–11).<sup>150</sup> This spiritual being “is the one through which God, may He be exalted, communicates the revelation to the first ruler of the city” (64:12). Here, as revelation makes its first explicit appearance in the text since Section 2, Alfarabi refers to the perfect being by the name “God” (*Allāh*) for the first time in his cosmological account. Regarding revelation and the manner in which it ties human and divine governance together, Alfarabi will have more to say soon. Section 26 concludes by noting that philosophic political science examines the rank of the trustworthy spirit, placing in its proper place among the other spiritual beings.

Section 27, the final section of the *Book of Religion*, begins with an ascent from these spiritual beings toward the deity. Philosophic political science explains “how revelation descends from Him *level by level* until it reaches the first ruler” (64:15–16, emphasis added). Communication between God and the first ruler is therefore not direct, nor does it take place through the sole mediation of the trustworthy spirit. Rather,

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<sup>150</sup> This title is a Qur'anic epithet for Gabriel, the angel responsible for communicating the words of the Qur'an to Muhammad. The exact phrase occurs in 26:193.

revelation must descend through an unspecified number of levels before reaching the first ruler. The benefits of revelation are then dispersed through the ranks of the city in the form of divinely inspired governance, which “extends to every one of the divisions of the city in an orderly manner until it finally reaches the last divisions” (64:17–18). In this way, God is responsible for the successful administration of the virtuous city, and Alfarabi is therefore justified in claiming that “God, may He be exalted, is also the governor of the virtuous city, just as He is the governor of the world” (64:19). However, as noted above, there appears to be a qualitative difference between God’s rule over the cosmos and his rule over human affairs. Alfarabi confirms this impression, stating that while “His ... governance of the world takes place in one way, ... His governance of the virtuous city takes place in another way; there is, however, a relation between the two kinds of governing” (65:1–2). The essential characteristic of God’s rule over the cosmos was mentioned in Section 20, where the natural worth of every being was said to be taken into account. For reasons that remain unknown to us, God’s governance of the human realm, mediated through the virtuous first ruler, must remain, at best, an approximation of that standard.

In Section 1, Alfarabi had claimed that “It has already been explained in *theoretical science* how the revelation of God, may He be exalted, to the human being receiving the revelation comes about” (44:12–13, emphasis added). But now, Alfarabi presents the process of revelation as being explained by political science that is a part of philosophy. If the cosmological account that concludes the *Book of Religion* is the product of both theoretical philosophy and prudence, it remains an open question what an



unaltered theoretical account of revelation, free from prudential considerations, would consist of. Alfarabi offers no such account here and has furthermore given several indications that theoretical science must never be presented to the public without an admixture of politically salutary doctrines.

Philosophic political science teaches that just as the various beings in the world, “despite their multiplicity and the multiplicity of their actions, . . . become like a single thing performing a single action for a single purpose” (65:8–9), so, too, must the various divisions and ranks of the city and nation be brought together in mutual support by the first ruler. An example of such unity of purpose arising out of multiplicity of being is available “to anyone who contemplates the organs of the human body” (65:14).<sup>151</sup>

In addition to implanting “the natural constitutions and instincts (*al-fiṭar*<sup>152</sup> *wa al-gharā'iz*)” (65:15) into the various beings that make up the world, God ensures that “the world and its divisions persevere and continue in the way He constituted it for very long periods of time (*mudaddan tawīla jiddan*)” (65:15–16). Alfarabi noticeably refrains from claiming that God ensures the eternal existence of the world as it currently is. Two alternative possibilities therefore seem to be left open: first, that the world will eventually cease to exist at all, or second, that it will continue to exist, but in some way

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<sup>151</sup> Alfarabi does not ask the reader to consider the faculties of the soul, although they were mentioned in Section 21 as a similar example. Perhaps the soul, with its numerous, often conflicting, appetites, less clearly constitutes a harmonious whole than does the body.

<sup>152</sup> The singular form of this word occurs in Qur'an 30:30, in which God instructs believers to follow the natural pattern (*fiṭra*) according to which man is made.

fundamentally different from its current state. The extent to which the ordered, harmonious arrangement of the various natural beings is eternal and stable is therefore called radically into question by Alfarabi at a very late point in the text. However, Alfarabi draws no further attention to the topic and instead proceeds to suggest that the human governor ought to similarly ensure the long-term preservation of “the virtuous traits and dispositions that he prescribes” (65:17–18).

God’s provision for the various natural beings is such that “the natural goods (*al-khīrāt aṭ-ṭabī‘iyya*)<sup>153</sup> are fully realized in each of the realms according to its level as well as in the totality of the beings” (66:2–4\*). But the realization of good things in the human realm seems to depend entirely on the existence of the virtuous first ruler. This figure must follow the pattern provided by God’s governance of the cosmos “so that the voluntary good things might be fully realized in every single city and nation *to the extent that its rank and worth permit*” (66:5–6, emphasis added). The raw materials with which the virtuous founder must work—the city or cities he rules and their inhabitants—therefore have certain inherent limitations that are not necessarily within the power of the first ruler to alter. This moderates an earlier statement made in Section 14b, where Alfarabi claimed that “First rulership is the one that first establishes the virtuous ways of life and dispositions in the city or nation without their having existed among the people before that, and it converts them from the ignorant ways of life to the virtuous ways of life” (56:9–11). It now appears as though a full conversion from utter ignorance to

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<sup>153</sup> This is the only appearance in the *Book of Religion* of this phrase.

complete virtue may not always be possible. On the issue of whether God, too, must work with beings that have inherent, unalterable characteristics, Alfarabi is silent.

The first ruler's successful emulation of God requires that he "already have thorough cognizance of theoretical philosophy; for he cannot understand anything pertaining to God's, may He be exalted, governance of the world so as to follow it *except from that source*" (66:9–10, emphasis added). In making this claim, Alfarabi denies revelation's claim to be the only source of knowledge regarding the most important things. Theoretical philosophy is not merely an alternative path to understanding God's rule of the universe; it is the only path. To the extent that a revealed teaching contains doctrines regarding God's governance of the world, these must be either invented by the first ruler or the product of genuine theoretical insight.

Having offered in the final nine sections of the text a moving vision of a wondrous universal order, in which beings of vastly different rank each move toward a single purpose in dynamic harmony, Alfarabi chooses to end the *Book of Religion* with a word of caution: no earthly regime can ever hope to approximate such cosmic splendor in the absence of a common religion. His closing remarks are worth quoting in full:

It is clear, in addition, that all of this is impossible unless there is a common religion in the cities that brings together their opinions, beliefs, and actions; that renders their divisions harmonious, linked together, and well ordered; and at that point they will support one another in their actions and assist one another to reach the purpose that is sought after, namely, ultimate happiness (66:10–13).

## Chapter 4: Alfarabi's Defense of Political Rationalism

Alfarabi's critique of the rule of law, appearing as it does in the context of a discussion of religious founding, is intended to apply first and foremost to *divine* law. The *Book of Religion* therefore contains Alfarabi's criticism of that version of piety which demands submission to unchanging legal commands. Thus, although predating by roughly one thousand years the intellectual development of Islamism in the mid-twentieth century, Alfarabi is not unaware of the theological claims upon which that movement depends. For as seen in Chapter 1, Khomeini, Maududi, and Qutb each contend that the explicit injunctions of divine law are permanently valid, precisely the claim that is subjected to such heavy scrutiny in the *Book of Religion*.

But before applying the political teaching of the *Book of Religion* to the claims of the Islamists, it is necessary to point out the precise manner in which Alfarabi's understanding of the relationship between religion and politics differs from that of the liberal reformists examined in Chapter 2. Alfarabi shares, to a significant extent, the political goals of these reformists, especially concerning the authoritative role that reason must be given in political matters. However, as was shown in that chapter, the attempts of 'Abd ar-Raziq, 'Ashmawi, 'Abduh, Iqbal, Sardar, and Soroush to secure the status of reason in Islam are undermined by various inconsistencies in argument, such that the account given by each of these scholars lends unintended support to the Islamist position. The precise manner in which Alfarabi avoids these errors and, as a result, offers a more compelling argument against Islamism, is the subject of the first part of this chapter.

## Alfarabi and Liberal Islamic Theory

‘Abd ar-Raziq and ‘Ashmawi assert that religion and politics are properly separated and that such separation is Islamically sanctioned. In contrast, Alfarabi considers religion to be inherently political: religion is the collection of opinions and actions legislated for a community by their first ruler (43); the character of these opinions and actions, if the religion is virtuous, is determined by the “kingly craft,” which has as its object the regime (47, 54); the founder of a religion is explicitly said to be a “lawgiver” (50); it is “political science” that offers knowledge of how to achieve ultimate happiness in the afterlife, the very goal of virtuous religion (43, 54); the founder of virtuous religion is the earthly counterpart of the deity, who rules over the cosmos (63); through the process of revelation, God himself rules the virtuous city, just as he does the broader cosmos (64).

This insistence on the political character of religion allows Alfarabi to avoid the particular difficulties into which ‘Abd ar-Raziq and ‘Ashmawi fall. The former is led, as a result of his insistence on the separation of religion and politics, to argue that prophets are unconcerned with the worldly effects of divine law. In making this statement, ‘Abd ar-Raziq lends unintended support to the Islamist claim that explicit injunctions of divine law are unalterable and permanently valid, for once it is conceded that the law's worldly effects are not of primary concern, on what basis can they be considered obsolete and thus in need of revision?<sup>154</sup> According to Alfarabi, our knowledge that the religious

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<sup>154</sup> Though they may still be considered incoherent; see n. 61.

founder sought, in part, the worldly happiness of his followers justifies prudential revision of the legal injunctions issued by him. In contrast to the image of the prophet offered by ‘Abd ar-Raziq, Alfarabi's religious founder is deeply interested in the worldly effects of religious legislation; we therefore best respect his intention as lawgiver by displaying a willingness to revise this legislation as required by changing circumstances, for only in this way do we ensure that his intention is not frustrated by the passage of time.

‘Ashmawi does not go so far as to declare that Muhammad was uninterested in the worldly effects of the laws communicated by him. Rather, he limits himself to claiming that Muhammad did not himself possess political authority, and that as a result, no such authority could be inherited from him by any subsequent Muslim or portion of the Muslim community. On this basis, ‘Ashmawi argues, there ought to be political equality among all Muslims after the death of Muhammad. However, this line of reasoning does not unambiguously lead to the conclusion that reason ought to be granted supervisory power over revelation. For the Islamist demand that all Muslims submit themselves to the law in its literal sense does not grant political privilege to any particular portion of the Muslim community—all are equal before the law.<sup>155</sup> In fact, such an arrangement arguably does a better job of reflecting the fundamental equality of all Muslims after Muhammad than one that privileges certain types of scriptural reinterpretation. Alfarabi, in contrast to ‘Ashmawi, does not claim that the death of the

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<sup>155</sup> While it is true that Islamists do not claim that every Muslim possesses equal jurisprudential authority, the educational process by which one becomes a jurist is, in theory, open to all.

religious founder results in a state of political equality among his followers in succeeding generations. Rather, members of the religious community will differ significantly with respect to their ability to perceive the original intention of the lawgiver. Those who are better equipped for this purpose are entitled to extrapolate from what the founder explicitly determined, or when warranted by historical circumstances, to alter these determinations. Crucially, both extrapolation and alteration of the law take place according to a prudential consideration of the particular needs of the time period in which the law is being applied. Alfarabi makes clear that the founder's law will necessarily deteriorate with the passage of time if no such steps are taken. This claim allows Alfarabi to present a position more consistently opposed to Islamism than one that insists on the absence of inheritable political authority from Muhammad.

‘Abduh and Iqbal, for their part, affirm that there is a certain depth of insight not available to our rational faculty and that unaided reason cannot be expected to understand fully the essential features of revelation. Alfarabi, in contrast, does not even speak of suprarational wisdom: religion, in both its theoretical and practical aspects, is subordinate to philosophy, as is the kingly craft (47); truth is ascertained only through primary knowledge or by demonstration (46); theoretical science suffices to explain the process of revelation (44); it is political science that discerns those ways of life that achieve ultimate happiness in the afterlife (54);<sup>156</sup> prudence is the quality that allows its possessor to

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<sup>156</sup> As will be discussed in greater detail in the latter half of this chapter, the claim that political science can successfully apprehend the link between worldly and otherworldly happiness is questionable, which suggests important limits to Alfarabi's political rationalism.

determine actions correctly, the characteristic activity of the religious founder (58–59, *cf.* 43); theoretical philosophy is the *only* path toward understanding God's governance of the world (66).

The pervasive rationalism on display in the *Book of Religion* lends Alfarabi's presentation a greater consistency than can be found in the works of 'Abduh and Iqbal. Although 'Abduh claims that it is precisely Islam's rationalism that distinguishes it from other religions, this assertion sits uneasily alongside his subsequent discussion of the relationship between reason and revelation. For by conceding that revelation teaches man that which he cannot come to know through his unassisted intellect, 'Abduh removes any compelling basis for subjecting the teachings of revelation to prudential revision. Such revision cannot be undertaken with any confidence if we are dependent on revelation in order to understand the recompense our actions in this life will receive in the next, as 'Abduh claims we are. Alfarabi, in contrast, asserts that it is political science that grants its possessor knowledge of worldly happiness, ultimate happiness in the afterlife, and the link between them. And crucially, as a *science*, political science contains nothing beyond what is accessible to the unassisted human mind. Religion as a whole conveys truths that are first discovered through philosophy. As a result, reason remains perfectly within its proper boundaries when it takes upon itself the task of updating particular injunctions of divine law, since these are products of reason in the first place.

Iqbal strictly separates rational consciousness from mystic consciousness, asserting that the latter supervenes the former to offer a level of insight that lies beyond the grasp of our everyday experience. The supernatural experiences of a prophet are



merely a subset of this category of mystic consciousness and are therefore themselves beyond the ability of reason to comprehend. This assertion, if accepted, undermines Iqbal's stated goal of reconstructing religious thought in Islam on a rational basis, for to do so would be to violate the proper ranking of our mystic and rational faculties as understood by Iqbal himself. In contrast, at no point in the *Book of Religion* does Alfarabi speak of mystical insight of any kind. Revelation itself, as explored in the previous chapter, is ultimately replaced in the *Book of Religion* by a combination of prudence and theoretical philosophy. There is nothing in the process of revelation that is mysterious, nor does this process yield any knowledge that is not attained by rational means.

However, although Alfarabi offers a more consistent defense of reason than can be found in the works of 'Abduh and Iqbal, it must be emphasized that he has not disproved their assertion that mystic insight or revelation conveys truths that are unavailable to rational consciousness. And as long as this possibility remains open, Alfarabi's understanding of divine law is not obviously superior to the Islamist understanding; obedience to unchanging laws, even when we are incapable of perceiving their goodness, is reasonable as long as such laws are the product of a wisdom exceeding our own. Thus, the possibility that revelation contains suprarational wisdom cannot be ignored when appraising Alfarabi's defense of political rationalism. This topic will be discussed in greater detail in the final portion of this chapter. For now, I limit myself to showing that, as a practical matter, conceding the existence of suprarational insight surrenders critical ground to the Islamist position.

Finally, Sardar and Soroush deny the ability of the human mind to transcend the

limitations placed upon it by cultural and historical circumstances. Alfarabi, in contrast, repeatedly points to the existence, and furthermore the accessibility, of a *universal* knowledge that transcends immediate environment: the virtuous kingly craft consists of the knowledge required to establish virtue in cities and nations *in general*, thereby transcending any particular political environment (56); similarly, philosophic political science, which is necessarily universal in scope, brings about knowledge of the patterns by which particulars are determined with respect to any given set of practical circumstances (59); prudence is the ability to determine the proper response to every occurrence that can arise in *any* political community (60).

Alfarabi by no means suggests that such trans-historical or trans-political insight will be attained by most human beings. He may therefore agree that Sardar and Soroush's claims about the limitations of the mind apply to the vast majority of people; this seems especially likely in light of his claim that “most people who are taught the opinions of religion and instructed in them and brought to accept its actions” are not capable of philosophic understanding (47:21–22). Nevertheless, a decisive difference between the two positions remains, inasmuch as Alfarabi refuses to concede that the human mind *as such* is subject to inescapable limitations due to political or historical environment. This position allows Alfarabi to avoid the problem of total and permanent reliance upon the literal meaning of divine revelation, a problem that emerges quite clearly from the works of Sardar and Soroush. Sardar, for his part, urges Muslims to take upon themselves the task of updating Islam in the face of new problems presented by modernity, a process he refers to as “operationalization.” While such a project has something important in

common with Alfarabi's teaching that religious laws ought to be revised in order to prevent their lapsing into obsolescence, Sardar undermines himself by flatly denying that objective insight of any kind is available to human beings. Once such a pessimistic view of the abilities of the human mind is accepted, it is not at all clear how Sardar's political project is to be carried out with any confidence. For the operationalization of Islam for modern times appears, in the context of this epistemological relativism, to involve imposing modern cultural norms upon religious teachings. When Alfarabi suggests that divine laws be subject to revision, it is essential that such revision be informed by political science, which as a science, displays the objectivity necessary to overcome the problem of merely adapting religion to our socially constructed ideas and desires.

Soroush distinguishes between religion in itself and our understanding of religion, the latter necessarily subject to all the limitations of the human mind. It is on the basis of this distinction that he argues against obedience to static religious law; such obedience does not reflect devotion to religion, but rather to our necessarily tentative religious understanding. And to the extent that we are unwilling to adjust our religious understanding as time progresses, we have made idols of our own perceptions. However, it is not merely our understanding of religion that is subject to such severe limitations; rather, cultural and historical forces fully determine the limits of what we can know *in general*. It is therefore not at all clear that there is any reliable standard against which our defective religious understanding can be measured and in light of which it can be revised. Any alteration of the specific injunctions of revelation risks being arbitrary. Alfarabi, in contrast, insists that any change made to the legislative legacy of the religious founder be

undertaken on the basis of knowledge of (in contrast to historically determined hypotheses about) both the founder's intentions as well as the character of the good sought by the religious community in all times. Only such knowledge guarantees that succeeding generations are truly upholding the intention of the founder, rather than replacing his will with their own.

Having contrasted the liberal reformists with Alfarabi in this way, it would be helpful to compare the positions these thinkers would adopt with respect to the four Islamist claims discussed in Chapter 1: that Islam is a political religion, that reason is properly subordinated to revelation, that the divine law is permanently valid, and that following the divine law produces perceptible benefits for the Muslim community.

The liberal reformists are varied in their support for some of these assertions. ‘Abd ar-Raziq and ‘Ashmawi clearly seek to deny that Islam is inherently political, but the others do not hesitate to call attention to the religion’s public-spirited character. None of the six wishes to concede that reason is simply subordinate to revelation, instead adopting the position, at least in their rhetoric, that the independent status of reason is affirmed in Islam. However, as summarized above, the ability of reason to autonomously guide human life is called into question by these thinkers, sometimes in a manner evoking Islamist claims about the limits of the unassisted mind. None of the liberal reformists go so far as the Islamists do in asserting the permanent validity of divine law; indeed, the perception that the laws of Islam are in need of reconstruction or reformulation for the modern world seems to be the primary impulse motivating the works of these scholars. Finally, regarding the tendency of divine law to bring perceptible

benefits to those who follow it, there is no disagreement between the reformists and the Islamists.

Alfarabi, as we have seen, consistently affirms the political character of religion as well as the authority of reason to alter the prescriptions of revelation. Furthermore, he is explicit in asserting that laws that are not revised will necessarily deteriorate with the passage of time. Finally, he claims that the same way of life that achieves ultimate happiness in the afterlife will result in the acquisition of worldly goods, as well.

But although Alfarabi offers a more internally consistent defense of political rationalism than can be found in the works of the liberal reformists, it remains to be seen how this teaching fares when put into dialogue with a dedicated Islamist. In the process of constructing such a dialogue, to which end the remainder of this chapter is devoted, the meaning and purpose of certain perplexing passages of the *Book of Religion* will also become clear, helping us to better understand Alfarabi's deepest insights.

### Political Rationalism and the Case for Divine Law

A pivotal moment in the *Book of Religion* occurs in Section 14d, in which Alfarabi compares virtuous political rule to the correct exercise of the medical craft. Later, in Section 23, the virtuous political ruler is compared to the deity. Alfarabi thereby offers an indirect comparison of the physician and the deity, since both are compared to the political ruler. Having insisted that no wise physician could regard universal rules as anything more than guidelines, Alfarabi provokes the reader to consider why God would ever act as *lawgiver*, when such a role only makes sense in light of certain human limitations, such as mortality, from which God is free. Since Islamism is chiefly

characterized by its strict insistence on the primacy of divine law, it is necessary for our present purpose to consider possible explanations for God's reliance upon legislation.

Although I will refer to specifically Islamist arguments in the process of elaborating the case *for* divine law, I will not restrict myself to considering only these. It will be necessary, in addition, to discuss other potential arguments that could be offered on behalf of divine law, in order to bring out both the strengths as well as the limits of Alfarabi's political rationalism. Thus, in the following analysis, I will address four potential arguments in defense of divine law. First, I will consider a position according to which divine law is designed solely as a means toward our eventual self-rule. Then, I will discuss the possibility that divine law does not aim whatsoever at our worldly good. Next, I will consider the subtler argument that the law does indeed benefit us in this world but sometimes does so in ways that are not perceivable to us. Finally, I will turn to the claim that the law aims to instill in its adherents the virtue of obedience. Of these four positions, the first two are admittedly extreme; these are discussed more for the sake of what they bring to light about Alfarabi's position than because they reflect actual arguments made by the faithful. The last two positions, in contrast, are more nuanced contentions that more accurately reflect claims of serious religious belief. After discussing these various views of divine law, we will return to the previously postponed topic of the potential availability of supernatural wisdom.

### **Divine Law as Educative**

To begin with the first of these possibilities, perhaps divine law, properly understood, does not require any sacrifice of worldly happiness on the part of its

followers. When any particular law ceases to benefit the community of believers because of changes in historical circumstance, that law is properly dispensed with or at least amended. Thus, reason is granted full authority to govern our worldly affairs. Certain divine laws may continue to be upheld, but only insofar as their goodness is corroborated by rational political science.

It is not immediately clear on the basis of this understanding of divine law why God's will would take the form of legislation at all. If we are simply meant to guide our own affairs using reason—if this is indeed what God wishes us to do—divine law is largely superfluous. The prescriptions contained in revelation would merely constitute starting points which are freely altered by the pious community as circumstance requires.

But perhaps the religious community that receives such a law was not always capable of guiding its own affairs. It may have been necessary, at an earlier and more primitive stage of human political development, for God's laws to be implemented and obeyed simply. But as time passes and historical change renders some portion of those laws obsolete, it is the task of the pious, if they are capable, to update divine legislation such that its original intention is preserved. God's reliance upon legislation would, in this case, have an educative purpose. By providing human beings with an imperfect instrument with which to regulate political life, God would encourage the development of prudence, such as would be impossible if he ministered to each individual as the physician does to his patients. The shortcomings inherent in law are simply the necessary soil for the development of that faculty by which human beings are distinguished from all other creatures.

Of course, if this is indeed the case, then Alfarabi has been correct throughout the *Book of Religion* to assert that the religious founder's laws must be subject to revision by prudent successors when these laws are rendered obsolete by the passage of time. This particular explanation for God's reliance on law therefore poses no challenge to Alfarabi's political position.

### **Divine Law as Entirely Otherworldly**

Not all possible explanations for divine law are equally supportive of Alfarabi's thesis. What of the possibility that the divine law does not aim whatsoever at the worldly good of those who practice it? While God may indeed reward with eternal paradise those who prove themselves obedient to his will in their mortal lives, what if the attainment of ultimate happiness requires that we forego the pursuit of worldly happiness? Perhaps, for reasons unknown to us, it is precisely our misery in this life that entitles us to happiness in the next life. As long as divine law potentially originates in a deity of this kind, who has no apparent concern for earthly human welfare, it would be a mistake of the highest order to subordinate its precepts to worldly considerations and thereby risk incurring divine wrath.

It must be noted that the commands of such a god would necessarily fall outside the realm of political science as understood by Alfarabi, insofar as that science investigates worldly goods, ultimate happiness, and the link between them. Once this link is severed, political science can offer no guidance at all. It is therefore not clear that Alfarabi would have regarded the existence of this kind of god as a hypothesis capable of refutation.



But crucially, there is no reason to believe that such a possibility would have disturbed Alfarabi overmuch. Those inclined towards rationalism encounter at least indirect evidence of the existence of a just and caring god, not only in the form of the religious experiences of prophets and believers—the latter group constituting an enormous proportion of the human race—but also in their own moral concerns. While it is possible to imagine a religious law that denies its followers the right to pursue worldly goods, it is much harder to imagine human beings who would believe that such a teaching is divine.<sup>157</sup> Rather, we encounter the claim that worldly happiness is itself, to some extent, a genuine good. Thus, believers are not asked to give up all worldly goods for the sake of true happiness in the afterlife, but rather to seek them in the right way; this is particularly noticeable in political, legislative religions such as Islam. Even a religious morality that demands the noble sacrifice of one's own access to worldly goods still aims, at least in part, at the enjoyment of those goods by others<sup>158</sup>—martyrs do not die so that

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<sup>157</sup> Of the major world religions, Buddhism comes the closest to advocating the foregoing of all worldly pleasures, but critically, this presupposes an understanding that their pursuit results in greater suffering than happiness.

<sup>158</sup> Abraham's intended sacrifice of Isaac/Ishmael at God's behest is an obvious counterpoint to this claim. While the inclusion of this story in both the Bible and *Qur'an* is certainly significant, it is nevertheless reasonable to expect that, if obedience to God consistently resulted in the premature and violent deaths of our loved ones (at the hands, moreover, of the those who love them), religious belief would wane dramatically. In other words, it is an essential detail of the story that God ultimately does not demand that Abraham kill his son. See Pangle (Chapter 8) for the argument that the Binding of Isaac, when read within its Biblical context, does not reveal Abraham's God to be amoral or transmoral.

others will suffer, but so that others will benefit. This is the conclusion to which we are led by actually existing claims of religious experience; in the absence of similar evidence pointing toward unjust, amoral, or tyrannical gods, their existence must remain a merely logical possibility.<sup>159</sup>

It is for this reason that Alfarabi writes as if the expected benefits of divine law will always include worldly prosperity. And crucially, any theological position that aims at the enjoyment of goods here on this Earth, even if such enjoyment is not an end in itself, opens itself up to judgment by political science, as the science of both “happiness presumed to be happiness without being such, and happiness that is truly happiness” (52:11–12). The political pursuit of worldly goods is *the* common ground between philosophy and theology;<sup>160</sup> this is the single most important observation to which the *Book of Religion* leads us. It is therefore in no way a distortion to suggest that divine law, while maintaining that the goods of this life do not constitute ultimate happiness,

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<sup>159</sup> In taking seriously the evidence for *just* gods and grappling with the consequences of their existence, Alfarabi distinguishes himself from Bertrand Russell, who dismisses all claims about divinity as being akin to positing the existence of a teapot orbiting the sun (547–548). Russell and those who follow him make the fundamental error of failing to perceive the connection between human moral experiences and claims of religious experience, which, once appreciated, necessitates that claims about divine justice be taken with the utmost seriousness by philosophers.

<sup>160</sup> That this is a subject of philosophy and not merely political science is confirmed by Alfarabi's discussion of “Political science that is a part of philosophy,” his subject in Sections 15 through 24 in the *Book of Religion*. This philosophic political science is explicitly said to involve, in part, “the identification of happiness” (59:9\*).

nevertheless aims, at least in part, at worldly happiness for its followers. Indeed, a system of law that did nothing of the sort would be seen by potential believers as diabolical rather than divine.

In this context, we are in a better position to understand Alfarabi's striking claim in Section 11 that true happiness can only be attained in the afterlife. This assertion is the keystone of the pious position, and it has the effect of subordinating our pursuit of happiness in this life to the far more important end of our eternal happiness. When man's horizons are extended to eternity, and when the character of eternity depends entirely on obedience to divine commands, any life other than the life of piety is fundamentally misguided. Thus, Alfarabi's political teaching, which demands that divine law be subjected to the rigor of reason, involves a tremendous risk as long as the orthodox position on the afterlife remains a possibility, which it does as long as philosophy or science lacks the ability to rule out miracles.<sup>161</sup> Aware that the knowledge necessary to do so evades human beings, and that therefore no one can presume to know with certainty what awaits man after death, Alfarabi would be foolish to merely deny pious claims about the afterlife. The only path left open to him is to meet the orthodox position on its own terms, to concede, *arguendo*, that true happiness exists only in the afterlife, and

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<sup>161</sup> Rational arguments for the eternity of the soul can, of course, be debated; however, the assertion that souls will miraculously and eternally be preserved by God is not capable of refutation as long as the possibility of miracles remains open. Relevant in this context is Alfarabi's comment at the end of the *Philosophy of Aristotle* that "we do not possess metaphysical science" (130), such as is presumably necessary to close this possibility.

somehow yet show that divine commandments ought to be subject to prudential revision, or that revelation ought to be subordinate to reason. To the extent that he is able to do this, Alfarabi will have taken steps toward establishing his rational political teaching on a far more solid footing than if he had simply ignored the pious position on the afterlife altogether.

It is in the context of such reflections that the final Islamist theme discussed in Chapter 1 becomes highly relevant. Khomeini, Maududi, and Qutb each feel compelled to assert that the divine law emphatically does not require the sacrifice of our worldly interests. Rather, those individuals who obey the law and those communities that enforce it will experience peace, prosperity, and flourishing in this life, in addition to the eternal reward of the afterlife. As Alfarabi was aware a millennium ago, the most serious demands of religious obedience are never divorced from the trust that such obedience will redound to the benefit of the believer, not merely in the life to come, but in this life as well. And it is this critical observation that highlights the singular importance of political science; for as the science of human happiness, only it is capable of judging whether any particular law continues to fulfill its original intention of leading the community of believers towards, in part, worldly prosperity.

The teaching contained within the *Book of Religion* can therefore be said to drive a wedge between the third and fourth Islamist themes outlined in Chapter 1; that is, between the claim that divine law is permanently valid and the claim that divine law leads to the worldly benefit of its followers. For as Alfarabi leads us to see, fixed laws are generally not capable of continually achieving the good of a political community over

time. In the absence of new revealed laws from God, a possibility precluded in Islam by the belief that Muhammad is the final prophet,<sup>162</sup> there is no recourse except to prudential legal revision, if the relationship between law and worldly good is to be maintained. It would appear that a dedicated Islamist is left either to contend that no possible historical change could render any explicit command of divine law obsolete or to accept that reason must play an authoritative role in judging the goodness of any particular command.

### **Divine Law as Mysterious**

There is, however, a way for Islamists, or indeed any defender of static law, to avoid this dilemma. Rather than arguing that God expects us to alter his commands (as in the first understanding of divine law) or that God is wholly unconcerned with our worldly happiness (as in the second), it could instead be maintained that obedience to unchanging laws is good for us even when such goodness is imperceptible to any human observer. It would not be the case, according to this argument, that God does not care about our worldly flourishing; rather, we are simply unable to appreciate his care from our position of ignorance, much as a child fails to understand every action of a loving parent. Indeed, the claim that divine law might be good for us despite appearances to the contrary enjoys some immediate plausibility; measured against the wisdom of a perfect being who is in no way deficient, human wisdom is paltry.<sup>163</sup>

It must be emphasized at the outset that this is *not* the claim made by the Islamist

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<sup>162</sup> Qur'an 33:40.

<sup>163</sup> This is illustrated with particular clarity in *Qur'an* 18:65 and following by the story of Moses and the mysterious servant of God, named *al-Khidr* in subsequent Muslim tradition.

thinkers discussed in Chapter 1. Khomeini, Maududi, and Qutb do not speak of the divine law as benefiting us in a manner that is mysterious or beyond the grasp of human perception. Each of them instead insists upon the existence of *recognizable* benefits that accrue to those individuals and communities that obey: “the solution of social problems and the relief of human misery” (Khomeini, 36); “peace and contentment” (Maududi, 155); “[freedom] from servitude to others” (Qutb, 108). The Islamists thus speak of justice, peace, and freedom; they do not claim that the benefits of divine law must be accepted on faith. Nevertheless, it is not unreasonable to assume that these thinkers or their followers would assert that, at least in certain cases, following divine law will benefit us only in imperceptible ways. We must therefore consider how Alfarabi would respond to the claim that human beings are not always capable of recognizing the benefits they receive from divine law.

Alfarabi's criticism of static law is strengthened by his continual reference to the problem of obsolescence. He is not criticizing laws whose purpose has been unknown since their inception, but rather those whose original intention has apparently been subverted by the passage of time. And it is a far more difficult task to defend a law that produces dramatically inconsistent effects over time than one whose purpose has always been mysterious. Nevertheless, an Islamist may simply reply that God alone possesses perfect knowledge of the future such that the ultimate purpose of religious law is known only to him. Thus, a law that produces varying effects over time may simply be part of a divine plan that no human being can hope to comprehend, but which a comprehensive wisdom would reveal to be entirely appropriate.

To lend further strength to this view of the divine law as being in some important respect mysterious, the very possibility of a science of human happiness, such as Alfarabi's political science, can reasonably be questioned. If an Islamist contends that human beings cannot discern the path to worldly happiness, he may assert the permanent validity of divine law; Alfarabi's claims of legal obsolescence would reflect a failure to perceive the mysterious ways in which the divine law continues to contribute to our worldly good. In other words, by denying that political science as Alfarabi understands it is accessible to the human mind, a case is made for submission to laws whose goodness may or may not be apparent at any given time. From this perspective, those who insist on following solely the guidance of their own reason, despite its inability to come to firm conclusions regarding, for example, the origin of the world and humanity's place in it, are guilty of the ultimate hubris. The proper attitude would involve, in contrast, a humble acknowledgment of the limits of the human mind, such as would be encouraged by submission to commands that may not serve our worldly interests in any discernible way, though we may possess faith that they ultimately do.

Let us be absolutely clear about the implications of defending divine law by pointing to the limited capacity of human wisdom to recognize its value. Even in those cases in which divine law does not recognizably contribute to our worldly happiness, we would be obligated to submit to it regardless, understanding that our merely human perception of happiness is superseded by divine wisdom. This is not the same as arguing that the path to worldly happiness requires sacrifices or struggles and for that reason may not always be appealing. For as long as such struggles culminate in some *recognizable*

benefit, Alfarabi would not hesitate to recommend that they be undertaken; such a conclusion would be supported by a political science that investigates the true nature of human happiness. What is instead under consideration are the more difficult cases in which there is *no* recognizable benefit of obeying divine law, not in terms of fostering virtue, unifying the religious community, or any other such end. In these cases, obedience to the law is only reasonable if it is asserted that its goodness is imperceptible to us.

It is therefore clear that as long as God's essential mysteriousness is upheld, there is no pressing need to show how divine law is good for us in ways that are recognizable by human wisdom. To the extent that an Islamist is willing to faithfully obey a divine law that does not benefit him in any way that he perceives, it must be conceded that Alfarabi provides no argument in the text by which he can be shown to be simply wrong or incoherent in his approach to faith. Nevertheless, there are perhaps psychological limits on the ability of any human being to trust in a deity that is fundamentally mysterious, as will be discussed in the next section.

### **Divine Law as Demanding Obedience**

It may be asserted that divine law is meant, above all else, to inculcate the virtue of obedience in its adherents. If following the law fails to result in the acquisition of worldly goods, this is not necessarily an indication that the law has failed or is in need of revision. Rather, the law's merit lies in the fact that it tests our obedience precisely by laying out a course of action that is not always easy.

There are two very different ways to understand the nature of the obedience demanded by divine law. If obedience can reasonably be conceived of as self-fulfilling,



even or especially as it demands that we forgo certain worldly goods, then the law requiring such obedience is not inherently opposed to a rational political science. After all, it is not necessarily the case that worldly happiness is better achieved through indulgence than abstention. A law that sets limits on our pursuit of pleasure may be difficult to follow consistently, since pleasure is naturally attractive, but however challenging it would be to obey such a law, doing so may very well constitute the surest path to worldly happiness. This is especially clear in the case of short-term pleasures whose pursuit typically results in long-term misery, although it also possible that true fulfillment requires that we not simply abide by hedonistic calculations. In any case, Alfarabi's political science, as the science of human happiness, would presumably take upon itself the task of investigating the extent to which happiness arises out of self-restraint. And if divine law merely demands a prudent amount of self-restraint, political science would have no grounds on which to criticize it.

If, on the other hand, obedience to divine law is primarily sacrificial, in the sense that the goods we are required to forgo are true goods and not merely tempting pitfalls, then there is a necessary conflict between the demands of that law and Alfarabi's political science. In this case, we are brought around again to the difficulties presented by a law that is otherworldly, for we are asserting that we would indeed be made happier by disobeying the law; otherwise, there is no true sacrifice.

But matters are further complicated by the expectations believers possess with respect to the afterlife. If forgoing true goods in this life is rewarded by ultimate happiness in the next, then in what sense is the type of obedience being spoken of now

distinct from that considered previously? In both cases, those who obey divine law would seem to be prudently aiming at what is best for them, by securing for themselves either the fulfillment that arises from abstention (in the first case) or eternal blessedness in the afterlife (in the second case). And if giving up the goods of this world is the necessary means to eternal happiness, why should doing so be conceived of as making a sacrifice rather than an investment?

Perhaps happiness in the afterlife is more coherently conceived of not as recompense for having made true sacrifices in the life of this world (in which case foreknowledge of the compensation renders the sacrifice problematic) but rather as a reward for having followed the difficult path laid out by divine law. True sacrifice, after all, would require that believers give up worldly happiness for *no* reward, that they freely choose to forgo what is better for themselves for the sake of what is worse. And this is a demand that appears neither in the Qur'an nor in the works of Muslim scholars.

The difficult claim with which Alfarabi is faced is rather that God will indeed reward those who do not seek the goods of this world, not because abjuring these goods is fulfilling but simply because their eschewal is required by divine law. Faced with this possibility, we must again ask how far God's mysteriousness can be taken. There is no attempt in the *Book of Religion* to disprove the hypothesis that a mysterious deity issues commands that from any human perspective can only be viewed as arbitrary. However, Alfarabi is likely aware that arguments relying upon divine mystery, when taken too far, threaten to sever entirely the connection between religion and human happiness. And although an Islamist may not agree with Alfarabi's declaration in Section 1 of the *Book of*

*Religion* that the *sole* aim of virtuous religion is ultimate happiness for man, he may nevertheless come to realize that any religion that does not contribute to the happiness of man here in this world cannot be expected to survive. More importantly, he may find it increasingly difficult to regard such a religion as divine, the more he is required to accept on faith that the law is good for him despite appearances to the contrary.

### **The Availability of Suprarational Wisdom**

In light of this last consideration, we are equipped to return to the previously postponed topic of the possible availability of suprarational wisdom via divine revelation. For reasons already discussed, this possibility represents the fundamental challenge to Alfarabi's political teaching, which seeks to place the rational mind in the position of highest authority. At no point in the *Book of Religion* does Alfarabi attempt to provide a theoretical refutation of the existence of such wisdom. Instead, he offers an alternative vision of the cosmos in which there is no place for mysterious divine edicts. The culminating cosmological portion of the *Book of Religion* speaks of revelation, to be sure, but this is a type of revelation whose content is verifiable by and thus subordinate to philosophy, as Alfarabi had previously established in Sections 3 and 5—in other words, a type of revelation making no demands upon us that cannot be wholeheartedly endorsed by reason. But in the absence of a comprehensive metaphysical account of the whole, what confidence can Alfarabi—or any of his readers—have that revelation is in fact as intelligible as he suggests?

It is no accidental feature of the *Book of Religion* that the cosmological portion *follows* the investigation into the limitations of divine law and its relationship to human

happiness. Alfarabi is under no naive illusions about the availability of metaphysical knowledge or knowledge of the divine, but might he not suggest that political science, understood as the investigation into the nature of human happiness and the manner in which divine law does or does not contribute to it, offers our best (or perhaps our only) avenue toward such knowledge? In other words, might not deep reflection upon that which truly makes human life fulfilling grant us at least limited insight into our relationship with the divine and thus the character of the divine itself?

Of course, meditation upon the nature of human happiness can only be expected to lead to theological insight on the assumption that God cares about our happiness. Without this presumed connection between human flourishing and the will of God, understood to be fundamentally benevolent, introspection would not grant us intimate knowledge of the divine. Thus, we would be dependent for such knowledge upon the religious experiences of prophets. And insofar as these prophets would not attribute to God a providential care for our well-being, our attachment to him would be necessarily limited. But this, of course, is not the God spoken of in the Qur'an, who instead states, "We will show them Our signs in the horizons *and in themselves*" (41:53, emphasis added).

The *Book of Religion* implicitly offers an empirical hypothesis: that no religion asks its adherents to worship a god whose commands, if obeyed, consistently lead to what can only be perceived as worldly misery for the pious community. And if not a single one of the great prophets of human history has claimed to speak for such a god—and if we do not experience, during moments of quiet introspection, even the slightest impulse to

believe in such a god—perhaps this is the strongest evidence available that he does not exist.

## **Conclusion: Reading Alfarabi in the Modern World**

The *Book of Religion* contains Alfarabi's investigation into the soundness of political rationalism in light of the possibility of suprarational divine wisdom. Speaking as it does to the perennially problematic relationship between religion and politics, it is a work no less relevant today than upon its initial authorship. Alfarabi is able to offer a more consistent defense of rationalism than can be found in the works of modern liberal theorists precisely because of his appreciation for the seriousness of the theological challenge that rationalism faces. The uncompromising character of some of the philosopher's claims—for example the assertion that virtuous religion is entirely subordinate to philosophy—reflects his understanding that even the slightest concession on this and other points lends critical support to the argument that reason is properly subordinated to static revelation, a position that is today adopted most consistently by various groups and individuals falling under the broad category of “Islamism.”

But although Alfarabi thus points modern scholars toward the most promising grounds of intellectual engagement with Islamism, the alternative offered by him is not a liberal, democratic alternative. We must therefore avoid the mistake of seeking in Alfarabi merely a better means of achieving the political goals of those authors reviewed in Chapter 2. For although important common ground exists between the two positions—namely the desire to secure an authoritative role for reason in political matters—Alfarabi diverges from modern liberalism in several significant ways, the most obvious of these being the type of regime required for virtuous political rule.

The proper structure of the regime is by no means the primary theme of the *Book*

*of Religion*. The only direct elaboration on regime type in the work is found in Section 18, in which Alfarabi describes the pivotal importance of succession; philosophic political science explains that “what is *best and most virtuous* in virtuous cities and nations is for their kings and rulers who succeed one another through time to possess the qualifications of the first ruler” (60:14–16, emphasis added). As discussed in Chapter 3, Alfarabi goes on to indicate that the potential for virtue is to be sought in all of the king's sons so that the most promising among them may be properly educated, with the hope that he will thereby become a worthy successor to his father. Alfarabi is here clearly describing a hereditary monarchy, albeit one in which the line of succession is not determined by order of birth.

In this brief passage concerning the inheritance of the throne, Alfarabi quietly points to the existence of a power that, although less formal than kingly rule, in some way takes precedence over it: the power of educating future kings. Moreover, this power does not necessarily, and perhaps practically cannot, belong to the king. Alfarabi has already, by this section of the work, made a point to mention those “necessary occupations” that demand the ruler’s attention and thus preclude comprehensive legislation (48:10).<sup>164</sup> Furthermore, he consistently and frequently employs the passive voice while describing the search for virtue among the king's sons as well as their education, thus leaving grammatically undetermined the actor who undertakes these tasks.<sup>165</sup> Is it reasonable to

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<sup>164</sup> Although Alfarabi was speaking specifically of the “first ruler” in Section 7, the demands upon the ruler's time to which he refers would be no less a factor for any succeeding king.

<sup>165</sup> Philosophic political science “brings about cognizance of how it ought *to be worked out* so that these kings

assume that the king will always have time to attend to “how [his son] ought to be educated, how he is to be raised, and in what way he is to be instructed so that he might become a king completely” (60:19–20)? If the education of the crown prince is instead delegated, the individual or body to whom it falls attains an enormous power to influence the future of the regime. But to whom might such an awesome task be entrusted?

As discussed in the relevant portion of Chapter 3, Sections 8 through 10 of the *Book of Religion* make clear the great power wielded by jurists in Alfarabi's envisioned regime. To reiterate, by claiming that the non-philosophic ruler must possess the art of jurisprudence and immediately proceeding to suggest that there will be multiple jurists, Alfarabi had left the precise relationship between the king and the juristic class as a whole ambiguous.<sup>166</sup> And inasmuch as the king is occupied by inescapable commitments of ruling, might not it be precisely the religious scholars, as a class, who are responsible for identifying the most promising of the king's heirs and ensuring his proper upbringing? In this way, the stipulation that the eldest son not receive automatic priority for the throne turns out to be critically important. The power of the juristic class to approve or disapprove of the king's first choice for successor would serve as an important

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who succeed one another possess the very same states of virtue and which qualifications are *to be sought for* in the sons of the city's kings so that if they *are found* in one of them, it is *to be hoped* that he will become the same kind of king as the first ruler. In addition, it explains how he ought *to be educated*, how he is *to be raised*, and in what way he is *to be instructed* so that he might become a king completely” (60:16–20, emphasis added).

<sup>166</sup> See pp. 152–153, above.



potential check on the misuse of executive power.<sup>167</sup> It is therefore not clear if the account of the regime given in the *Book of Religion* leads so much to monarchy as it does to effective theocratic rule by a body of religious scholars. Such an arrangement is, of course, no more democratic than hereditary monarchy, unless the scholars themselves are popularly elected, a stipulation that Alfarabi never suggests.

Nevertheless, there are at least two reasons to consider in greater depth just what varieties of political arrangement would be compatible with the political teaching of the *Book of Religion*. First, we have already seen the manner in which Alfarabi's brief discussion of the regime is more complicated and subtler than it first appears. For in the very same breath that he speaks of hereditary monarchical power, the philosopher simultaneously offers glimpses of the possibility of a more mixed regime, in which the ability to designate and educate the crown prince does not necessarily fall to the king himself. Alfarabi's views on the matter of regime may therefore be considerably more flexible than a superficial reading of the text would suggest. Second, as a general interpretive principle, we must remain open to the possibility that a philosopher's political teaching is, to a certain degree, tailored to the needs of the time in which he is writing. Such a consideration is especially important when reading the *Book of Religion*, one of whose primary themes is the tendency of historical change to render obsolete certain political principles that were sensible in the past. In other words, we must consider whether Alfarabi, had he lived to witness the dramatic historical changes

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<sup>167</sup> For a compelling argument that precisely such an arrangement characterized the regimes of the Islamic Golden Age, see Feldman, pp. 31–35.

between his time and ours, would as a result be brought far nearer to the liberal Muslim theorists of the modern age, at least in terms of preferred regime.<sup>168</sup>

Such a determination is admittedly difficult to make without falling into one of two errors: either simply imposing modern preferences upon a medieval author or rejecting out of hand the possibility that such an author might have approved of modern political arrangements. Furthermore, these are considerations that cannot be made without resorting to some degree of speculation. Nevertheless, such questions are worth investigating, since a philosopher of Alfarabi's stature may very well have something to teach us about those political arrangements most familiar to us. I therefore address myself in the subsequent analysis to the following consideration: whether the political teaching contained within the *Book of Religion* truly requires an abandonment of those modes of political practice found to be so highly functional in the modern world. More specifically, what remains to be seen is the extent to which Alfarabi's teaching is compatible with democracy, liberalism, pluralism, and secularism.

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<sup>168</sup> Such a movement would not necessarily indicate that the philosopher has changed his mind, but might rather reflect a prudent reaction to radically altered circumstances. As discussed on pp. 146–147, Alfarabi raises the possibility, in Section 15 of the *Book of Religion*, that the patterns of historical circumstance with which *any* ruler may be faced are finite, in which case knowledge of political science would grant its possessor familiarity with *the* permanent political alternatives. Furthermore, Alfarabi's evaluation of regime types in the *Political Regime* shows that he was not unfamiliar with democracy as a form of political arrangement.

## Democracy

The *Book of Religion* is infused throughout with strikingly undemocratic language. The virtuous religion described in Section 2 portrays a cosmic order characterized primarily by rank—that is, by rulership and servitude. Furthermore, the theoretical opinions prescribed by virtuous religion are explicitly said to serve as models of political life for citizens, who are brought to understand by them that some things in the city are meant to “yield to others” (45:22–23). Alfarabi's own description of the cosmos in Sections 19–27, presented as a summary of the discoveries of philosophic political science, similarly emphasizes rank and order; the universe is a strict hierarchy in which every being has its proper place. Indeed, Alfarabi goes so far as to suggest that the organs of the human body and the faculties of the soul are themselves characterized by hierarchical relationships.

With respect to the body, soul, and cosmos, Alfarabi provides no arguments in defense of these descriptions; their hierarchical nature is merely asserted. But with respect to the city, we are provided with at least some indication of why purely egalitarian political arrangements would be inappropriate. As Alfarabi states in Section 6, “most people who are taught the opinions of religion and instructed in them and brought to accept its actions” are unable to attain a philosophic understanding of religious teachings, either because they are incapable by nature or because they lack the necessary leisure time (47:21–22). If, as Alfarabi suggests, the majority of people accept religious doctrine because it is “generally accepted or persuasive” (48:1–2), rather than because they fully grasp the truth contained within it, the case for democratic governance is

severely undermined. For democracy requires, if not the direct power of the majority to interpret, alter, or create law, at least popular election of those who are responsible for such tasks. But what claim to legislative, judicial, or elective power can one have who does not understand the true meaning or purpose of law? Such understanding would necessarily elude those who accept religion for sub-philosophic reasons, since Alfarabi has made clear the intimate relationship between religion and law in Section 4, such that they can sometimes be considered synonymous (46:13–14).

We are provided with further examples of Alfarabi's low appraisal of the intellectual capacity of the many in Sections 11 and 14. In the former section, the philosopher states that those goods sought by the multitude do not constitute true happiness. This idea is reinforced in the latter section, in which Alfarabi again distinguishes between true happiness on one hand and “the [goods] the multitude presumes to be goods” on the other (55:8–9). The concept of ignorant goods was introduced as early as Section 1, but it is only in these two sections that Alfarabi makes explicit that the multitude is misguided about what is truly good for them. Since virtue is equivalent to the pursuit of true happiness (54:3–5), the possibility of a virtuous multitude is precluded, unless that multitude has been persuaded to believe in a virtuous religion and thereby guided toward the pursuit of true happiness. Outside the context of a wise religious founding, most people will remain ignorant of what is truly good for them. As a result, popular sovereignty seems a deeply problematic standard of political arrangement; citizens would be better off under the rule and guidance of the wise.

However, as discussed at length in Chapters 3 and 4, the status of ignorant goods

undergoes something of a reappraisal over the course of the *Book of Religion*. For as we learn in Section 14, the path to ultimate happiness will lead, if only incidentally, to the attainment of worldly, ignorant goods; the correct way of life does not abjure entirely those goods sought by the multitude. It would therefore be a mistake to underestimate the ability of the many to manage correctly at least certain aspects of their lives. While it is certainly the case that the many place too much emphasis on the importance of bodily health, wealth, pleasure, honor, and conquest, they correctly intuit that such goods can be constituents of a truly happy life.

On this basis, might not *limited* popular participation in government be compatible with the political teaching of the *Book of Religion*? Fundamental decisions regarding the interpretation of divine law, Alfarabi makes clear in Sections 8–10, is the purview of jurists. But provided the multitude remain within the legal framework set by jurists, there is no obvious reason for excluding them from political participation altogether. For example, jurists may decide that redistributive taxes are required by divine law and, in addition, set broad guidelines and limits concerning their implementation, while the multitude may determine, within these limits, the most efficient and equitable method of collecting and distributing funds. Fixated as they are upon worldly goods such as wealth, the multitude is presumably not incapable of such tasks.

Certainly, Alfarabi does not call for popular political participation of this kind at any point in the *Book of Religion*; what we are considering is the range of regime types that do not violate his explicit statements regarding the multitude. In this spirit, it may safely be said that there is no basis in Alfarabi's text for a *totalitarian* regime in which all

the details of everyday life are managed by a single ruler or a small ruling class. The case for such an arrangement would be strengthened if the multitude were not even capable of correctly identifying worldly goods, but this is denied by Alfarabi. More compatible with Alfarabi's presentation is a political system in which jurists constitute a judicial body that has the authority to set limits on the multitude's decision-making to ensure that religious boundaries are respected. Of course, in a regime fitting Alfarabi's description, these jurists themselves would be educated with the understanding that religious law must be sufficiently flexible to keep up with changing circumstances and would therefore not exert an entirely regressive pressure on political society.

While this subordination of popular will to the decisions of a body of religious scholars is far from democratic, it must be remembered that every constitutional democracy places certain limits on majoritarian power, otherwise a constitution would be superfluous. The critical difference between the political arrangement currently being described and democratic constitutionalism is that only in the latter case is sovereignty recognized as ultimately residing with the people. As a result, democratic constitutions are malleable; the moment the populace chooses, through a constitutionally sanctioned amendment process, to repeal their constitution, it no longer binds them. In contrast, there is no concept of popular sovereignty present in the *Book of Religion*; sovereignty instead belongs to God and those human beings who come to understand, through theoretical philosophy, God's governance of the world.<sup>169</sup> A populace governed by virtuous religion

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<sup>169</sup> As discussed on p. 164, theoretical philosophy ultimately replaces revelation as the path to knowledge of God.

therefore possesses no legal right to reject that religion.

One final topic must be discussed concerning Alfarabi's attitude towards the intellectual capacity of the multitude and therefore the viability of democratic political arrangements. As mentioned above, Alfarabi had offered, in Section 6, two possible explanations for the differing levels of philosophic insight found across individual cases: either these differences are natural, or they merely reflect the amount of time one has spent philosophizing. Discovering which of these alternatives is the primary cause of variation in philosophic capacity would have serious implications for understanding Alfarabi's attitude toward democratic governance. For if natural differences are the primary cause of differing philosophic capacity, then democracy faces a permanent problem inasmuch as nature does not distribute wisdom equally. Democratic political arrangements, by insisting on an equal distribution of political power, would grant the ignorant as much authority as the wise. If, on the other hand, it is primarily differences of occupation or lifestyle that account for unequal levels of wisdom, egalitarian political structures are at least *potentially* reasonable; what would be required in addition to the equal distribution of philosophic capacity is a socioeconomic arrangement that affords sufficient leisure time to all citizens such as would allow for serious philosophic reflection. Such a regime could hypothetically produce citizens equal in philosophic ability, each capable of understanding the truth contained within religious teachings and the true nature of happiness. Alfarabi's ultimate attitude toward popular sovereignty would therefore seem to depend largely on which of these two possibilities he considered

determinative.<sup>170</sup>

Only very recently have circumstances allowed political societies to experiment along precisely the lines indicated by Alfarabi in the *Book of Religion*. Unprecedented levels of socioeconomic development have enriched the multitude within developed nations and made possible, for the first time in civilized history, widespread enjoyment of leisure time. What remains to be seen is whether the capacity for wisdom will, as a result, equalize as well.

### Liberalism

The essentially political nature of religion is made clear by Alfarabi in the opening sentence of the work: “Religion is opinions and actions, determined and qualified by stipulations and prescribed for the community by their first ruler, who seeks to achieve through their practicing it a specific objective for the sake of them or by means of them” (43:3–4\*). This definition also makes clear the extent to which religion, as Alfarabi understands it, is inherently problematic from a liberal perspective; not only does the religious founder seek to regulate the actions of his community, but also their opinions. But perhaps the same could be said of any political founding; for does not a liberal regime, too, depend on certain key opinions that are shared by those under its rule,

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<sup>170</sup> Alfarabi does not mention the possibility that differences in philosophic capacity are the result of a combination of natural and conventional forces. But as long as such differences are even only *partly* due to nature, democracy can never be a perfectly reasonable regime, although it may be the best practicable one.



such as the belief that no private religious opinion is intolerable?<sup>171</sup> However, as Alfarabi goes on to make clear, part of what the religious founder seeks to determine and restrict are “the speeches by which God is glorified and praised” (46:1\*). In thus regulating speech about religious matters, Alfarabi’s founder goes beyond the universal political act of educating citizens in certain opinions.<sup>172</sup> There is, therefore, an unbridgeable gap between the positions of Alfarabi on one hand and modern liberals on the other.

In Section 6, Alfarabi states that “dialectic and rhetoric are of major value for ... defending [the opinions of religion] when (*idhā*) someone appears who desires to deceive the followers of the religion by means of argument, lead them into error, and contend against the religion (48:2–5). While Alfarabi thus reiterates the importance of regulating the religious beliefs of the public, two important features of this statement must be given further attention. First, the word translated as “when” can also be translated as “if.” Taken in the former sense, the passage indicates that Alfarabi simply accepts as an inevitability that there will appear individuals who argue publicly against the official theology of the regime. Even if taken in the latter sense, the passage still shows that Alfarabi accepts the possible emergence of religious dissidents; there is no indication that

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<sup>171</sup> Binder: “The essential point, from the liberal perspective, is that it must be possible for that opinion which has become hegemonic to change” (2). But can liberalism cogently permit the alteration of even this “essential point?”

<sup>172</sup> See Kurzman on the importance of “intellectual disagreement, which is at the heart of liberal Islam.” This disagreement depends on freedom of thought, which, in turn, depends on “stretching two boundaries: who may speak and what may be spoken” (23).

such dissent can or should be prevented, merely that its effects should be combated.

While it may be the case that Alfarabi has in mind primarily those who will argue against official doctrine from outside the regime and are therefore not subject to its authority, such as foreign theologians, no such qualification is present in the text. Second, Alfarabi only speaks of defending religious doctrine through *argument*; at no point in the *Book of Religion* does he ever suggest that coercion be used to maintain orthodoxy among the multitude.

All of this suggests that we would go too far if we attribute to Alfarabi the view that threats of legal punishment should be employed by the regime in an effort to control the beliefs of citizens. Undoubtedly, the multitude's opinions about the highest things is of the utmost importance to the religious founder; in fact, religious opinions about theoretical matters, such as God, the spiritual beings, and the coming into being of the world, are the very first aspect of virtuous religion that Alfarabi sees fit to describe. But if the great importance placed on such matters by Alfarabi leads us to expect that he will suggest legal punishments for calling them into question, we must observe that no such recommendation is contained in the text.

## Pluralism

The *Book of Religion* contains no explicit treatment of religious minorities. There are only two indications that the community governed by the virtuous founder is anything other than religiously unified: first, the oblique reference to the presence of religious dissent in Section 6, discussed above, and second, the statement in Section 14a that the

virtuous city may contain inhabitants who are more properly considered members of an ignorant city. Aside from these potential indications of competing religious beliefs within the community, the overwhelming sense conveyed by the text is one of theological unity among citizens. This sense is bolstered strongly by both the opening and concluding sections of the work. In the former, Alfarabi notes that, through virtuous religion, the founder aims at the happiness of “*everyone* under his rulership” (43:8, emphasis added). In the latter, he states that the virtuous ruler must follow the example of God “so that the voluntary good things might be fully realized in every single city and nation to the extent that its rank and worth permit” (66:5–6). And as Alfarabi immediately goes on to clarify in the concluding sentence of the work, such a goal is beyond the realm of possibility “unless there is a common religion in the cities” (66:11). Religious unity is therefore the key to realizing the highest ambition of political rule.

But although a common religion throughout the realm is therefore the ideal circumstance for the realization of voluntary goods, Alfarabi makes clear in other parts of the work that the extent to which inhabitants of different cities will practice the same ways of life is necessarily limited. In Section 14d, in the context of defining “prudence” for the first time in the work, Alfarabi states that the prudent founder must be able to “determine actions with respect to what he observes in each community, each city ... each group, or each person” (58:16–17). Thus, at least the *actions* prescribed by the virtuous founder may vary considerably from community to community, or if possible

from individual to individual.<sup>173</sup> Furthermore, in Section 18, the only other section of the book in which prudence is mentioned, Alfarabi defines it as “the ability for excellently inferring the stipulations by which the *actions, ways of life, and dispositions* are determined with respect to each community, each city, or each nation” (60:8–10, emphasis added). The very way of life of a community must be determined with respect to the particular characteristics of that community. If the virtuous founder’s authority extends beyond the boundaries of a single city or nation—as Alfarabi has indicated all along that it very well might<sup>174</sup>—the founder will be responsible for stipulating a diversity of actions, ways of life, and dispositions based on the specific needs of the various communities under his rule. Alfarabi therefore does not suggest that more expansive forms of political arrangement, such as empires, impose a single system of law upon all subjects. To do so would be to ignore the demands of political prudence, which the kingly craft requires (60:12–13).

However, it should also be noted that Alfarabi never suggests that the founder stipulate diverse *opinions* for the various communities under his rule. He thereby

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<sup>173</sup> It must be remembered that Alfarabi’s extraordinarily high expectations for the ability of the virtuous founder to treat *individual* cases are meant in large part to demonstrate the limitations of the rule of law as such. But while it is very difficult to imagine any system of law that accommodates the idiosyncratic needs of every individual, it is conceivable (and not without historical precedent or modern example) that the smaller communities that comprise larger political units, such as districts in an empire or states in a union, do not follow identical laws.

<sup>174</sup> As in the second sentence of the book.

indicates that there are certain differences that should not be fostered or exacerbated. But in what way might a ruler encourage differences in ways of life and dispositions without encouraging differences in religious opinion? Perhaps Alfarabi has in mind something like the Muslim attitude towards so-called “People of the Book,” the Qur’anic title for Sabians, Jews, and Christians.<sup>175</sup> These communities, according to the Qur’an, are tolerable inhabitants of Islamic territory in a way that the polytheists of Arabia were simply not. Nevertheless, it is clear, especially in the case of Christianity, that the People of the Book do not simply share the theological opinions of Muslims. But as we have seen in Section 2 of the *Book of Religion*, the opinions found within virtuous religion concern more than just the precise nature of God (although this is undoubtedly the most fundamental subject addressed by religion). For in addition, religion teaches its followers about the creation of the world, as well as prophets, righteous kings, and wicked communities of the past. And with respect to each of these key areas, Islam very much shares in the Judeo-Christian tradition. Encouraging Jews and Christians within Muslim territory to continue following their own customs will therefore not promote intolerable differences of religious opinion, such as allowing pagan traditions to continue presumably would. The prudent founder described by Alfarabi must distinguish between those communities that will be granted some degree of autonomy and those that will not. And although he will not seek to encourage differences of opinions in religious matters, he may recognize that such differences will exist to some degree as a matter of practical

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<sup>175</sup> This category was, at various points in Islamic history, extended to include other religious communities, such as Hindus, Buddhists, and Zoroastrians, though not without controversy.

necessity.

## Secularism

Although Alfarabi does not speak in the *Book of Religion* of democracy, liberalism, or pluralism, certain passages within the work, if reflected upon carefully, reveal that the philosopher is not wholly insensitive to the arguments that one could offer in their defense. For this reason, it does not sufficiently capture the subtlety of the work to claim that Alfarabi is simply opposed to democracy, liberalism, or pluralism. A superficial reading of the text prevents one from seeing the often surprising turns that Alfarabi's presentation takes as it unfolds.

With respect to secularism, however, there is little in the text to suggest that Alfarabi would be sympathetic. Religion is the foundation as well as the mortar of the political structure envisioned by Alfarabi, the heart as well as the lifeblood of the political body. It governs its members' actions, speeches, and opinions; it offers their souls a meaningful place in the cosmos. Although reason, in the form of political science, is granted the authority to revise legal injunctions, the commonly recognized source of law remains the divine revelation that God bestowed upon his prophet, and through him, the religious community at large. The majority of people, Alfarabi makes clear, require the symbols contained within virtuous religion to provide answers to questions that would otherwise leave them in perplexity. Religion offers persuasive teachings about our origin as well as our ultimate fate in the afterlife. Alfarabi's presentation implies that a populace cannot be effectively governed in the absence of such authoritative, persuasive religious

teachings.<sup>176</sup>

But what of the possibility, discussed above, that radical socioeconomic changes since Alfarabi's time usher in an era of unprecedented public enlightenment? Insofar as religion consists of a symbolic representation of truth for those who are incapable of unmediated philosophic insight, perhaps it ceases to be necessary in a world of philosophers, in which each individual has overcome their reliance upon symbols. But such a world would require, in addition to widespread economic prosperity, human beings who could rest satisfied having only as much knowledge about our deepest existential concerns as can be arrived upon by the unassisted human mind. And while continued dramatic increases in economic prosperity for all is easy enough to envisage, it is far more difficult to imagine a world in which authoritative teachings about life after death are no longer needed. It must be remembered that Alfarabi, for his part, does no more than point to the possibility of public enlightenment by suggesting that differences in philosophic capacity *may* ultimately be rooted in differences of lifestyle, rather than nature.

Following the path laid out by Alfarabi will therefore not likely usher us into a future in which the Muslim world—or indeed the pious world at large—has secularized, retaining only the barest cultural traces of a bygone religious faith. But even assuming that such a secularized world is possible, we are still left with the question of its desirability. That the Muslim world ought to retain, in some serious sense, its religious

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<sup>176</sup> See p. 110.

spirit; that it would do violence to the faith of millions of Muslims across the globe to expect a full separation of religion and state; that the world is in fact benefited by the presence of Islam, with all its political directedness—these are views shared by Islamists and many liberals.<sup>177</sup> Nor does one need to be a Muslim to recognize their reasons for holding such views. An honest and open-minded reader of the Islamist works discussed in Chapter 1—even one who is fully convinced of the superiority of liberal democracy to all of the alternatives—cannot help but be *partially* moved by some of the criticisms of modernity offered by Khomeini, Maududi, and Qutb.<sup>178</sup> Nor will such a reader fail to detect within himself a lurking spiritual malaise that by its very existence points to the possibility of a more satisfying political life than can be offered by secular liberalism. History offers no shortage of examples of the dangers posed by the mixture of politics and religion; we are only beginning to grasp fully the costs of their separation. A religious regime need not be an unreasonable one, and it is to this hopeful possibility that we are guided by Alfarabi.

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<sup>177</sup> For examples of these themes in the works of liberal authors featured in this essay, see especially: Soroush, Chapter 9; Iqbal, Chapter 6; ‘Abduh, Chapter 12; Sardar, Chapter 11.

<sup>178</sup> For example: Khomeini 33-34; Maududi 64-66; Qutb 155.



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